Beckett, Ionesco, and the Theater of the Absurd: Crash Course Theater #45

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=eJ7w2I83ba4
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*, and today we'll be discussing the Theater of the Absurd. Godot, that's your cue. Godot? That's fine, plenty of time to wait for that guy. Not a lot happens in these plays.

Lights up... when you get around to it.

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

What is the Theater of the Absurd, and how absurd is it? Well, I'm glad you asked. Very, sometimes.

It's a movement that got going in the 1950s, influenced by the events of the 40s. Because after you've come out of a world war in which millions of people were killed, maybe light comedy doesn't really do it for you anymore. The Theater of the Absurd wasn't one of those moments where everyone hung out in bars and had parties together. And maybe that's good, because some of those parties would have been dour.

Now, it's more of a loose style that a bunch of playwrights started writing in pretty much independently. And then one day, critic Martin Esslin noticed and wrote an essay about it and bam, a movement was born. Or identified, or whatever.

The Theater of the Absurd is another style that rejects realism. Absurdism, like dadaism and surrealism, is predicated on the idea that life doesn't really make sense, so theater shouldn't make sense either. This isn't absurd like comedy in 2018; it's more of a deeply dissatisfied, questioning kind of absurd. Plots are disordered, nothing happens—or if something does happen it's unmotivated—words don't make meaning in the usual way, and characters aren't consistent. Mysteries don't get solved, and order doesn't get restored. Lol.

Philosophically, the worldview of the Theater of the Absurd is similar to existentialism, probably because Esslin was influenced by Albert Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus wrote, "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity." Lol.

Esslin thought that the Theater of the Absurd could help its audience to accept life as meaningless and maybe not be so depressed about that. He wrote, "It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theater of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation." Lol?

There are a lot of playwrights who get labeled absurdist, including Alfred Jarry, Guillaume Apollinaire, and also the Italian playwright Luigi Pirendello, king of the it-happened-like-this, no-it-happened-like-that, no-I'm-never-going-to-understand-this-because-the-world-is-fundamentally-unknowable play.

We're going to look at three other absurdist playwrights today: Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett.

Jean Genet was born in France in 1910 and was abandoned soon after. As a kid, he tried to run away a lot, and he often stole. When he was 15, he was sent to French juvie. When he turned 18, he joined the French Foreign Legion but was drummed out for being gay. He wandered around for a while, supporting himself with prostitution and petty theft. He was in and out of prison, and it was in prison that he began to write, completing an experimental novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, in 1944.

Genet became popular with the French intellectual crowd, so when he was threatened with life imprisonment in 1949 for more theft, those intellectuals came together to petition the government to free him. And the government said okay. Philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre was such a fan that he wrote a 700-page analysis of his life and work called *Saint Genet*.

When Genet turned to the theater, first with the short play *Deathwatch*, he established the themes that would fascinate him for years: sex, power, beauty, degradation, ritual, and theatricality itself. Most of the characters in Genet's plays are consciously playing roles that can suddenly be reversed. And with a shift in power dynamics comes a shift in sexual dynamics.

Reality often shifts too, which gives the plays a disturbing, de-centering quality. You can see this in *The Balcony*, which is set in a brothel that caters to sexual roleplay, and in *The Blacks*, in which a cast of black actors perform in whiteface. Genet died in Paris in 1986.

Let's take a closer look at Genet's work by dusting off his three-character 1947 drama, *The Maids*. Grab a mop, Thought Bubble.

The Maids begins with a scene between a mistress and her maid, Claire. Their relationship isn't great. Madame insults Claire, and Claire bullies Madame, forcing her to wear a red dress. Claire spits at her.

Then an alarm goes off, startling both women. We realize that Madame is actually the maid Claire, and Claire is her sister Solange, and that this is an elaborate psychosexual game they play, taking turns as Madame.

As they wait for Madame, the phone rings. It's Monsieur, Madame's lover. He's been in prison, mostly because of an anonymous letter the maids sent. Now he's out on bail. Bad news for the maids. They're afraid he'll recognize their handwriting. They're frightened, and also they're disgusted by their own poverty and servitude.

As Solage says, "I want to help you. I want to comfort you, but I know I disgust you. I'm repulsive to you, and I know it—because you disgust me. When slaves love one another, it's not love. Claire replies, "And me, I'm sick of seeing my image thrown back at my by a mirror, like a bad smell—you're my bad smell."

So out of revenge and disgust, and in a not-very-sane attempt at self-preservation, Claire decides to murder Madame. Madame returns, and Claire puts sleeping pills in her tea. But before she can drink it, Solage tells her that Monsieur is free, and Madame leaves the tea untouched.

The maids begin their game again, but this time it's darker, crueler, and even weirder. Claire is playing Madame. She orders Solange to bring her a cup of tea. Claire lies down on Madame's bed and drinks the poisoned tea, killing herself.

Thanks, Thought Bubble, that was... not hygienic.

While Genet based his play on an actual, real-life French murder, Genet was obviously not trying to create true crime or realism. Genet's pal Sartre suggested that adolescent boys should play all of the roles as a way to enhance the unreality, but with its gowns, flowers, and sadomasochistic humiliation, it's already pretty unreal.

Our next absurdist is Romanian playwright Eugene Ionesco, author of deceptively simple, sometimes allegorical works like *The Chairs* or *Rhinoceros*. Ionesco was born in Romania in 1909, and moved between Romania and France several times. When Ionesco was almost 40, he decided to learn English by memorizing simple sentences. Those sentences made their way into an absurdist and sometimes silly word called *The Bald Soprano*.

In this play, one nice couple, the Smiths, invite over another nice couple, the Martins. The Martins think that they're strangers to each other, and then discover that they've been married for years. Here's an excerpt:

Mrs. Martin: Bazaar, Balzac, bazooka!
Mr. Martin: Bizarre, Beaux-Arts, brassieres!
Mr. Smith: A, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, i!
Mrs. Smith: Choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo!

The director wasn't really sure how to stage it, and initially the play was a flop. But other writers and intellectuals championed it (yay intellectuals!), and Ionesco kept going.

Ionesco was influenced by Dada and the surrealists, and a lot of his work is about a desire to access some other, better, probably unreachable world.

He's best known for a cycle of plays centered on a naive everyman figure called Bérenger, who pops up in different times and situations. These plays are *The Killer*, *Rhinoceros*, *Exit the King*, and *A Stroll in the Air*. Some of these plays have a more political orientation, but some don't. Bérenger is always struggling with the problem of human endeavor and free will in a seemingly random universe.

Ionesco's plays are written in simple, sometimes even simplistic language, but that disguises serious preoccupations and serious despair. Because, you know, randomness and entropy and death. Ionesco died in France in 1994.

And this here is your friend and mine, Samuel Beckett. Is Beckett the greatest Modernist playwright? Yes. I'm sorry, it's just a fact. His plays are weird and funny and horrifying and deeply moving. Just when you think you've got one of his plays nailed, the meanings have a way of sliding out from under you. We're big fans.

Beckett was born in Ireland in 1906. After university, he moved to France to teach, where he eventually became the research assistant of James Joyce. Beckett wrote poems, novels, and short stories, also all great. And, like Genet, he was at one point stabbed by a pimp. He also drove Andre the Giant to school on occasion. True story!

During World War II, Beckett was active in the Resistance, and after the war he began his career as a playwright, typically writing in French. His best known play is *Waiting For Godot*, a bleak tragicomedy from 1948 about two tramps waiting for a man who (spoiler alert) never arrives.

One critic called it a play in which nothing happens... twice. It's part vaudeville and part philosophy, and honestly it's pretty awesome. I mean, it's made fun of as a quintessentially weird modern play, for a lot of really good reasons, but it is also just a good play.

Other notable Beckett plays include *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, *Krapp's Last Tape...* and *Play*, because there were no titles left, I guess. Beckett's plays are almost completely empty of action, the characters are barely there, the dialogue goes in circles. Every rule Aristotle ever wrote, Beckett breaks, except for the unity of place, and, as we know, Aristotle never even wrote that one. Are Beckett's plays realistic? No.

So why are his plays so great? They're about people trying to live in a world that doesn't make any sense. And that's... I mean, that's most of us. They're bleak, but they're also very funny and perversely humane. Even in a senseless world, we still have each other. Beckett died in 1989, and, well, nothing to be done. Am I? Me too. No, not now. There's work to be done.

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next time, when we take a break from all of this existential despair and the search for meaning in a seemingly random universe. Grab your playbills and start stalking the stage door, because *Crash Course Theater* is going to Broadway, baby! Wait, what? York says that existential despair is there too? Ugh, can't get away from it! Caftan, curtsy, Cup O' Noodles, curtain.

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