Theater of the Absurd

Theater of the Absurd, term used to identify a body of plays written primarily in France from the mid-1940s through the 1950s. These works usually employ illogical situations, unconventional dialogue, and minimal plots to express the apparent absurdity of human existence.

French thinkers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre used the term absurd in the 1940s in recognition of their inability to find any rational explanation for human life. The term described what they understood as the fundamentally meaningless situation of humans in a confusing, hostile, and indifferent world.

British scholar Martin Esslin first used the phrase “theater of the absurd” in a 1961 critical study of several contemporary dramatists, including Irish-born playwright Samuel Beckett and French playwrights Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. These writers reacted against traditional Western theatrical conventions, rejecting assumptions about logic, characterization, language, and plot.

For example, Beckett’s En attendant Godot (1953; translated as Waiting for Godot, 1954) portrays two tramps waiting for a character named Godot. They are not sure who Godot is, whether he will show up to meet them, and indeed whether he actually exists, but they spend each day waiting for him and trying to understand the world in which they live.

Ionesco’s La cantatrice chauve (1950; The Bald Soprano, 1956) portrays a group of characters who are incapable of true communication and who have no apparent purpose in their lives. The play has a circular structure, ending in the same way that it began.
• Precursors to the theater of the absurd can be found in a number of late 19th-century and early 20th-century writers and literary movements. *Ubu roi* (1896; translated 1951), by French playwright Alfred Jarry, is considered an early example of absurdist theater for its use of nonsense language and mocking of theatrical conventions.

• The early 20th-century artistic movement known as surrealism sought to employ the subconscious mind by creating works of art spontaneously, without conscious thought; the sometimes bizarre, disjointed, or illogical products of this process resemble absurdist theater.

• Other theatrical trends and movements that influenced the theater of the absurd or were incorporated into it include vaudeville and slapstick humor and the Verfremdungseffekt (alienation effect) of German playwright Bertolt Brecht.

• To a lesser extent, absurdist theater was influenced by the theoretical writings of Antonin Artaud in *Le théâtre et son double* (1938; The Theater and its Double, 1958), which called for a theater that would jolt audiences and thereby stir them to action.

• The first absurdist plays shocked audiences at their premieres, but their techniques are now common in avant-garde theater and in some mainstream works.

• Contemporary playwrights whose work shows the influence of the theater of the absurd include American dramatists Edward Albee and Sam Shepard, British dramatists Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, German dramatists Günter Grass and Peter Weiss, Swiss dramatist Max Frisch, and Czech dramatist Vaclav Havel.
But how do I know if it is Absurd?
Characteristics of TOA

- Pessimistic view of modern world
- Includes a question of identity (who am I?)
- Relates a sense of the senselessness of being human—the human condition is absurd
- Has no moral or thesis
- Has no plot
- Reality merges into fantasy
- Language and reason often dissolve

- Characters lack any apparent motivation
- Actively defies intellectualism and rationality; things happen that are not rational; actions do not happen in logical ways
- Instead of reaching out to their audience, they seem to aim at confusing, boring, or even offending their viewers.

- Plays are often humorous
- Relies on the image (read stage directions & movements – try to visualize); plays present a series of strong dramatic images instead of a connected story lines. (After viewing an absurdist play, an audience member may not be able to tell “what happened” in the drama, but is more likely to report a random collection of images.)

- Purely subjective – relies upon the reader or viewer to incorporate his/her own feeling and experiences into the play
- Shows characters that have to cope with ridiculously bizarre situations.
- Plays avoid the two most potent interest factors of drama (conflict and suspense), making their dramatic structure appear to be a virtue of boredom.

- Characters in absurdist plays lack nobility in social standing; they are bums, maids, or civic functionaries. Since their world does not permit them to make heroism, characters in absurdist plays are small people trapped in a confusing environment

- So who is this Harold Pinter guy?

  - Harold Pinter (1930-2008)
  - Nobel Laureate (2005)
  - was an English playwright, screenwriter, actor, director, poet and political activist.
  - After publishing poetry as a teenager and acting in school plays, Pinter began his theatrical career in the mid-1950s as a rep actor using the stage name David Baron.
During a writing career spanning over half a century, beginning with his first play, *The Room* (1957), Pinter wrote 29 stage plays; 26 screenplays; many dramatic sketches, radio and TV plays; much more poetry; some short fiction; a novel; and essays, speeches, and letters.


He has also directed almost 50 stage, TV, and film productions of his own and others' works.

He is considered to be one of the most influential playwrights of the 20th century.

Pinter's dramas often involve strong conflicts among ambivalent characters fighting for verbal and territorial dominance and for their own remembered versions of the past;

stylistically, they are marked by theatrical pauses and silences, comedic timing, provocative imagery, witty dialogue, ambiguity, irony, and menace.

Thematically ambiguous, they raise complex issues of individual human identity oppressed by social forces, the power of language, and vicissitudes of memory.

Although Pinter publicly eschewed applying the term "political theatre" to his own work in 1981, he began writing overtly political plays in the mid-'80s, reflecting his own heightening political interests and changes in his personal life.

What about his work?

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Characteristics of Pinter's Plays

He developed a new style of drama, extending the idea of Theater of the Absurd.

This style is often called the Theater of Menace or Theater of Cruelty

The subtext is primary: as in real life, people rarely say what they mean.

In Pinter's world, very little is explained.
• Pinteresque touches: “The Dark Knight”—the Joker’s motivation never explained, as in “No Country for Old Men,” and “There will be Blood”.
• “You don’t have to hold the audience’s hand; the dialogue doesn’t have to illuminate the action. You don’t have to clearly define who’s a hero and who’s the villain.”

• Removed the idea of traditional plot (with exposition) replacing it with intricate webs of underlying tensions between people.
• Words are weapons in power struggles.
• “There are 2 silences: One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed…. The speech we hear is an indication of [what] we don’t hear.”

• “It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls, we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.”

• People say there is a failure to communicate, but Pinter disagrees. “I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate. . . Attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter someone else’s life is too frightening.”

The famous/infamous “Pinter Pause”
• Stage direction says “pause” or “silence”—let the silence drag for a bit.
• A pause in Pinter is as important as a line. They are there for a reason. 3 dots is a hesitation, a pause is a fairly mundane crisis and a silence is some sort of crisis.
• To what effect?