

Theatre of the Absurd

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I. DEFINITIONS

AT LEAST two definitions must be given when one speaks of "Theatre of the Absurd," one pertaining to its nature, the other to what the movement is trying to accomplish.

Contemporary authors such as Beckett, Ionesco, Albee, and Pinter have attempted to make a break with "contrived-realism" and free their work from the bonds of rigid construction. Their plays seem to exist in an abstract void in which plot or dramatic story-telling is almost non-existent. Characterization is conceived in terms of human symbols, rather than human beings with a past and future. They seem human enough in the situation presented, but one is not aware of their existence outside of the given situation. Language is often nonsensical or even inconsequential to the play. Attempts are made at a powerful sub-conscious communication with the audience in which ideas or situations are vaguely familiar but not completely understood. Consequently the action is often incomplete and spasmodic. In short, the playwrights of this movement are attempting, through vaguely recognizable characters and ideas, to reveal truths below the surface of the common reality of what is happening on the stage.

It must be realized that "Theatre of the Absurd" is an outgrowth of the surrealist movement in all art forms. André Breton in his first *Manifesto on Surrealism* gives a definition which applies to "Theatre of the Absurd" as well as it does to Surrealism in general. Breton wrote: "Surrealism is a pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought and thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations. Surrealism rests on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association neglected hitherto; in the omnipotence of the dream, and the disinterested play of thought." Surrealism then, is primarily a poetic movement dealing in the extension of accepted forms and concepts.

II. HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

The surrealist on the theatre is not new as it would seem. Some of the men who are considered to be leaders of the current movement were writing in the early 1920's. Notable among them are Jean Cocteau and Luigi Pirandello. The influence of these playwrights extended into some of their realistic contemporaries, e.g., Eugene O'Neil in *The Great God Brown*, and Sean O'Casey in his fanciful

Cock-A-Doodle-Andy. However, one must go back even further to find the beginnings of symbolism's being more important than plot or the use of purely human symbols for characters. The first important use of such methods was in the 1890's by Maurice Maeterlinck in his play *The Bluebird*. Here the playwright's intent was to attenuate character for the sake of poetic suggestion or abstraction. Later August Strindberg developed the concept in more detail in such works as *The Dream Play*, *The Ghost Sonata*, and *Storm Weather*.

The causes for this style seem to arise out of upheaval, whether it is personal as with Strindberg or general as with the writers immediately following both world wars. In times of peace and prosperity unthreatened by external conflict, dramatic form leans toward realism and the depiction of actual life situations. Even as far back as the time of Shakespeare there was an insurgence of non-realistic, heavily contrived tragi-comedies which was paralleled with political and economic instability.

Interest in the newly created Surrealism declined in the late thirties when a possible threat of war was becoming apparent. But again following the war this "avante-garde" movement gained new impetus with such groups as alienation writers of Germany and central Europe and the Angry Young Men in England.

III. SPECIFIC PLAYS AND PLAYWRIGHTS

As with every movement there is a great deal of flux in the personal interpretation of the tenets of the movement by each individual artist. So it is with the various playwrights who are classed under Surrealists or "Theatre of the Absurd." In their work they actually range from Expressionism, through Existentialism, to extreme Surrealism. Following are notes on these individual playwrights and their work:

Eugene O'Neil, "We (the theatre) need some sort of supernaturalism to take the place of old naturalism, . . . (routine realism) is a banality of surfaces." To break away from realism he used masks for split personalities in *The Great God Brown*, and the Elizabethan "aside" in *Strange Interlude* for psychological revelation and ironic effect.

Luigi Pirandello states, "Art frees things and human beings and their action from these meaningless contingencies . . . it abstracts character . . . less *real* but more *true* than life." And again, "People must think what they *feel*."

Jean Cocteau has written, "The poet must bring objects and feelings from behind their veils and mists."

Sean O'Casey wrote in the preface to *Cock-A-Doodle-Andy* in 1958 that "naturalism or even realism, isn't enough." His attempt was to capture for the stage "a dance, a laugh, a song."

Tennessee Williams in explaining *Cameo Real* calls for "freedom and mobility of form" along with symbolist imagery.

Eugene Ionesco insists, "Contemporary theatre has been spoiled by the literati. It has become a kind of second-rate literature. It should not be literature but what cannot be expressed by any other means." He attempted an *anti-play*—non-characters employing non-speech. An example of this would be the Orator in *The Chairs*.

Samuel Beckett writes in a style in which often nothing happens—and it is this *nothing* that matters. This is similar to Chekhov who lets the world of the characters completely reverse itself without the characters attempting to stop it. Most of Beckett's plays contain four characteristic features: intense bitterness, a sense of entrapment, a contempt for the present conditions, and a completely fatalistic attitude toward eventual destruction. This latter is accompanied by an elegiac mood of complete submittance. As to the often confusing patterns and symbols which he uses Beckett wrote, "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them."

Finally Bertolt Brecht who has had a great influence on the avante-garde playwrights through his "Epic style" of theatre advocated "alienating" devices and disjunctive form in order to make his audience think clearly about social and moral problems rather than feel fuzzily and lose itself in empathetic situations.

Other playwrights such as Osborne, Delany, and Albee border on the realistic, throwing in such vulgarisms and symbols as necessary to enforce their point. Anouilh and Giraudoux are fundamentally romanticists, Anouilh more so than Giraudoux. In general they deal with realistic or fantasy situations and comic plots. Each of these playwrights is attempting to achieve a sharper, clearer concept of the condition of man in his environment; although the means differ greatly, the end product—to stir up an awareness of the present state of our society—is the same.

IV. SUMMATION AND PERSONAL COMMENTS

For all the good "Theatre of the Absurd" may do in provoking philosophical thought on the fate of the human race, it does have one bad defect: the *dissolution of character*. It is not the obscenity or morbidity, or undue fascination with death and decay that will undermine our drama—these are concomitant characteristics—rather the disappearance of man himself constitutes the decadence in the theatre. This surrealist depersonalization is the gravest threat to our theatre since it began.

Often too, the playwright in his desire to point up all the world's evil crowds any meaning at all out of the play. He is often ambiguous in establishing a central theme, and over indulgent in his selection of symbols. Many playwrights who fall into these limits point to a quote by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who said, "Poetry gives more pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood." Although this may be true to some extent, it was T. S. Eliot who commented,

"The suggestiveness of true poetry . . . is the aura round a bright clear centre. You cannot have the aura alone."

Each age searches for truth in its own way; however, our age must be careful that in its attempt to strip man naked of the filth and corruption which surrounds him, it does not at the same time destroy all the good in man—leaving nothing but an empty void as the end result.

The Suburbanites

Russ Durbin

IT WAS colder inside the car than outside when Jim slid out. He made no attempt to kiss her. "See you tonight," he said, and walked toward the train. Janet scooted over behind the wheel and backed the station wagon viciously out of the parking space, her mind still busy with the events of the previous evening.

It had all started when Mrs. Applegate phoned to say she didn't feel well and wouldn't be in that afternoon. That meant Janet had to do the marketing, the cleaning and the cooking alone—and with the Blakes and the Carsons coming to dinner. She'd have to cancel a three o'clock appointment at the beauty shop which she'd really needed; then the butcher had been late in sending the roast. She had dropped everything to rush to the five-fifty-seven for Jim, and he hadn't been on it. Back at the house, she managed to get everything under control, but her guests arrived before she got the curlers out of her hair. Trixie Blake just smiled and said, "Janet, how cute! Just like a girl space cadet." She had never been very fond of Trixie anyway.

When the Carsons arrived, they had a stranger with them named Marian Todd, an old friend of Janie's who had dropped by late in the afternoon. Janie said, "I called about six but you weren't in, Janet, but I knew you wouldn't mind." She laughed, "Marian eats hardly anything at all."

Janet looked at the girl and thought: Just men. Marian was a sultry brunette with languorous eyes, a gorgeous figure and a full mouth. She wore a dress that was beautifully cut an inch too low. "I hope you're not too angry," she said in her best Julie London voice. Then she sank into a deep chair and crossed long, lovely legs. Jack Blake's eyes bulged.

It was almost eight, and the roast was drying, by the time Jim arrived. She could tell by the subdued astonishment in his eyes that he had completely forgotten about the Carsons and the Blakes. He explained that he had been delayed at the office, but Janet detected the Martinis on his breath when she kissed him. He'd certainly been in a great hurry to get home.