

THE ORIGIN OF THE ABSURD THEATRE

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the issue of the origin of modern drama types, namely absurd theatre and its core that is related to philosophy. The importance of existentialism, which is the sub branch of philosophy, is analyzed throughout the article. Furthermore, different views, that were under the discussion of many philosophers and critics, on the term “absurd” are presented.

Keywords: absurd, existentialism, cleavage, essence, neo-realist; drama of non-communication; comedy of menace; dark comedy; drama of cruelty, chaotic.

Introduction

As modern critic Bertolt Brecht states that drama is used as a tool to imitate for particular actions to reveal social situations for the purpose of political changes so that theatre is the most social of art forms and requires a great many conventions on the purpose that the theatrical event can take place in an orderly fashion.

There existed different movements in the history of drama, appeared new forms of drama and one of them is the Theatre of Absurdity which came into existence after World War II. Although the origin of the Theatre of the Absurd is often traced back to avant-garde experiments of the 1920s and 1930s, its roots, in actuality, date back much further that its elements can be found in Greek dramas particularly in the wild humor and buffoonery of Old Comedy and the plays of Aristophanes. Those elements were further developed in the late classical period by Lucian, Petronius and Apuleius, in Menippean satire, a tradition of carnivalistic literature, depicting “a world upside down.” In Middle Ages, morality plays can be considered as forerunners of the Absurd Theatre which depicted everyman-type characters dealing with allegorical and sometimes existential problems. Elizabethan playwrights such as John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Jakob Biederman and Calderon continued to use elements of the Absurd Theatre that they depicted the world with the help of mythological archetypes. During the nineteenth century, absurd elements may be noted in certain plays by Ibsen and, more obviously, Strindberg, but the acknowledged precursor of what would come to be called the Theatre of the Absurd is Alfred Jarry's (1873-1907) “monstrous puppet-play” *Ubu Roi* (1896) which presents a mythical, grotesque figure, set amidst a world of archetypal images. *Ubu Roi* is a caricature, a terrifying image of the animal nature of man and his cruelty. In the 1920s and 1930s, the surrealists expanded on Jarry's experiments, basing much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious mind which they acknowledged as a great, positive healing force. Their intention was to do away with art as a mere imitation of surface reality, instead demanding that it should be more real than reality and deal with essences rather than appearances. The Theatre of the Absurd was also anticipated in the dream novels of James Joyce (1882-1941) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924) who created archetypes by researching into their own subconscious and exploring the



universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. World War II was the facilitator that finally brought the Theatre of the Absurd into existence.

Materials and Methods

The term 'Absurd' was first used with its modern implications in the work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who rebelled against Hegelian ideals. He described Christianity as absurd because no man could understand or justify it according to rational principles. Existentialism, which developed in European countries like France and Germany, focused upon the meaninglessness of human existence. Martin Heidegger described Christianity as absurd; Jean-Paul Sartre, the founder of existentialism said there is an apparent pointlessness in man's life. He spoke of 'non-being' or 'nothingness.' Albert Camus (1913-1960) expressed that the disparity between man's intention and the reality repeatedly 'checkmates' the individual. In Gabriel Marcel's (1889-1973) view 'absurd' is the symbol of the fundamental mystery of human existence.

Albert Camus in his essay, titled as "The Myth of Sisyphus", used the term to define the human condition; and his description of absurdity as follows: "A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world, but in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is, deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity"¹

In the expression, "The Theatre of the Absurd" the word "absurd" might be misinterpreted as no more than ridiculous, bizarre, or nonsensical, thereby casting a pejorative light on the theatre for which it is a label. Camus argued that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond its reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd. Professor Mordecai Gorelik says: "It may be an expression of the absurd state of the modern world, which, however does not automatically ennoble it or give it stature; that it may provide a mild psychotherapy for certain audiences; and that it is part of a rebellion against mildewed family drama and stale domestic comedies"².

Absurd may be interpreted as a crucial category dominant for centuries and often found among the oppositions of relative and absolute, essence and existence and experience and experiencing mind. Historically seen, the word 'absurd' has senses which are far from suggesting anything trivial and which are fundamental in such diverse fields as mythology, natural science, theology and philosophy. In general, the absurd is what man encounters when "seeking salvation against universal deductive mechanism."³

The term "absurd" began to be used for theatre by Martin Esslin (1918-2002). So that the "Theatre of the Absurd" is a term coined by Hungarian-born critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of his 1962 book on the subject. Esslin regarded the term "Theatre of the Absurd" merely as a "device" by which he meant to bring attention to certain fundamental traits discernible in the works

¹ Albert Camus, "Le Mythe de Sisyphe". Gallimard, Paris, 1942, P 18.

² Mordecai Gorelik, - "The Absurd Absurdist" The New York Times. Section 2, Aug. 8, 1967, PP. 1-3.

³ Paul G. Kurtz, "Making sense of the Absurd", paper delivered at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential philosophy at Purdue University, Oct. 26 ~ 28, 1967, P. 8.



of a range of playwrights. The playwrights loosely grouped under the label of the absurd attempt to convey their sense of bewilderment, anxiety, and wonder in the face of an inexplicable universe. According to Esslin, the five defining playwrights of the movement are Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994), Samuel Beckett (1906-1986), Jean Genet (1910-1986), Arthur Adamov (1908-1970), and Harold Pinter (1930-2008), although these writers were not always comfortable with the label and sometimes preferred to use terms such as "Anti-Theater" or "New Theater". Other playwrights associated with this type of theatre include Tom Stoppard, Arthur Kopit, Friedrich Durrenmat, Fernando Arrabal, Edward Albee, N.F. Simpson, Boris Vian, Peter Weiss, Vaclav Havel, and Jean Tardieu.

The Theatre of the Absurd is defined in the Mc Graw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama as follows: "Type of European and American drama of the 1950s and 1960s giving expression to the existential sense of the meaninglessness of human life and endeavor."⁴

Though there never was an Absurdist Movement as such, dramatists as diverse as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Fernando Arrabal, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, N.F. Simpson, Edward Albee and Arthur Kopit, among others, all seemed to share a view that man was inhabiting a universe with which he was out of key. Its meaning being undecipherable, and his place within it seemingly without purpose, he was bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened, «The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.»⁵

The application of a current philosophical term as the "absurd" to drama was the invention of Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*. This book, more than anything else, has made the term familiar to the English reading public. It seems necessary to begift a discussion of the term "absurd" in this context. The term "absurd" is derived from the Latin "absurdum", meaning, "discordant" or "contradictory". The shorter Oxford Dictionary (1965) defines "absurd" as inharmonious, out of harmony with reasons or propriety; in modern use, plainly opposed to reason, and hence ridiculous, silly. Absurd originally means "out of harmony", in a musical context. In common usage "absurd" may simply mean "ridiculous".

Primary absurdity manifests a cleavage, a cleavage between man's hopes to unity and the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature, between man's drive towards the eternal and the finite character of his existence, between the concern which constitutes his very essence and the variety of his efforts; chance, death, the irreducible pluralism of life and truth, the unintelligibility of the real - all these are the extremes of the absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco says: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless"⁶

The label, the Theatre of the Absurd, may be interpreted as an ellipsis of the phrases the theatre which has its center in the representation of human existence and human viewpoints as absurd. In this representation, traditional norms and values have crumbled. Man is at the mercy of oppressive and arbitrary forces and institutions. His life is stupid; his efforts are aimless and bootless. He is

⁴ Mc Graw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama, Mc Graw Hill, Inc, 1972, P. 283

⁵ Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd". Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1962, P. 17

⁶ Eugene Ionesco, quoted by Martin Esslin in "The Theatre of the Absurd". Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1955, P. 17.



stranded and blind, a bare item of existence. He is not a fan of action that conquers his environment; he is a patient of an inscrutable agent. Altogether, a two-way absurdity appears. Man's predicament, when viewed by the codes and conventions of society, is absurd. Laws written and unwritten have made him an outlaw. These dogmatic codes and conventions become absurd. "The Theatre of the Absurd, can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time"⁷

Samuel Becket's play "Waiting for Godot" opened its stage career at the tiny Theatre de Babylone on the Paris Left Bank on 5th January, 1953 and it became a milestone in the history of drama. The eventual triumph of "Waiting for Godot" constituted the breakthrough into the public consciousness of a new convention of drama which has been vaguely labeled with the tentative generic term of the Theatre of the Absurd.

We can then conveniently describe drama in England as recently falling under three headings; first poetic, followed by two apparent movements, Angry and Absurd, the fusion of which leads to innumerable sub-divisions so that, by 1968, John Russel Brown, editing a series of essays on Modern British Dramatists, could write in the introduction: "The new plays have been given all sorts of labels: "kitchen-sink drama" was one of the first neo-realist; drama of non-communication; absurd drama; comedy of menace; dark comedy; drama of cruelty. But no cap has fitted for more than a year or two; none has been big enough for more than one or two heads; and often the caps seen more suitable for the Journalists who invent them than for the dramatists on whom they are thrust,"⁸

It must be noted that the dramatists discussed in this research work do not form any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement. Each has his own personal approach to subject matter and form, his own roots, sources and background. If they have a good deal in common, it is because their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the western world. This is not to say that their works are representative of mass attitudes it is an oversimplification to assume that any age presents a homogeneous pattern. In the revised version of The Theatre of the Absurd Martin Esslin repeats that there is no such a thing as a movement of Absurd Dramatists; "the term is useful - a device to make certain fundamental traits -which seem to be present in the works of a number of dramatists accessible to discussion by tracing features they have in common"⁹ Esslin has written the book "The Theatre of the Absurd" on a group of plays which incorporate certain beliefs and use certain methods and which, briefly, may be termed as "Absurd Drama".

Result and Discussion

In form as well as in content the Absurd Drama exposed the essential meaninglessness, and therefore the terror of existence. In the words of Arnold P, Hinchliffe: "It challenges the audience to make sense of nonsense, to face the situation consciously rather than feel it vaguely, and perceive, with laughter, the fundamental absurdity."¹⁰ Like the mythical Sisyphus, forever rolling a stone toward the top of a mountain, aware that it will never reach the top, the dramatists of the

⁷ Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd", Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1962, P, 16

⁸ John Russel Brown, "Modern British Dramatists", Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1968, P. 2

⁹ Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd". Penguin, revised and enlarged, 1968, P, 10,

¹⁰ Arnold P. Hinchliffe, "The Absurd", "by Cox and Wyman Ltd., Fakenham, Norfolk, 1972, P. 12,



absurd often created plays that end where they begin, without any progressive development of plot or psychological interests. Often, drama is derived closely from the intensification of the initial situation. This almost classical structure provided a representative image of man's absurd existence, beginning nowhere and going nowhere, but going on and on. A.C. Ward says; "The main thesis of the absurdists is that human life, being without "meaning" or "coherence", is essentially chaotic; that consequently, human beings have no channel of "meaningful" communication; and that plays aiming to give a genuine reflection of life must do so through a medium which suggests the full range of absurdity – meaninglessness, nonsense, non-communication."¹¹

According to the accepted canons of drama Absurd Drama is not a drama at all. According to the accepted canons of drama, a good play must have a beginning, in which the characters are presented and the plot given its exposition, a middle in which the plot is graveled up, and an end in which it is neatly unraveled. These plays have no exposition, no middle, and no end. The final situation is exactly the same as the opening one and the characters have been neither presented nor explained when the final curtain falls. If a good play has to give deep psychological insights into the thoughts and feelings of the authors, this, if anything, obscures them; if the well-made play is required to excel, in witty dialogue and brilliant repartee, this play is distinguished by dialogue which is constantly exposed as an abortive attempt at communication; and if the glory of the well-made-play is the truth and consistency of character; drawing, here the characters are not even sure that they are talking to the same people, from one scene to the next,. And yet, this strange play, condemned to failure by all touchstones of critical judgment, has, as an empirical fact, not only amused, intrigued and annoyed, hut also immensely moved large audiences, on the stage as well as on television and radio! In this connection Martin Esslin says:

"If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved,, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to the nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflection of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings".¹²

The senselessness of life and loss of ideals had, of course, been reflected in dramatists like Girandoux, Anouilh, Sartre and Camus, but whereas they had presented irrationality in terms of the old conventions, dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd sought a more appropriate form. They do not agree about absurdity, "they present it in being". Like the Poetic Theatre, Absurd Theatre relies on dream and fantasy but, unlike that theatre, it rejects consciously poetic dialogue in favor of the banal. Although centered in Paris it is distinctly international in character, as is emphasized by tie four leading exponents chosen by Esslin: the Irish Beckett, the Russian Adamov, the Rumenian Ionesco - who else to be Parisians? and the Frenchman Genet, These dramatists are followed by a number of other playwrights of whom Harold Pinter and N.F. Simpson are the British representatives, Samuel Beckett has been writing both in French and English and so he can

¹¹ A.C. Ward, "Longman Companion to 20th Century Literature", second edition, first published 1970, P. 428.

¹² Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd". Eyre and Spottiswode, London, 1962, P. 15.



be treated as a French absurdist as well as a British absurdist.

Conclusions

The Dramatists of the Absurd find Man an uncomprehending being in an incomprehensible universe. They ask along with Sophocles and Shakespeare, the awful question - Why? Why is Man here? Why is Man on earth? What role is assigned to him to play? What function does Man fulfill? And they always arrive at the same answerless answer - Nothing. Nothing fulfills Man. Man is on earth for no 'reason' at all. There is nothing for Man to do - nothing, that is, except to wait, pass time. In the words of Eugene Ionesco "Man is lost; all his actions.....senseless, absurd, useless."¹³

Thus The Theatre of the Absurd, as shown above, poses an "Existential Problem". It is highly significant that the plays of the absurdists mirror some of the fundamental preoccupations of contemporary philosophy.

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¹³ Eugene Ionesco, quoted by Martin Esslin in "The Theatre of the Absurd". Garden City, 1961, P. 19,

