

THE FRENCH THEATRE OF THE ABSURD*

By GERMAINE BRÉE

WHEN, in January, 1953, *Waiting for Godot*, the first play by Samuel Beckett, scandalized a small audience at the Babylon theatre in Paris, Jean Anouilh, by then a well-established playwright, called it "a music-hall sketch of Pascal's *Pensées* performed by the Fratellini clowns" and acclaimed it as an event as important theatrically as the first Paris production, thirty years before, of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The Spanish playwright Alfonso Sastre greeted it with delight: "At last, a real tragicomedy. We laugh but are paralysed with horror."

Waiting for Godot somehow brought to light the existence of a new species of plays, or "anti-plays" as they were first called. They were not comfortable plays, and, impervious to the precepts of Horace, they did not aim at pleasing the audience. They aimed at being "intolerable" and the audience reacted in consequence. Paris, once again had a lively experimental theatre whose impact was immediate and brutal. The inter-war years in France had been brilliant theatrically. The 1950's seemed at first to be continuing in the same spirit. Sartre's *Devil and the Good Lord*, Cocteau's *Bacchus*, Montherlant's *Port-Royal* raised universal problems concerning man's fate, possibilities and responsibilities. These plays relied for their effects on themes and techniques inherited from the experimental theatre of the 20's, but which in fact were based on the Aristotelian stage. In a spacious world, at its central point of reference was the hero, the anxious but still determined searcher for truth. Solidly rooted in a universal space and time, as also in the newly-discovered depths of his own conscious and subconscious being, he could lucidly partake *significantly* in *significant* conflicts. He could act and react. On stage, the walls that had imprisoned within narrow social limits the situations, characters and plots of the bourgeois theatre had long since fallen down. The theatre of the 40's dealt with violent human situations, but a violence essentially intellectual in kind and it referred to and directly presented problems that were metaphysical in nature. God, as a critic remarked at the time, was rapidly becoming the most popular character on the French stage. In his confrontation with and defiance of the inscrutable forces that determine man's fate, the stage character assumed heroic dimensions. The stage revolved around him; his gestures and speeches could make or shake a word. To destroy Cocteau's Oedipus, it takes the infinite, intricate "infernal machine" of the gods. In the new plays, such as Adamov's *Ping-Pong*, a mere pin-ball machine does a much more thorough job of destruction.

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The leading playwrights in the early 50's questioned many things; they did not question the reality, the universal importance, the privileged character of human awareness. On the whole their plays prolonged technically the tradition of the well-made play as defined by Aristotle—exposition, incitement, rising action, falling action, climax—although in general they offered no conclusion. For the dialogue, they relied on the discursive rhetoric inherent in the traditional conception of the characters as capable, to a greater or less degree, of logically confronting and “speaking” their situation and positions with regard to it.

All these things the new playwrights violently rejected. In the next ten years the kind of theatre they proposed was to cause a great deal of discussion, not only in France but in the Occidental world. After Hiroshima, some playwrights no longer felt quite so sure that the universe would continue to revolve around us, and consequently felt that the human figure and adventure had considerably diminished in stature. They themselves called their plays by a variety of names: comic drama, tragic farce, “clownery” or just plays. Their critics coined a number of others: cosmological comedy; ontological theatre; theatre of the absurd; metaphysical farce. Only Brecht and his “epic theater” were to draw as much attention.

With the recent publication of a book by Lionel Abel entitled *Metatheater*, a turning point was reached in these discussions. His thesis, debatable in points, but stimulating, bears on the history of our Occidental theatre since the Renaissance: critics, since the Renaissance, have, Mr. Abel suggests, erroneously tried to apply the label “tragedy” to our great plays and so have evaluated them in terms that do not correspond to their real character. With the exception perhaps of *Macbeth* and Racine's *Athalie*, that might be considered tragedies, our great plays could better be designated as “meta-plays”. They are based essentially on the self-awareness inherent to the Western mind that leads to a sense of the world as a stage, an illusion, a kind of dream, in which we see ourselves as actors, puppets or mimes. Life is a performance, and the theatre a “meta-play”, a play concerning that essential play.

Whatever the reservations this point of view may raise—and has raised—it fits our experimental playwrights particularly well and gives as good a jumping-off point from which to assess their theatre as the now somewhat shopworn label “theatre of the absurd”. It stresses a feature that the playwrights themselves like to emphasize: they are not iconoclasts; they are, they insist, working within well-established stage traditions, much older and more universal than our own now rather narrow conventions. Critics now trace the antecedents of the type of drama back through the expressionist, surrealist, Pirandellian experiments, to the baroque stage, but also to other forms of theatre like the Oriental and to other kinds of spectacle such as the mime, circus and vaudeville. Deliberately these playwrights—Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet—are dealing with life as spectacle and with the stage as spectacle. But if we question as to the kind of play the dramatist thinks we, today, have been cast for, no single answer suffices, for the divergences are great. A brief discussion of Samuel Beckett's now familiar *Waiting for Godot*; of Ionesco's *The*

Bald Soprano and *The Chairs*; of Genet's *The Blacks* may, I think, best show the essential differences between the three best-known of these playwrights. Their very names—Beckett, an Irishman; Ionesco, a Roumanian; Genet, a Frenchman—show that, though the plays were initially written in French, we are not dealing with an exclusively *French* stage.

Waiting for Godot is a two-act play which has been quite adequately summarized as follows¹: "On a deserted country road, distinguished only by a pitiful tree, Vladimir and Estragon (known as Didi and Gogo), wait for a mysterious person named Godot who at some indefinite time in the past, under somewhat uncertain circumstances, made a rather imprecise appointment to meet them in some ill-defined place at an indeterminate hour. At the end of the first act a messenger appears to say Godot will not come that day; and the same thing happens at the end of the second act. The implications of course are that, were there a third act, things would start all over again; there is no end to the play; no conflict and no resolution. Six times during the play, with slight variations, the following short exchange is ritually repeated: 'Let's go.' 'We can't.' 'Why not?' 'We're waiting for Godot.'"

In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, the curtain goes up on a very old man and a very old woman living in a kind of tower surrounded by stagnant water. They are expecting a great crowd of people, including the Emperor himself; an orator is to come to deliver to the crowd an important message, the old man's message. The bell rings; the first guests arrive in mounting agitation, the two old people bring in more and more chairs for the thirty-two expected guests whom we, the audience, never see: the two actors mime the reception and mimic the conversation with absorbed excitement and absolute conviction. The orator appears and the two old people jump into the water below. In this play there is an ending at least for the two old people but nothing else has occurred: the orator is mute; there are no guests, no Emperor, no message. Genet's *The Blacks* stages a complicated, involved theatrical kind of story: a troupe of masked Negro players is rehearsing a play. In the centre of the stage stands a catafalque covered with a white cloth. Around the stage itself seats for spectators mirror the tiers of seats in the house. White-masked Negro players occupy these; they represent "the Court", Queen, Judge, Missionary, Governor, and Valet: the powers that be. In the play rehearsed, the players, enacting the murder of a white woman whose catafalque is supposedly the one at the centre of the stage, are observed and judged by the court. A struggle eventually takes place between the black-masked and the white-masked players during which the white-masked court is vanquished. The play ends when the whole cast, including the court, discarding their masks, "joins in a minuet, the same dance with which the play began". The play, we realize, is only a rehearsal. It has been rehearsed before and will be rehearsed over and over again. It leads to no resolution.

¹ Pronko, L., *Avant Garde: The Experimental Theatre in France*. Univ. of California Press, 1962, p. 13.

Different as they are, these plays have some common features. Beckett has done away with the plot; the fact that in any case a plot would be impossible is emphasized by Estragon: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." The situation given at the outset does not evolve. In *The Chairs* the situation seems to evolve at least visually on stage: we see the hectic piling up of the chairs and whereas in the beginning there are two people in a room, in the end we have a room empty of people but full of chairs. But what is the significance of the change? Genet stages a disturbing kind of masquerade filled with movement but which like Beckett's play comes full circle back to its beginning. Nothing has really happened.

In all three cases the audience watches a *stage spectacle*; it is not asked to follow the development of a story. As for the characters, in no sense can we as audience "identify" with them. We see them from outside, from a distance. They do not purport to be persons like ourselves though, as we move from Beckett to Genet, they come somewhat closer to a kind of concrete reality. But they are never, as in the traditional theatre, characters purporting to be human. They are deliberately designated as stage characters, belonging specifically to the world of the "performing arts". They *dress* the part. Vladimir and Estragon are a typical pair of circus clowns with their bowler hats and worn-out boots, with the ill-fitting, ill-assorted clothes typical of all Beckett's creatures, hand-me-downs never made for their peculiar anatomy. As many critics have emphasized, they are adept at all the stage-business that we associate with vaudeville, circus and mime, spectacles we enjoy in themselves, disconcerted only when they emigrate into a "serious" play. Beckett is jolting us out of our habits, we who implicitly take it for granted that theatre is not circus—nor circus, theatre. On their desolate road, with their battered hats and swollen feet, they too know they are actors. The words they speak show a rather humorous, double-edged awareness of themselves, not only as stage characters but as audience too of their own show.

- “ Charming evening we're having.
Unforgettable.
And it's not over.
Apparently not.
It's only beginning.
It's awful.
- Worse than the pantomime.
The circus.
The music-hall.
The circus.”

In *End-game*, at the most abysmally hopeless moment of the play, Hamm (one of the two main characters) remarks: "I'm warming up for my last soliloquy"—a ham-actor in his own eyes. So, Beckett suggests, the clowns are on stage, and must perform. But of course compared to the playwright, to the audience, or to regular

actors, Vladimir and Estragon are at a disadvantage ; they don't know when the performance is going to end, when Godot will appear. So they must continue to improvise their parts to fill up time, perhaps for ever and ever.

In *The Chairs* the characters are grotesques : he is 95, she is 94 ; the decor in itself removes them from us and, when the mimed reception starts, the accelerated tempo of the mimicry, gestures and words, dehumanizes the characters more and more effectively. They too become puppets giving a show, acting in it, improvising the dialogue. Behind the façade too they are putting on another more intimate show, a much more complex, much more moving one : the pretence that there is a message, a unique, urgent message to be delivered, a message that must be communicated to humanity as a whole, giving their pathetic lives a "raison d'être", justifying them.

In the Genet play all the characters are actors, wearing the traditional mask of the actor, but these actors never seem to be quite sure as to whether they are playing their parts or are speaking as persons for themselves, so rapidly do make-believe and reality shift in the very course of a single exchange. Even the catafalque, we realize at the end, is make-believe, empty : two chairs, covered over by a sheet. The white-masked Negroes play their illusory roles with a conviction equal to that of the black-masked players. The play itself we sense is a ceremony, a ritual, or rather a make-believe ceremony. And what could be more theatrical, the theatre itself being make-believe, "a house of illusions" as Genet makes clear in another play, *The Balcony* ? Genet uses to the full the "mirror" quality of the theatre as such, in fact, he emphasizes it in *The Blacks* while the masquerade goes on on stage, somewhere, we learn, outside the play, a murder has been committed, a Negro has in fact been killed.

In no one of the three plays is there any attempt at the development of character. The character, theatrical in essence, is in fact a prop, part of a stage world. The stage is not considered as a kind of flat frame set up conveniently to describe the social world. Characters and sets cannot be disassociated. The sets are not merely suggestive or symbolic. They seem to embody something else, an active element in the play, yet one somehow detached which, in the case of *The Blacks* and *The Chairs*, proves disturbing to the spectator. But it does not disturb the characters who live *within* their given stage world and have no point of reference outside it. The stage set for Beckett and Ionesco is, as in expressionist drama, the concrete projection of an inner psychological space, a subconscious framework of reference that embodies certain baffling subconscious elements in the characters' inner world. For Genet, in the tradition of the "poetic drama", it is more flamboyant, more symbolic. Yet what the characters say—and after all dialogue is the very stuff out of which we expect a play to be made—develops in apparently disconnected ways. There is a strange incongruity between their situation and their words, a disparity visible to the spectator but not to the characters who never question the coherence of what they say. This incongruity is the trap whereby the playwright "catches the conscience" of the spectator. But, with each playwright, the disparity takes

on a different form: the plays must be looked at separately. Before discussing them we should, I think, pause to raise the question of the playwrights' intentions: are they merely experimenting? playing with the stage? or is there a relation between something essential that they are trying to say and the kind of play they are writing? Whereas both Genet and, much more explicitly, Ionesco have explained what it is they are trying to do, Beckett never theorizes. All three, however, are interested in stagecraft as such and have certain principles in common that derive from the ideas of one of the most curious minds of the thirties, Antonin Artaud. Artaud's *The Theater and Its Double*, published in 1938, stated in an extreme form a number of the ideas that have now for a time been prevalent in the experimental theatre.

He first rejected the current drama of social or psychological conflict, based on the logical development of a plot—a type of theatre he thought had become so conventionalized that it had lost its power really to move an audience. He called for a *theatre of cruelty*, that would cut right through the dull stereotypes of our stage. In his eyes we, Occidentals, are far too inhibited emotionally; drama should wound us, bringing to the surface our secret obsessions and fears. As is the case with Oriental theatre, in particular the theatre of Bali fascinated him. Theatre should be ritual, ceremonial. It should project on stage “animated hieroglyphs” using all the non-verbal elements of stagecraft—lighting, gesture, movement, costume, stage objects—to create an intense emotional shock. Language should be used as incantation or mere cry, as a kind of music, not as logical discourse. The play in its totality should reflect encounter of the human being with the mystery, violence and chaos in which our flimsy human order plunges. He thus described a theatre of aggression and of exorcism, with a theatrical language of its own, a theatre concerned with the fundamental human situation, not with any particular human being, taken in his limited social context. The dynamic centre of the play would no longer be a human figure but a troubled and terrorized awareness of life's cruel inexplicability. Naturally, a play thus defined would not yield much to the reader. It must be staged. Although Artaud's ideas were certainly not applicable, World War II gave them added weight. “There comes a time”, wrote Ionesco, “when you can no longer accept the horrible things that happen.” There is an echo of this dazed awareness in Ionesco's *Killer Without Wages*. The main character, Berenger, “everyman”, is shown a Radiant city, where everything is perfect; except that, somehow, every day, a couple of corpses turn up there, something, the architect suggests, that must just be shrugged away. Berenger cannot shrug it away and feels he must track down the killer, whom he finally confronts, in a highly dramatic scene.

Here, in a sense, we see the two poles of this theatre of Beckett and Ionesco at least; on the one hand the chit-chat of everyday routines and aspirations, our dreams of a perfect society; on the other, the baffled awareness that somehow something is not as it should be in our world, the sense of the wide gap between our daily living, for example, and of another dimension that the nuclear age has opened up for us.

Two main trends therefore came together to give this theatre its peculiar power, its limitations too and its strange burlesque, discomfiting quality: the first a stage-revolution going back to the turn of the century dealing with the use of the stage as such, and the second an awareness of the basically explicable character of the human situation which these plays reflect. This awareness explains the "patterns" of repetition and circularity that replace the traditional linear development and resolution. The stage is the place par excellence that can reproduce this reality as the playwright sees it, but only through situations stylized and removed from the immediate audience, universalized by the very nature of the stage characters: "old endgame, lost of old, play and lose have done with losing", as one of the characters says in *End-game*. The characters on stage are "sufferers out of context", pathetic, insignificant and baffled, comical and moving. The play is a metaphor.

Ionesco's world is the easiest to approach. He has written a number of plays of a great many kinds, using a variety of techniques, and in ten years of prolific playwrighting has evolved considerably. But he has one basic theme. In our society he sees the human person as threatened, threatened in various kinds of ways, by various forms of disintegration, old age among them as in the case of the old man and woman in *The Chairs*; by all forms of mechanization, too, not the least of which is *speech*; by all forms of play-acting; by the slow submersion in life, that is life itself. Each of his plays is a duel fought against some form of this threat. First came language—and in fact Ionesco has never ceased his fight against all forms of the cliché and their dangerous implications. The subtitle of his first play, *The Bald Soprano*, was a "tragedy of language". As critics have noted, it parodied every sort of breakdown in our everyday language: the cliché, the non sequitur, the chit chat, the false logic, the meaningless proverb. In *The Bald Soprano*, starting from the most ordinary situation—two suburban couples spending an evening together—Ionesco, by progressively disarticulating the language, turns his characters, under our eyes, into a ferocious species of parrot, revealing the hideous void behind the chatter: the empty conformism of talk cut away from mind and feeling from any significant reference to reality, mimicing the inner void, the dehumanization of the individual in our present-day world and his inhumanity. Words become objects, external and rigid, ferociously batted back and forth, and in some plays they do indeed appear as objects on stage. *The Chairs* project, on stage, a vague emotional inner world, the illusory world of what might be or might have been.

From the point of view of the audience, a Ionesco play, whatever the theme, relies for its effect on two main techniques: the ever-widening incongruity between situation and dialogue; the tension and release created by the tempo of the words, their unexpected combinations, the powerfully comic and poetic impact of a recognizable dislocation of everyday speech.

Genet's intent and his stage world are quite different from Ionesco's. "The fictitious representation of an action or experience", he writes, attacking the traditional concept of catharsis, "generally dispenses us from attempting to act on the level of reality and in ourselves." So that, in his eyes, a playwright who projects

on stage the kind of play that leads to the stage resolution of the problem stated is dangerous. We, the audience, will then leave the theatre at peace with ourselves, for "we've taken sides with the hero who attempted to bring about a solution", we "identify with all his admirable traits". A petty criminal and homosexual who sees himself as an outcast from society, Genet will have none of this. "Let evil", he writes, "explode on our stage, show us naked, leave us haggard if possible and with no recourse outside ourselves." It is *at* the spectator that the play is directed, at the complacent masks he wears. This explains why, in the case of *The Blacks*, Genet insists that the audience must be white, and if not, that a white dummy should be placed in the front row. Genet's play incriminates the spectator; it is not really a play directed at a specific social problem, but it uses a specific social situation to formulate a much more general conflict. The murder ceremony in *The Blacks* is a ceremonial of masked aggression through which the Blacks, who symbolize the Oppressed, temporarily attain an illusory release from what oppresses them: the hated, obsessive, White image. The spectacle on stage can thus be enlarged indefinitely, to symbolize the perpetual transfer into "spectacle" or art of man's fundamental rebellion against the "images"—social, religious, metaphysical—of his human limitations. The play, like the revolt, is a "clownerie", a sham; but the lyrical richness and violence of the language, the ceremonial of dance and gesture, have a dramatic intensity that impose on the spectator the sense of the play's reality. One critic at least, Mr. Pronko, concludes enthusiastically that "like the Catholic Mass, like the Voodoo ceremonies in Haiti, and like the Dionysian celebrations that undoubtedly preceded the flowering of tragedy in Greece, Genet's theatre speaks a language which has not been heard for many years on the European stage".

Beckett's bare stage, with its four characters, its austere language and controlled movements, could hardly form a greater contrast. It suggests a double perspective from which to view the action. For Vladimir and Estragon there is the eternal passage of time, the passing moment which must be filled and which they fill with their patterned words and movements: they talk, eat, suffer, quarrel, wonder, wait, get entangled in the theatrical act of that strange passing master-slave couple, Pozzo and Lucky. Their talk runs down, like a record, and has to be started off again. It moves in short sequences and covers a great register of expression, from the noble and rhetorical to the lyrical, to the burlesque. The dramatic hold of the play on the audience is based both on the rhythm and the changing register of the language. The suspense arises not so much from involvement in *what* is going on as from a doubt as to whether it can go on, as sequence after sequence resolves itself in silence. The words themselves are burlesque and the gestures of the two clowns, but not the participants themselves, we slowly come to see them in the perspective of eternity, indestructible and incomprehensible: two clowns, we realize, are playing on stage a mime of our own human living, whose mysterious meaning is left open to our interpretation. Fear, hatred and violence have their place, but only a restricted place, in Beckett's world. Nor does Beckett deliver an interpretation of the spectacle on stage. Who is Godot? What, if anything, does the single tree represent?

What is the meaning of the two appearances of Lucky and Pozzo? As in the case of Ionesco and Genet, the play returns the spectator back to his daily life with a new awareness, but in the case of Beckett the dimension suggested is entirely metaphysical. A deep compassion emanates from the spectacle counteracting the silence that surrounds the questioning, waiting, human figure.

What, to conclude, is the future of this theatre? It has already exercised a far-reaching influence on the Occidental stage, as Mr. Esslin's book emphasizes. It has produced at least half a dozen exceptional plays and opened the way to further experimentation. It cannot, obviously, repeat itself. "New" dramatists, undoubtedly, will appear to displace the old ones. "A play by Beckett, Ionesco or Genet does not bog the spectator down into stagnation", writes Jacques Guicharnaud, "does not hold him down in a hole with no exit: it provokes him, it makes him indignant; it insults him; it makes him laugh. It is upsetting, not paralysing. . . . The new theatre is a theatre of dissatisfaction, in which all the means are used so that, at no moment is any dehumanization complacently accepted." It testifies to the vitality of the Occidental stage.

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