the Absurd Theatre   
  
Introduction  
The theatre of the absurd was a short-lived yet significant theatrical movement, centred in Paris in the 1950s. Unusual in this instance was the absence of a single practitioner spearheading the form. Largely based on the philosophy of existentialism, absurdism was implemented by a small number of European playwrights. Common elements included illogical plots inhabited by characters who appeared out of harmony with their own existence. The typical playgoer had never seen anything like this on the stage before. The theatre of the absurd will be remembered in history for many things, the most significant of these being Samuel Beckett’s masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*, one of the great plays of the 20th century. Absurdism is commonly studied in senior high school and university drama and theatre courses. Below are the main conventions of the theatre of the absurd.

**Background**

* not a conscious movement
* exponents of the form were a disconnected group of playwrights
* the term *theatre of the absurd* was first coined by scholar Martin Esslin in his 1961 text [*The Theatre of the Absurd*](https://www.bookdepository.com/Theatre-Absurd-Martin-Esslin/9781472577023)
* true absurdist playwrights are few in number: Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet (with some scholars including Arthur Adamov).
* other playwrights whose selected works have been labeled absurdist by others include Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard, Fernando Arrabal, and Peter Weiss (though most deny the label of absurdist playwright)
* the beginnings of absurdism lie in avant-garde experiments of the 1920s and 30s, while some argue absurdist elements exist in plays such as Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* (1896) and even in ancient Greek dramas

**Theory**

* *theatre of the absurd* is otherwise referred to as *absurdism*
* *absurd* originally means “out of harmony” (in a musical context) – its meaning in the theatre of the absurd is different to the everyday meaning of the word as “ridiculous”
* absurd in the context of absurdism can mean:
  + without purpose
  + illogical
  + out of harmony
  + useless
  + devoid of reason
  + meaningless
  + hopeless
  + chaotic
  + lacking order
  + uncertain
* lying in the background to absurdism is the notion of existentialism
* existentialist philosophers who influenced absurdist playwrights were Frenchmen Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) – both also playwrights themselves

*Existentialism refers to a particular view of the nature of man’s existence. The existentialist believes that man starts life with nothing. His life is made up of acts; through the process of acting man becomes conscious of his original nothingness. By choosing to act, man passes into the arena of human responsibility which makes him the creator of his own existence. However, the existence inevitably ends with death. Man returns to his original state of nothingness. This existential notion eliminates the Western concept of man’s exalted nature. Life becomes meaningless and useless – a condition which is in essence “absurd”. Man’s only freedom in this condition is the exercise of his conscious mind. However, consciousness means conflict – between man’s awareness of the absurdity of his existence and his need for justification of his human action. (J. L Crawford: Acting In Person and in Styl*e)

* the atrocities of World War II are considered influential events to the movement, highlighting the precariousness of human existence
* Sartre denied the existence of a God, seeing humans with no choice but to create their own standards and moral code in life (instead of accepting standards offered by the Church, the State, or society)
* Camus’ book-length essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* sees Sisyphus endlessly pushing a boulder to the top of a mountain, only to see it roll to the bottom again – this futile labor is an analogy for man’s meaningless existence, a quality seen in many characters and plots of absurdist plays

*For Camus, the legendary figure of Sisyphus was the prototype of an ‘absurd’ hero, condemned by the gods forever to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back down again by its own weight. He represented the epitome of futile labor and pointless existence. Although Camus denied any connection with Sartre’s existentialism, the book (Sartre’s The Myth of Sisyphus) became a manifesto for the new existentialist drama, and later for the theatre of the absurd. In it, Camus asserted that it was legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life had any meaning. He described how man felt himself to be a stranger in an alien world, and believed that this divorce between man and life was properly ‘le sentiment de l’absurdite’, the feeling of absurdity. (J. L. Styan: Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 2)*

**Plot and Structure**

* anti-realistic, going against many of the accepted norms of conventional theatre
* labeled by some critics as ‘anti-theatre’
* often characterised by a deliberate absence of the cause and effect relationship between scenes
* non-linear plot developments, sometimes cyclical – ending where they began
* occasionally appearing as though there is no plot at all to speak of
* deliberate lack of conflict

*… a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What’s more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice.*

*On the plot of Samuel Beckett’s play*[*Waiting for Godot*](https://www.bookdepository.com/Waiting-for-Godot-Samuel-Beckett/9780802144423)*– Vivian Mercier, The Irish Times, 18 February, 1956.*

**Acting and Characterisation**

* both presentational and representational modes of acting
* sometimes stereotypical
* often an absence of character development
* absurd characters lack the motivation found in characters of realistic dramas, highlighting their purposelessness
* time, place and identity are frequently blurred with characters often unsure about who or where they are
* characters are often out of harmony or out of sync with the world in which they live

**Movement**

* mixture of realistic and non-realistic
* elements of circus, vaudeville and acrobatics
* ritualistic
* slow
* illogical
* repetitive
* action sometimes defies logic or easy understanding
* one extreme to the other without notice
* often sombre and serious, then highly comical

*… the absurdists, while for the most part accepting Sartre’s philosophical outlook, tended to concentrate upon the irrationality of human experience without suggesting any path beyond. By employing a succession of episodes unified merely by theme or mood instead of a cause-to-effect arrangement, they arrived at a structure parallelling the chaos which was their usual dramatic subject. The sense of absurdity was heightened by the juxtaposition of incongruous events producing seriocomic and ironic effects. (Oscar G. Brockett: History of the Theatre)*

**Dialogue**

* language was devalued as a communication tool (unreliable and distrusted)
* often illogical
* sometimes telegraphic and clipped
* long pauses
* clichéd
* repetitive
* rhythmical
* frequent use of silence
* monotone
* slow dialogue sometimes accompanied by a frenzied, fast-paced monologue (extremes)

**Stagecraft**

* often simple and minimalist use of stagecraft
* barren set pieces barely denoting a location (e.g. a tree and a country road in *Waiting for Godot*)

**Key Plays**

* *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett
* *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett
* *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco
* *The Chairs* by Eugene Ionesco
* *The Lesson* by Eugene Ionesco
* *The Bald Prima Donna* / *The Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco
* *Exit The King* by Eugene Ionesco
* *The Balcony* by Jean Genet

**Other Notable Works**

* *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard
* *The Dumb Waiter* by Harold Pinter
* *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter

**Important playwrights  
  
1. Thornton Wilder – The Long Christmas Dinner (1931)**   
Wilder did not quite kickstart the theater of the absurd, but several of the novel elements of this one-act play would go on to influence some of the movement’s most significant recurrences. The setting is a Christmas Dinner that takes place over 90 years, its characters erratically changing clothing to catch up with time. And eventually, when death occurs, they will exit stage right through a portal. Wilder crafts a play where time becomes so volatile that its characters–as well those performing them–will have trouble keeping up.

**2. Jean Tardieu – Underground Lovers (1934)**

Tardieu’s Les Amants du Metro was way ahead of its time. Subtitled “a comic ballet without dance and without music”, the experimental playwright employed melodic and rhythmic patterns to the dialogue, including a scene where two loves fight by merely mentioning the names of different women. The associative power of such dialogue would go on to influence Samuel Beckett, among others.

**3. Jean-Paul Sartre – No Exit (1944)**

Sartre, along with Anouilh and Camus, would define the post-war era with their unique brand of existentialist drama. Nevertheless, No Exit induces its audience with a sense of claustrophobia and absurdity when the realization that “Hell is other people” becomes an inescapable mantra for the three trapped in the Inferno’s waiting room.

**4. Samuel Beckett – Waiting for Godot (1953)**

Samuel Beckett is without a doubt the father of the absurd. Not only did his prolific career as a playwright and novelist cement his reputation as the most prominent voice of the genre, but he also helped popularize the movement’s oft-challenging vision. Waiting for Godot centers around two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, as they wait for a mysterious figure name Godot (pronounced God-oh) and pass the time by desperately breaking the silence with shrewd, quick-witted dialogue.

**5. Max Frisch – The Firebugs (1953)**

Frisch was one of the most prominent German voices of the absurd, using his plays to extract evil from the actions of everyday life. The Firebugs centers around a man who must deal with local arsonists who trick themselves into entering people’s homes to such an extent that it makes the homeowners complicit in their own failure. Written in the wake of Fascism and Nazism, evil permeates over the banality and comedy of the dialogue.

**6. Ezio D’Errico – The Anthill and Time of the Locusts (1954)**

D’Errico is little known in literary circles outside of Italy, but his two most important plays, The Anthill and Time of the Locusts, meditate upon the haunting aura of brazen destruction that ravaged Italy during wartime. While The Anthill turns the conventional heroic tale upside down by deteriorating the hero with tortuous insistence, Time of the Locusts is about an Italian-American who is murdered by young thugs, and the community that faces the absurd and inexplicable consequences thereof.

**7. Arthur Adamov – Ping-Pong (1955)**

The Theater of the Absurd often portrays its characters in closed systems that they cannot escape. Ping-Pong pits two characters within a pinball machine with a mind of it own, and it literally takes over their lives. Not only is their conversation limited to talking about the machine, but the very breadth of their love and despair cannot transcend it, either.

**8. Jean Genet – The Balcony – (1955)**

Genet’s Balcony is a Dante-like journey to the depths of power, and how such a force enlivens and destroys certain people. Set in a brothel during a revolutionary uprising, the setting acts as a microcosm for the absurdity of social importance and oppression. Instead of being an enterprise of sexual pleasures, the brothel becomes a hub for society’s most bacchanalian pursuit: To hold power over others.

**9. Eugene Ionesco – Rhinoceros (1959)**

The Theater of the Absurd has time and again dealt with the pressures that society impinges on individuals to conform. Citing the destructive fascism and communism that plagued Europe during the mid-twentieth century, Ionesco portrays the ravage and ruin that occurs after the inhabitants of a small French town turn into rhinoceros. The only iconoclast, Berenger, struggles to stand his ground as all of his peers metamorphose before his eyes.

**10. Manuel De Pedrolo – Cruma (1957)**

You have probably not heard of Pedrolo because he is a distinctly Catalonian writer, but that doesn’t demerit his biting satire, imaginative symbolism and meditations upon isolation. Set in a mysterious apartment, two men to measure a room with numberless rulers, meet ghostly apparitions, and ponder upon the nature of the outside world. The play demands answers to a troubling question: Can we maintain our authentic selves without isolation, or must we give in to deception for the sake of social interaction?

**11. Fernando Arrabal – The Automobile Graveyard (1958)**

The combined influences of Beckett and Antonin Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” are evident in this play about a nightmarish junkyard hosting a colorful but remorseless cast of characters. Parodying the Biblical account of Christ, it juxtaposes the myth with modern deprivation and the wasteful rot of excessive materialism.

**12. Boris Vian – The Empire Builders (1959)**

EmpireBuilders

Boris Vian was more known for his magnanimous presence in the Parisian haunts of Saint-Germain-des-Pres, but his posthumously-performed opus The Empire Builders portrayed a lucid and troubling world haunted by death. Set in an increasingly-shrinking room, a man and his family try to escape an awful noise coming from outside, only to split apart for the sake of staying alive.

**13. Harold Pinter – The Dumbwaiter (1960)**

Harold Pinter is one of most critically-acclaimed playwrights in British Literature, and The Dumb Waiter is his wonderful take on the Absurd. About two hitmen awaiting their next assignment in a dingy basement, the tension builds between the characters as their banter gets interrupted by a dumb waiter (a food elevator) demanding filled orders.

**14. Edward Albee – Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1962)**

Albee’s uniquely American take on the Absurd is not quite as mind-bending or irrational as some of the other selections on this list, but it uses the dialogic techniques of Beckett and Tardieu to capture a professor’s troubled relationship with his wife. Set during a late night in a small college town, George and Martha host two young upstarts, causing the clash of generations, as well as the revelation of secrets too painful to hide.

**Vaclav Havel – The Memorandum (1965)**

Long before he leads the Czech Republic away from the Iron Curtain as the nation’s president, Havel was a prolific playwright who had garnered fame locally and abroad. The Memorandum is about a man forced to learn a fictional language to fill out an audit form sent to him by the government. Bland and without emotion vigor, learning the language slowly drives him crazy. The influence of Franz Kafka is without a doubt present, but Havel is also speaking to the repressive culture of Communist bureaucracy that troubled Central and Eastern Europe at the time. **3rd year English department   
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