

Relationship with Existentialism

The Theatre of the Absurd is commonly associated with Existentialism, and Existentialism was an influential philosophy in Paris during the rise of the Theatre of the Absurd; however, to call it Existentialist theatre is problematic for many reasons. It gained this association partly because it was named (by Esslin) after the concept of "absurdism" advocated by Albert Camus, a philosopher commonly called Existentialist though he frequently resisted that label. Absurdism is most accurately called Existentialist in the way Franz Kafka's work is labeled Existentialist: it embodies an aspect of the philosophy though the writer may not be a committed follower. As Tom Stoppard said in an interview, "I must say I didn't know what the word 'existential' meant until it was applied to Rosencrantz. And even now existentialism is not a philosophy I find either attractive or plausible. But it's certainly true that the play can be interpreted in existential terms, as well as in other terms."

Many of the Absurdist writers were contemporaries with Jean-Paul Sartre, the philosophical spokesman for Existentialism in Paris, but few Absurdist writers actually committed to Sartre's own Existentialist philosophy, as expressed in Being and Nothingness, and many of the Absurdist writers had a complicated relationship with him. Sartre praised Genet's plays, stating that for Genet "Good is only an illusion. Evil is a Nothingness which arises upon the ruins of Good."

Characters

The characters in Absurdist drama are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe and they abandon rational devices and discursive thought because these approaches are inadequate.

The plots of many Absurdist plays feature characters in interdependent pairs, commonly either two males or a male and a female. Some Beckett scholars call this the "pseudocouple". The two characters may be roughly equal or have a

begrudging interdependence (like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* or the two main characters in [*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*](#)); one character may be clearly dominant and may torture the passive character (like Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*)

Language

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama was its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language had become a vehicle of conventionalised, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication.

Despite its reputation for nonsense language, much of the dialogue in Absurdist plays is naturalistic. The moments when characters resort to nonsense language or clichés—when words appear to have lost their denotative function, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters, make Theatre of the Absurd distinctive. Language frequently gains a certain phonetic, rhythmical, almost musical quality, opening up a wide range of often comedic playfulness.

When language that is apparently nonsensical appears, it also demonstrates this disconnection. It can be used for comic effect, as in Lucky's long speech in *Godot* when Pozzo says Lucky is demonstrating a talent for "thinking" as other characters comically attempt to stop him.

Plot

Traditional plot structures are rarely a consideration in The Theatre of the Absurd. Plots can consist of the absurd repetition of cliché and routine, as in *Godot*

Likewise, the action of *Godot* is centered around the absence of a man named Godot, for whom the characters perpetually wait. In many of Beckett's later plays, most features are stripped away and what's left is a minimalistic tableau.

Conclusion

Waiting for Godot is probably the most famous absurd play to date. The characters of the play, are absurd caricatures who of course have problems communicating with one another, and the language they use is often times ludicrous. And, following the cyclical pattern, the play seems to end in the same state it began in, with nothing really changed.

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