

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

ORIGINS

- 1950's and 60s Europe and America
- Agreement with Existentialist philosopher Albert Camus's belief that the human situation is essentially absurd, devoid of purpose.
- Existentialism
 - what happens when human existence has no meaning and therefore all communication breaks down
- Rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s
- Shared trauma from the World Wars plus the threat of nuclear war

BASICS OF ABSURDISM

- Without purpose
- Illogical
- Out of harmony
- Useless
- Devoid of reason
- Meaningless
- Hopeless
- Chaotic
- Lacking order
- Uncertain

CONVENTIONS

- Non linear, often circular plot development. The structure was a round shape and the finishing point was the same as the starting point. The sense that nothing has really happened.
- Anti-realistic, little to no plot, unrecognisable set - desert, empty room, sparseness
- Lack of cause and effect between scenes or actions
- Irrational or illogical speech, non-sequiturs, irrelevant topics
- Elements of vaudeville and circus movements
- Long pauses/silence

SAMUEL BECKETT

1906-1989

- Irish Playwright and Novelist
- Travelled Europe, settled in Paris, befriended James Joyce
- Wrote *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*
- Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969
- Wrote in both French and English
- "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."
- "We are all born mad. Some remain so."



WAITING FOR GODOT

PUB.1952

- Tragicomedy in Two Acts
- First theatrical success of Absurd Dramas
- 2 men, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for someone named Godot. They discuss their miseries, contemplate suicide, do not know their reason for existing and yet they still wait
- Link to script http://www.napavalley.edu/people/LYanover/Documents/English%20121/English%20121%20Samuel%20%20Beckett%20Waiting%20for%20Godot.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3uOI3hlz8ongeh94pzEnyBFACiRzXiTmxTK1QvfXlev9cFSI_arklaTNQ

WAITING FOR GODOT

Voted as the most significant English-language play of the 20th century

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=99&v=MUXtzkLTABl&feature=emb_logo



From the 1953 opening of
Waiting for Godot

HAROLD PINTER

OCTOBER 1930 - DECEMBER 2008

- Actor turned playwright
- Never offers an explanation
- Outside forces interrupting a stable environment
- Unlike other absurdist practitioners, his settings are more realistic
- Plays included *The Homecoming*, *No Man's Land*, *The Birthday Party*
- *The Dumb Waiter* - two men waiting for instructions
- "One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness."



PINTER PAUSE

- There are three different types of silences that can be categorised under Pinter Pauses
- An ellipsis is denoted by three dots and was used by the playwright to indicate slight hesitation.
- A pause was a much longer hesitation used by Pinter to more accurately depict the careful construction of an utterance. Generally, during a pause, the character is in the middle of a deep thought process and the use of this device helped Pinter to create tension and an unsettling atmosphere.
- A full-on silence, also known as a pregnant pause, is a dead stop during which no word is uttered because the character has encountered a conflict so absurd that they have nothing to say, and they are left in a completely different mental state from where they started.

EUGENE IONESCO

1909-1994



- Romanian-French playwright
- The solitude and insignificance of human existence in a tangible way
- Admirer of Surrealist and Dadaist movements
- Berenger - Everyman character - in *Rhinoceros* everyone turns into rhinos except for Berenger. The play explores conformity and mob mentality.
- In *The Chairs*, an old couple welcomes a large number of guests to their home, but these guests are invisible, so all we see are empty chairs, a representation of their absence.
- Also appeared in TV show *Breaking Bad*.
- "Ideologies separate us. Dreams and anguish bring us together."

OTHER PLAYWRIGHTS

- Tom Stoppard - *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* - two minor characters in a play that has already been written. *The Clockwork and the Mystery* - Classic vs Romantic.
- Friedrich Dürrenmatt - *The Visit* - wealthy woman promises a reward to a whole town for killing her ex.
- Jean Genet - *The Maids* and *The Balcony* - struggles between outcasts and oppressors, used parody and role-play within plays.
- Edward Albee - *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* - George and Martha create an illusory child to mask the ugliness of their marriage.

TINA HOWE

- The American playwright Tina Howe (born in 1937) is able to tread the fine line between Absurdism and Realism in many of her plays.
- Her 1976 play Museum involves 55 characters at a group art show.
- The Art of Dining (1979) uses food and dining (two of Howe's favourite themes) to explore the absurd timeless environment of waiting for a meal. Action, situation, dialogue and detail work together to create the absurd.
- Howe's 1986 play Coastal Disturbances which is set on a beach and required six tonnes of sand for the first production shows how situation and character can drive Absurdist drama rather than language.

- Shows are often described as Pinteresque or Beckettian, why?
- Is there still a place for absurdist theatre today? Why/Why not?