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American Drama and the Theatre of the Absurd

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Abstract:

The present paper addresses the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd in American Drama. Shortly after the First World War, German playwright Bertolt Brecht began influencing the direction of twentieth-century drama with his innovative theories. Brecht's 'Epic Theatre' revolutionized the European theatre freeing it from the constraints of nineteenth century well-made play and from the superficialities of dramatic realism. Similarly Artaud's 'Theater of Cruelty' posed another challenge to realistic representations during the 1930s and 1940s. A revolution was taking place in European and Britain theatre during the 1940s and 1950s, largely in response to the social and political changes brought about by the Second World War. Martin Esslin brought these plays together under the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' which endeavored to deal with the absurdity of human condition. The scene was thus set for the emergence of anti-realistic dramatic styles that would characterize European experimental theatre after the Second World War and well into the 1950s and 1960s. It was a result of the efforts of the American director Herbert Blau that the innovative theories of Brecht and Artaud which the European playwrights had embraced moved into the American experimental theatre scene during the 1960s and 1970s. Starting in the 1950s, the most innovative movement in mid-century American drama was the theater of the absurd. The international movement endured from 1950s to the 1970s, and its values reverberate in the contemporary plays of such American dramatists as Sam Shepard and Suzan-Lori Parks.

Keywords: Absurd, Meaninglessness, Existentialism, Futile

The term 'Absurd' was first used by a Hungarian-born critic Martin Esslin in his 1960 essay 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Esslin's study was a description of what he saw as a new movement in European and British drama that had emerged during the 1940s and 1950s, a movement that reflected the general mind-set after the Second World War where "the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions" (Esslin 23). The scientific development at the beginning of twentieth century paved a way for war-weapons too. The world turned into a horrifying place where religion had lost sense. People lost faith in a unified universe and the result was meaninglessness and rootlessness in life and a breakdown of communication. For Esslin, the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' was an attempt to unite, in form and content, the sense of

‘metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition’(Esslin 23-24).The absurdists had to take up the task of restoring order in an otherwise anarchic world. Some of the major European absurdists include Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, David Campton. The ‘literature of the absurd’ was influenced by the existential outlook of such men as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. These philosophers viewed “human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe; to conceive the human world as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning; and to represent human life in its fruitless search for purpose and significance, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came towards the nothingness where it must end-as an existence which is both anguished and absurd”(A Glossary...M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham).

For the absurdists, the world is empty, incomprehensible, hostile and meaningless. The plays that fall under the caption ‘Theatre of Absurd’ thus tend to resist the realistic conventions of narrative plot, developed characters, a well-defined structure, an accurate reflection of social reality, and a language that rationally expresses meaning. Instead, these plays have no story or plot. They start at an arbitrary point and end at one as well. The plot denies all notions of logical or realistic development and is essentially repetitive and cyclical. The stage-setting is austere, quite in tune with what they want to present. There is an absence of recognizable characters who are mostly common men (tramps). The plays have neither a beginning nor an end. Absurd plays lack final clarity. The language used can be described as ‘incoherent babblings’ (Esslin 21), promoting the notion that communication is impossible, futile, thus reflecting the senselessness of life. “The plays that fall under the heading of ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ resist such conventions, distorting the surfaces of social reality in favor of a freer expression of human experience, one that suggests rather than delineates” (Saddik 29). The Theatre of the Absurd expresses a sense of shock at the absence, the loss of any clear and well-defined systems of beliefs or values.

While the Second World War brought disillusionment throughout Europe and Britain, the United States still showed no signs of despair since it emerged from the war with a continued belief in progress and a renewed sense of the possibilities of the American dream. Esslin grieved over the paucity of Absurdist dramatists writing in the United States. “He posited that the despair characteristic of nations such as France and Britain during the years following the war was not matched by America’s relative detachment from its atrocities” (Saddik 36). This sense of security was ultimately crushed by the social cataclysm of the 1960s and as Esslin points out by the disillusionment brought on by the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War which resulted in a severe loss of lives. From here onwards, American theatre took up such themes that would question the very meaning of individual and social existence. Dramas of quite a few American playwrights beyond 1960s have existentialist preoccupations. William V. Spanos says: “Certainly for the American writers of the 1950s and 60s, whose work as a whole is justly referred to as the

Literature of Revolt- Salinger, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Styron, Mailer, Ellison, Albee and Bellow, to name the best-the influence of the existential outlook has become central" (v).The American dramatists began to follow European innovators such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco in order to contemplate the absurdities of human existence. They demonstrated the universal absurd by abandoning theatrical realism, logical dialogue, characterization and situation. American playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd include Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Jack Gelber and John Guare.

Among all those who were influenced by the European absurdists, Edward Albee was at the forefront. Albee's first plays bear much resemblance to plays by Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett which were making such a stir in the mid-fifties, plays such as Ionesco's *The Chairs*(1952) and *Rhinoceros* (1959), Beckett's *Act without Words* (1956), *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days* (1960).In his enthusiasm for the new mode, Albee wrote *The Zoo Story* (1959) modeled on Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. The play was quite successful and Albee was now associated with the great Samuel Beckett. Martin Esslin in his essay 'Theatre of the Absurd' states, "Edward Albee comes into the category of the Theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism" as is evident in his first play, *The Zoo Story*. In the play, Albee fulfils the two purposes of the Theatre of the Absurd for in Peter , he satirizes "the absurdity of lives lived unaware an unconscious of ultimate reality", while in Jerry we face "the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties ".In both characters we have an example of "man forever lonely , immured in the prison of his subjectivity, unable to reach his fellow-man"(Esslin 392). With *The Zoo Story*, Albee aligned himself with the Absurdists in his illustration of the frustrations of human connection and communication.

The theater of the absurd tends to make use of expressionism. "On the expressionistic stage the world may be symbolized by a few angular pieces of abstract statuary, by a color alone, or by a few boards made into platforms of different levels; tall buildings may lean over a house to express menace, stables may flower at their peak to express hope, men may walk through mirrors to express their insubstantiality. The laws of nature and probability are suspended on the expressionistic stage, and their place is taken by the laws of poetry, which state that a writer is free to reshape the natural world in order to make his point clear" (Kernan5-6). Kernan depicts the minimalist expressionistic theater as consisting of "skeletal structures [which] represent houses, where the world is reduced to a bare stage with a single tree, where a few folding chairs stand for an automobile and household furnishings," etc. The stage directions for Ionesco's *The Chairs*, for instance, involve only "a large, very sparsely furnished room" which initially contains only two stools, a blackboard and two chairs. The set for Beckett's *Happy Days* is simply an

“expanse of scorched grass rising center to low mound. Gentle slopes down to front and either side of stage.” The stage for his *Krapp’s Last Tape* contains just a small table, two drawers of which are open to the audience. Albee’s *The Sandbox*, written in 1959 and first performed in 1960 uses the same stage directions: “A bare stage, with only the following: Near the footlights, far-stage-right, two simple chairs set side by side, facing the audience; near the footlights, far stage-left, a chair facing stage-right with a music stand before it; farther back, and stage-center, slightly elevated and raked, a large child’s sandbox with a toy pail and shovel.” That’s it, just three chairs, a music stand and a child’s sandbox. In the play, there are four characters called Mommy, Daddy, Grandmother and Young Man. The play is very absurd for it doesn’t compliment traditional theater. The grandmother breaks the fourth wall, reminding the audience they are in a theater. *The Sandbox* is absurd and meaningless, and so Albee implies is much of American life today.

In his play, *The American Dream* (1961), Albee in his typical Theatre of the Absurd manner, portrays the death of the American Dream. In this play, we are being told that the characters Mommy and Daddy had adopted a son many years earlier. As they objected to the child’s actions, they mutilated it as punishment, eventually killing it. Now a Young Man appears at the door looking for work. After hearing his life story, we are informed that this Young Man, who is dubbed “The American Dream,” is the twin of Mommy and Daddy’s first child. Because the first child was maimed, the twin has experienced all of its pain and has been left physically beautiful, but also a psychological cripple, completely shallow and completely empty. As one Albee critic, Gerry McCarthy, says, “If the boy in *The American Dream* is left as a shell, it is because Albee is dramatizing a soulless aspect of Americans society” (Edward Albee, 24-25). Similarly, the mysterious son who is the subject of much heated quarrels between the husband and wife in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962), but who turns out to be an entirely imaginary character [a reference to American Dream] is hardly less absurd than the mysterious Godot of the play by the same name by Samuel Beckett, a character who is constantly spoken of but who never actually appears, and who may not really exist, either.

Another American playwright associated with the Theatre of Absurd is Sam Shepard. From the beginning of his career, Shepard was interested in exploring the experimental dramatic forms that emerged in Europe after the Second World War and took root in the Off-Off-Broadway American theatre scene during the 1960s and 1970s. Shepard’s earlier plays were more experimental and were heavily influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd. Later on, his plays took on a more serious, post-modern feel but were still influenced by absurdism. Shepard said:

The stuff that had biggest influence-on me was European drama in the sixties. That period brought theatre into completely new territory, Beckett especially who made American Theatre look like it was on crutches. I don’t think Beckett gets enough credit for revolutionizing theatre, for turning it

upside down. (Interview "The Art of Theater. . ." 224).

These words suggest Shepard's indebtedness to Samuel Beckett who exposed Shepard to Sartrean existentialism [which led to the development of Theatre of Absurd]. The existential quest for one's identity, which forms the basis of the Theatre of Absurd, undoubtedly had to be a matter of concern for Shepard as well, since he had got rid of all of his familial definitions and his past in an attempt to manufacture his own identity and to define himself. However, Shepard's search for identity was both personal and at a larger level the search of the 1960s American man for genuine faces behind the masks- a need to shed off the duplicity of appearances created by consumerism and mass media. The subject of freedom, which is a principal concern of existentialism is a major theme in Shepard as well. Freedom for Shepard meant a freedom from the shadow of his dead, drunken father and a desire for the freedom of American people from the constrictions of the political environment in the late 1960s and ultimately the freedom from the victimization of the mysterious deterministic forces. Shepard expresses his 'identity crisis' very ardently in an interview with Stephanie Coen:

This problem of identity has always interested me. Who in fact are we? Nobody will say we don't know who we are, because that seems like an adolescent question-we've passed beyond existentialism, let's talk about really important things, like the fucking budget! (Laughter.) (Interview Online.n.p.)

Shepard's search for identity ultimately led him to deal with the mystery of the universe, the existential angst that is a result of a confrontation with the terrible purposelessness of world on which man has no control and the existential dilemma wherein a man is utterly free to create himself and his world through choices but even then is somehow faced with choosing between equally good or equally bad choices. Shepard's one-act play *The Unseen Hand*, first staged at La Mama in 1969 is replete with existentialist preoccupations. In the play, the dramatist tries to show the multifaceted nature of human freedom and its repercussions. Every other character in the play seeks freedom which is controlled and at times hampered by an 'unseen hand'. Another of Shepard's early plays *Chicago* (1966) is also in tune with the Drama of the Absurd. Throughout this play, Shepard deals with the decay of American society and its dysfunctional families. The characters [Stu and Joe] in the play are alienated from each other. They are portrayed as being caught in an intangible world. There is a lack of communication between the characters. The dialogue is devoid of sense and meaning. Everyday language has become empty. The conversation is merely an exchange of meaningless banalities used to fill the emptiness between people or within them as is suggested by the banal dialogue between Stu and Joy:

STU: Biscuits. Who need biscuits at this hour? Who ever needs biscuits? Joy?

JOY: (off right): What?

STU: Who needs biscuits?

JOY: Peasants in Mexico (2)

The conversation is reminiscent of the purposeless word-play between Didi

and Gogo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Shepard's play *Buried Child* (1979) belongs to his trilogy of family dramas and is probably the one which marks his transition from a highly experimental to a more realistic style. The play may have a realistic setting, but step by step, Shepard creates a sarcastic play which could also be seen as part of the Theatre of Absurd. The play borders on the Theatre of Absurd with its illogical circumstances and bizarre plot. Several incidents in the play are left unexplained. Throughout the play, the character Tilden makes several appearances carrying the corn and other vegetables that have mysteriously grown in the garden whereas the other two characters, Dodge and Halie claim that the garden has been barren for the last forty years. In the play, Shepard portrays his characters as voids so as to show both the emptiness of their lives and the void of their contemporary culture. The disintegration of identity, lack of meaning, and purpose in life, are features of the Theatre of Absurd and all these together lead to the disparaging outcome in *Buried Child*. Wilcox (1984) notes: "In Shepard's world of pop bricolage each individual speaks in a private code or idiolect, and becomes a kind of linguistic island separated from everyone else"(561). Aimless and fragmented conversations in the play are the exact result of talking for the sake of talking. "The characters are reticent to say anything, but also need to speak simply to avoid falling into the vacuum of silence. The result is a preponderance of oddly disjointed, desultory conversations" (Bottoms 165). As Tilden tells his father the reason of his coming back home, "I was alone. I thought I was dead" (23). Tilden felt lonely and needed a company; "you gotta talk or you'll die"(22). Regarding *Buried Child*, the elements of the play can neither be interpreted nor can any explanations be attributed to what happened during the play. The play ends as it began with Halie and Dodge talking to each other while Vince has taken Dodge's place, and through this effect, Shepard defers any kind of closure or resolutions in the play.

Jack Gelber is also an important American advocate of the Theatre of Absurd. Gelber's first well-known play *The Connection* (1959) fits well into the category of Absurdist Theater. About the play, Gelber said, "My play... is an anti-phony play, which hits hard at the sentimentality. But there is faith in it-not in terms of a hero who finds his own salvation, but in terms of the continuity of life"(Arthur Gelb,1960), a continuity crucial to the existential mindset. The world of Gelber's drama is a fragmented one. There is no security or peace. Respite comes through drugs and sleep. Conflict pervades society and the closest of human relationships. *The Connection* addresses the issue of meaninglessness in the world as, "Life may be by default meaningless, but it will go on, so why not construct our own meaning" (Mike 2011). Gelber readily admits the absence of any intrinsic meaning in life and disapproves of those who do not realize this and yet are intrigued by those who do accept these conditions. The play *The connection* often hints at such an attitude of society. As soon as a character comes close to profundity of thought, another character's entrance or frivolous chatter interrupts him. The

characters in the play don't grow, they don't construct meaning for themselves, and that is their mistake, from an absurdist perspective. There is essentially no movement in the plot of this two-act play because the characters are so desperate in their need that they remain in Teache's room, the only setting in the play, afraid to leave for the fear that Cowboy, their dope supplier, might come while they are gone. Unlike Beckett's *Godot*, Gelber's *Godot* does arrive in the play, in the form of Cowboy, who provides heroin for the characters. On one hand, this seems to be a denial of meaninglessness, because the thing the characters are waiting restlessly for actually appears. On the other hand, the thing is a man who brings heroin for them so they might slide back into their hazy illusions. Even as one of the characters Leach almost dies of an overdose, the rest continue their lives exactly as before. The play is an existentialist assemblage of disorder and suffering through which the characters seek to improvise an existence in the face of meaninglessness.

One more American playwright who has often been compared with the dramatists who make up the Theatre of the Absurd is John Guare. In an interview with John Digaetani, Guare admits that "it is impossible not to be influenced by the absurd...That's just a handy label for that which has existed for all time from Aeschylus on down...I think Theater of the Absurd is just a critical label for something that has existed since Greece. Euripides' *The Bacchae* is one of the greatest examples I know of the Theater of the Absurd" (108). Like other dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd, Guare believes that the world has its irregularities and weirdness. Guare's plays, *A Day for Surprises* (1971), *Something I'll Tell Tuesday* (1967) and *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year* (1966) belong to the Theater of the Absurd. Jean Stine et al. propose, "Linking Guare with this [Theater of the Absurd] movement is his use of exaggeration, shock, ludicrousness, and black humor....Placed in unpleasant situations or environments, Guare's characters... display negative aspects of human nature"(203). According to Clive Barnes, Guare's drama belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd for involving organized irrationalities or as he says "calculated irrelevancy" and "astonishing logical illogicality" (203). Several incidents in the plays sound illogical and unjustified. In *A Day for Surprises*, it is not clear why the hungry lion leaves the people in the street and library and chooses to eat Miss Pringle. In *Something I'll Tell You Tuesday*, nobody knows what kind of marital problem is there between Hildegard and George. And in *The loveliest Afternoon of the Year*, the man's wife is abnormal for carrying a rifle under her children's seat in the stroller and shooting her husband and the young woman without even talking to them. Edmund Thomas and Eugene Miller say that absurdity is "[s]omething that is foolish, ridiculous..., plainly not true, not sensible or contradictory" (249). These incidents may be taken as expressions of an estranged or alienated world signifying the absurdities of existence.

Guare's characters are city residents who experience several social ills like capitalism, heavy workloads, utilitarianism etc. He criticizes urban communities for putting psychological pressures on American citizens at

home and work. Dasgupta describes the mind-set of Guare's city characters as: "Down-and-out characters, forever arguing or complaining about lost opportunities, inhabit middle-class dwellings and display extreme forms of urban paranoia....Clinging desperately to dreams of a better life, they continually chase after their visions, only to be drawn deeper and deeper into frustration and despair..." (204). The characters are frustrated individuals undergoing psychological disturbances. In *A Day for Surprises*, Miss Jepson utters a monologue which reflects her disturbed state of mind:

Well, you sneakies! You and Miss Pringle! Why don't you let anybody know! Isn't this a day for surprises! You and Denise Pringle—It's like all the surprises of the world store themselves up for a day when the one thing you do not need is a surp...you and Denise Pring...sonofagun...(18).

The monologue includes several abstruse phrases that form a constricted syntax and incomplete or unintelligible words like "surp" which stands for "surprise." Moreover, "sonofagun" is a nonsensical word.

The characters in Guare's plays as in most of the absurd plays are alienated and isolated ones. The stage directions in *Something I'll Tell You* reveal anxiety and despondency on Hildegard and George's faces: "Hildegard's hair is askew. George looks like he's on the brink of either murder or an ulcer" (6). In *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*, both young man and lady experience loneliness. The lady says that no-one wants to commune with her for eleven months, so her life has altered into "a goddam convent" that is deficient of fun and activity (22). The characters are victims of American society which pressurizes its citizens, causing some individuals to crumple under pressure.

The American playwrights of the Absurdist tradition were by and large critiquing the sense of alienation, emptiness and lack of communion embraced by a superficial capitalist society, implicitly suggesting alternative possibilities. They tried to distort the demarcated surface realities in order to peep into the truths beyond the superficial.

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