



ABSURD 4

Teacher Resource Pack

INTRODUCTION

Theatre of the Absurd is one of the most difficult styles of theatre for students to understand. Students are often baffled at the non-realistic conventions and will struggle to understand the layers of meaning beneath the surface of absurdist dramas and the complexity of the genre, from the philosophy of existentialism to the reasoning behind strange characters and events.

These notes are designed to give you a concise resource to use with your class and to support their experience of seeing *Absurd 4*.

CLASSROOM CONTENT AND CURRICULUM LINKS

Essential Learnings: The Arts (Drama), English

Style/Form: Absurdism, contemporary clowning, physical comedy, physical theatre and comedy, improvisation

Themes and Contexts: Creativity, imagination, transformation, audience engagement and interaction, role and relationships

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Historical Context

Theatre of the Absurd emerged in post World War II Europe. The senseless atrocities committed during the war are considered to have been a major factor in the development of the style. Theatre of the Absurd is generally associated with Paris, which was a hub of artistic endeavour in the 1950s, and the home of playwrights such as Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett, an Irish playwright who was living and working in Paris at this time.

Even so, Absurdism has its roots in the avant-garde theatrical experiments of the 1920s and 30s, and absurdist elements can be found in earlier works, such as Alfred Jarry's 1896 play *Ubu Roi* and even in ancient Greek theatre.

Practitioners

Unlike other modern theatre styles, which originated from theoretical essays, political ideology and practical experimentation with particular techniques and ideas (think Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre, Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, Grotowski and his "Theatre Laboratory" in Poland), the term "theatre of the Absurd" was unknown until 1960, when theatre critic Martin Esslin developed the term to describe the plays Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Arthur Adamov. Only these four are considered to be true Absurdist playwrights and, it is important to note that they were all playwrights. It is their plays that are their expression of the style.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the 19th Century philosophers through the Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. It emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice and focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence. It holds that, as there is no God or any other transcendent force, the only way to counter this nothingness, and to find meaning in life, is by embracing existence. At its core is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe.

It emphasizes action, freedom and decision as fundamental, and holds that the only way to rise above the essentially absurd condition of humanity, which is characterized by suffering and inevitable death, is by exercising personal freedom and choice.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the writings of French existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir popularized existential themes, such as dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment and nothingness.

This philosophy philosophical can be seen in the plots, events, characters, themes and actions of many Absurdist plays. Many of the characters in Absurdist plays are examples of an existential existence.

The Second Wave of Absurdist

A second wave of Absurdist playwrights emerged between the late 1950s and the 1980s. Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard all wrote Absurdist plays, though not all of them wrote exclusively in this style. Indeed, Stoppard has made a successful career writing for television, radio and film as well as stage.

CONVENTIONS OF ABSURDIST THEATRE

Plot and Structure

- anti-realistic, going against many of the accepted norms of conventional theatre
- has been labeled by some critics as 'anti-theatre'
- frequently characterised by a deliberate absence of the cause and effect relationship between scenes
- non-linear plot developments, often circular, ending where they began
- occasionally appearing as though there is no plot at all
- deliberate lack of conflict

Acting and Characterisation

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

Movement

- combination of realistic and non-realistic
- elements of circus, vaudeville and acrobatics
- ritualistic
- slow
- illogical
- repetitive
- action sometimes defies logic or easy understanding

Mood and Atmosphere

- moves between extremes, from serious to comical

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
- use of 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

ABSURD 4 PLAYS

***Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Becket**

Two characters, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), are waiting for the arrival of someone named Godot.

When the play premiered in Ireland in 1956, Vivien Mercer of The Irish Times described *Waiting for Godot* as "... 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".

Curiously, *Waiting for Godot* was voted "the most significant English language play of the 20th century".

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/199355060/Waiting-for-Godot-Script#scribd>

***Rhinoceros*, Eugene Ionesco**

The inhabitants of a small, provincial French town turn into rhinoceroses, leaving Bérenger, an everyman figure, as the only human who does not succumb to this mass metamorphosis. Bérenger becomes increasingly obsessed with the rhinoceroses, refusing to join them even after his best friend and his girlfriend have succumbed. Alone at the end, he tries to become a rhinoceros but fails.

Written in 1959, the play is usually read as a response and criticism to the sudden upsurge of Communism, Fascism, and Nazism during the events preceding World War II, and explores themes of conformity, culture, mass movements, mob mentality and morality.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/151655020/Rhinoceros-Script#scribd>

***The Chairs*, Eugene Ionesco**

Two characters, Old Man and Old Woman, are setting up chairs for (invisible) guests who are coming to hear an orator reveal the Old Man's discovery. As the "guests" arrive, the two characters speak to them and reminisce cryptically about their lives. Finally, the orator (played by a real actor) arrives to deliver his speech to the assembled crowd. The old couple then commits suicide by throwing themselves out of the window. As the orator begins to speak, the audience discovers that the orator is a deaf-mute. At the end of the play, the sound of an audience fades in.

<http://www.paololandi.it/theater/testi/the%20chairs.pdf>

***The Dumb Waiter*, Harold Pinter**

Two hit-men, Ben and Gus, are waiting in a basement room for their assignment. In the back of the room is a dumbwaiter, which delivers occasional food orders. Eventually, Gus leaves the room to get a drink of water, and the dumbwaiter's speaking tube whistles. Ben listens carefully to the message and shouts for Gus, who is still out of the room. The door that the victim is supposed to enter from open, Ben faces it with his gun drawn, and Gus enters, stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie and gun. There is a long silence as the two stare at each other before the curtain comes down.

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

The Maids by Jean Genet

Plays from the Second Wave

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard

The Dumb Waiter by Harold Pinter

The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter

Preparation for the Show

Absurdism can be quite confusing for students due to the randomness of the ideas and behaviour of the characters.

Activity 1.

A Non-Sensical Scene

Part 1 - Place a number of random objects around the room. Students line up at the entrance to the classroom. Each student takes a turn at entering the space, picking up an object and using it in a way that it would not normally be used.

Part 2 - Students pair up. Student 1 enters the room and picks a different random object and uses it in a way it wouldn't normally be used. As they are doing this, Student 2 enters and whispers a line of dialogue into their partner's ear. It should have nothing to do with the object or what the person is doing with the object. The person then says it aloud. It is important at this point to have the students discuss their experiences of the exercise. Use questions that engage them with the idea and the connection that what appears on stage is not literally what is intended. Often something different may be meant.

Activity 2.

Watch Clips of Absurdist Scenes

The work of Monty Python is accessible and can give students an experience of Absurdism. There are some excellent examples on YouTube that demonstrate what an Absurdist piece can look like. Sketches such as the Fish Slapping Dance and the Parrot Sketch are good examples, as are the sandwich-making and the television aerial scenes in *Mr Bean*.

Have the student reflect on what makes these scenes so absurd.

Post-show Discussions

Have the students reflect on the way the 2 actors explored the conventions of Absurdism. Have them think about and discuss the use of dialogue and silence, space and props, costumes and makeup, audience interaction. Did the students feel uncomfortable at any time? What did they laugh at and why? What did they enjoy most about the performance?

References

Brockett, Oscar, G., *History of the Theatre (7th Ed.)*

Crawford, J. L., *Acting in Person and in Style*

Esslin, M., *The Theatre of the Absurd*

Styan, Jerry, L., *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 2*

Web Links

<http://www.thedramateacher.com>

http://cccdrama.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/8/9/12892594/theatre_of_the_absurd.pdf

http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/theatre_of_the_absurd.html