

# The Theater:

## Absurdist Plays Disrupt Comfortable Certainties

By WILLIAM PACKARD

In recent years, certain very curious contemporary plays have been grouped together into the so-called Theater of the Absurd—a collective name for all those plays that illustrate and analyze the irrationality of the world we live in.

Of course, the concept of absurdity is nothing new. One of the very early claims to faith in the Christian church was "Credo quia absurdum est" (I believe because it is absurd). And since Freud, we have all been made aware of the fact that the great shaping forces of life are hidden away inside ourselves, in some secret abyss often far beyond the reach of reason—for the unconscious is, by definition, quite a curious absurdity, and it can only be dimly glimpsed through the weird logic of dreams.

Now in our own time, Europeans have been especially susceptible to this whole notion of absurdity—perhaps because their own experience of this ghastly past half century has exposed them to two total wars which were unprecedented in scope and savagery and senselessness. What can we say of the Warsaw Ghetto, Dachau, Belsen, Buchenwald and Auschwitz? These are more than merely monstrous absurdities—in some eyes they may also be nightmare monuments to the meaninglessness of existence.

It is no wonder, then, that the leading postwar European poets and playwrights began to give voice to their own sense of absurdity and abandonment. Albert Camus, writing in "The Myth of Sisyphus," said that man is experiencing "the unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing." And Eugene Ionesco writes: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless."

And so when we see contemporary European plays—for example, the work of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, as well as the work of the English playwright Harold Pinter—we can understand how they might all share in the same forlorn premise: That man is suffering from a contagion of sadness, that he is dumbstruck by the breakdown of language and logic, so he can only make hollow shouts out of a joyless void. And these curious outbursts of anger and anxiety and ennui constitute the "Theater of the Absurd."

In form, these plays are highly stylized, abstract and melancholy; in content, they are often no more than elaborate jests, stoic jokes, witless riddles, or plain shaggy dog stories. And yet beneath their curious surface of absurdity, they are all appalling commentaries on our time, and they speak for the human condition as few naturalistic plays do.

### The Puzzle of 'Godot'

Samuel Beckett's "Waiting For Godot" was first produced in France in 1953, and since then it has baffled and fascinated the modern imagination — critics have puzzled

over the stark metaphor of "waiting," readers have wondered at the mysterious identity of "Godot" and audiences have more or less concluded that the play must be some sort of oblique parable of man's isolation and abandonment.

The play concerns two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who sit and talk endlessly about how futile it is to sit and talk endlessly. But they keep repeating that they are also doing something else, something of redemptive importance: They are waiting for Godot. And so they wait and they wait and they wait—and their waiting is punctuated by madcap vaudeville routines, lapses of memory, and thoughts on suicide and salvation. But always, their conversation comes back to the boredom and futility of this existence. As Estragon says: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful."

They wait and they wait and they wait. After awhile two new characters, Pozzo and Lucky, enter; Pozzo is taking Lucky to the fair, to sell him (that will be kinder than killing him, he explains). After long silence, Lucky suddenly delivers a long speech of incomparable absurdity, and then falls silent again; Pozzo and Lucky exit, and the tramps continue to wait.

They wait until the end of the play, and Godot still has not come. And we wonder: What is all this heroic nonsense? What can we make of these two poor lost tramps? And who is Godot?

No one knows. Beckett himself has commented that if he had known who Godot really was, he would have said so in the play. And so the most we can say is that we are dealing with a meditation on man's abandonment—and that in waiting for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon somehow voice our own appeal for pity in a world that is rapidly going to ruin.

The plays of Eugene Ionesco are equally curious; they all have a buffo tone, as if they were farces of sadness. One play—"Jack," or "The Submission"—concerns the plight of a young man whose parents insist that he perpetuate all the ancestral family patterns, by admitting that he loves hashed brown potatoes. It is an absurd demand, and Jack rebels. He will not even tolerate the hypocrisy of language: "Oh words, what crimes are committed in your name!"

But it is all futile—Jack's family pushes him into marriage with a surrealistic bride, Roberta, who has two noses on her face and nine fingers on her left hand. Jack pleads with Roberta for understanding, and describes the terrible forces of conformity which have conspired to torment him:

"I fell for it!—But everything was fake . . . Ah, they had lied to me. Centuries and centuries have passed! People . . . they all had the word goodness in their

mouths, a bloody knife between their teeth . . . Do you understand me? I was patient, patient, patient. Someone would surely come to look for me. I had wanted to protest: There was no longer anyone . . ."

Roberta sympathizes, but only so she can seduce him. She woos Jack in an illogical language which consists of only one word: "Cat". And at the end of the play, when the lovers finally embrace, Jack's family crawls and waddles back onstage, leering at the young couple and making obscene animal noises.

Ionesco leaves no doubt in our minds about the effect he wishes to create at the end of the play; in his stage directions he writes: "All this must produce in the audience a feeling of embarrassment, awkwardness and shame." In other words, this play is not simply a scathing satire of middle-class morality—it is also a way of making the theater audience experience the full impact of absurdity in their own lives.

Jean Genet is a poet of roles and poses, who delights in stripping masks away in order to show us our psychological nakedness; his plays are all written for a ritualistic theater of serious ceremony, halfway between high mass and black magic.

One play, "The Balcony," begins with a Bishop onstage, complete with miter and gilded cope—but this Bishop is not really a Bishop at all, he is a gasman who has come to Madame Irma's brothel to dress up in a Bishop's clothes in order to act out his sexual fantasy of confession, absolution and atonement. Other customers come to dress up as a Judge (who makes a brothel girl stand trial for theft) and a General (who orders a brothel girl to whinny and trot around the room as if she were his favorite horse). The local Chief of Police keeps visiting the brothel in hopes that someday, someone will come and ask to dress up as the Chief of Police.

Throughout the play, there is machine gun fire offstage—a revolution is going on, and for political reasons the brothel customers must maintain their fantasy roles, and appear on the Balcony as the Bishop, the General and the Judge, in full view of their fellow citizens. Thus these characters have become what they once were only in their own mad imaginings, and the audience is baffled at the transformation: Is the Bishop really a Bishop after all? There is no answer to the question.

Granted, the play is a circus of perversions—we are dealing with sadism, transvestitism, voyeurism, and all the other slippery tricks of the unconscious. And yet, although we know the play is curious and absurd, the more we gaze into this mirror

image of the Self, the more we lose all sense of our own identity. And this is Genet's intention. As Madame Irma says at the end of the play: "You must now go home, where everything—you can be quite sure—will be even falsier than here. . ."

### A Mood of Doom

The plays of Harold Pinter are curiously ominous and filled with a mood of doom. In "The Caretaker," Aston has invited Davies, a tramp, into his house, and offered him a job as caretaker of the premises. Davies is dirty, vicious, and lost; and when Aston reveals that he once received electric shock treatments in a mental hospital, the tramp seizes on this chance to advance himself at Aston's expense. He complains to Aston's brother that the place is not good enough for him—that he needs a clock, he needs another pair of shoes, he needs a bed that is not next to the window.

Eventually, the stench and the pestering become intolerable, and Davies has to be asked to leave. And yet, for all his faults, this tramp's pitiful appeal to stay at the end is inexplicably haunting: "You mean you're throwing me out? You can't do that. Listen man, listen man, I don't mind, you see, I don't mind, I'll stay, I don't mind, I'll tell you what, if you don't want to change beds, we'll keep it as it is, I'll stay in the same bed, maybe if I can get a stronger piece of sacking, like, to go over the window, keep out the draught, that'll do it, what do you say, we'll keep it as it is?"

But there is no reply—so Davies stands speechless as the curtain falls. And the audience is also dumfounded, perhaps because it realizes that this filthy tramp is utterly alone and absolutely unable to adapt to any form of human communication or relationship. Here again, we are face to face with man's alleged abandonment and isolation.

This is, indeed, a curious theater. But then, as these playwrights remind us, it's a curious world. And the theory is that as our modern life gets more and more arbitrary and accidental, our art must express itself more and more in terms of the absurd—through stark metaphors, stoic jokes, oblique parables, dream logic and farces of sadness.

All of these absurdist plays invariably raise more questions than they answer, and so they are intellectually disquieting. But more important, these plays also challenge us psychologically, because they disrupt all of our comfortable certainties and make us aware of how precarious things really are all around us. And that is as it should be. The French critic Antonin Artaud once wrote: "We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all,"