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Understanding Existentialism on Stage: The Theatre of the Absurd

Edward Albee, one of the most famous playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd movement, argues that “the health of a nation... can be determined by the art it demands” (Albee 64). As such, an understanding of the trends in popular art is crucial to better understanding the region it represents. In looking at the art of a post-World War II world, there have been several clear and significant shifts in what is “traditionally” understood as art. The Theatre of the Absurd represents one of the many shifts in the art forms of the second half of the 20th century. In a world that was searching for meaning, the Theatre of the Absurd was able to stage the universal situation of humanity in a new light. The Theatre of the Absurd largely sought to reinterpret several “traditional” conventions of theatre, and in doing so, was able to recontextualize some of the largest questions asked by humanity. Each play slowly shifts the conventions of theatre, as they were traditionally understood by audiences, to change the ways that audiences view the world around them. Overall, the Theatre of the Absurd redefines what so many consider the undefinable, allowing audiences to better negotiate the world around them.

The roughly 20 years spanning the entirety of the Theatre of the Absurd represent a brief and bright constellation of plays, consisting of several plays clustered together within recent history. Amidst this constellation, there are some stars that stand out, eventually paving the way for plays to come. Of these brightest stars are Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Since first being performed, *Godot* and

Rosencrantz have garnered vastly different audience responses to the character pairs of Vladimir and Estragon, along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and how they interact with the worlds around them. Both plays encourage audiences to face the reality around them and to question what it means to be human. By challenging “traditional” theatre, Beckett and Stoppard bring the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd into conversation with audiences around the world. It is through utilizing these conventions that Beckett and Stoppard seek to defamiliarize audiences, encouraging them to question the world around them.

Defining the Undefinable: Theatre of the Absurd

Frequently, one of the most significant elements of absurd theatre that shocks audiences is the dialogue. To try and describe the dialogue of either *Godot* or *Rosencrantz* without directly experiencing it is challenging. The way they speak is both nonsensical, but full of meaning. It is confused, but also very direct and intentional. The characters are very clearly cunning, but they also seem to lack all intelligence at the same time. Throughout the history of *Godot*'s productions, audiences have been lost by the language of Beckett. At the London premiere of *Godot*, one audience member voiced his frustration with the play's language in his claim that “this is why we lost the colonies!” (qtd. in Mount 26). From the extreme existential dread of Vladimir, to the famous “nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!” (Beckett, *Godot* 32), Beckett challenges audiences with the language of the characters on stage.

The conversations of Estragon and Vladimir are especially fascinating due to their apparent lack of meaning. The two seek to bring some structure to their waiting, as they wait for Godot, who we learn never actually arrives and we question whether Godot exists. Time and again the two emphasize the fact that there is nothing to be done, that they must keep waiting for the time being. This waiting is what occupies much of the time on stage. *Godot* represents an

example of a new structure of theatre being born. The “situational play structure” represents a particular situation rather than a journey or quest (which is typical of “traditional” theatre). Much like the rest of the Theatre of the Absurd, this structure seeks to break some of the conventions of “traditional” theatre. Understanding this situational play structure is crucial in understanding the influence that *Godot* has on audiences. By observing the events on stage, audiences are required to recognize their own situation. In the case of *Godot*, the situation being represented is the waiting. This waiting reflects a deep sense of isolation in the characters, as they continue to bide their time through seemingly meaningless conversation.

This isolation requires audiences to focus especially on their own perspective. It is through the isolation, the waiting for something that they do not know will come, that Vladimir and Estragon begin to consider other alternatives. As the patience of the two finally begins to wear thin, Estragon expresses a theme that reverberates throughout *Waiting for Godot*.

ESTRAGON: Didi.

VLADIMIR: Yes.

ESTRAGON: I can't go on like this.

VLADIMIR: That's what you think.

ESTRAGON: If we parted? That might be better for us.

VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON: And if he comes?

VLADIMIR: We'll be saved.

With only moments to go, both Vladimir and Estragon express a significant amount of existential dread. Fearing that who they are waiting for will never arrive, the two resolve to end their waiting once and for all, only to leave the audience questioning whether they end up following

through with their intentions or not. Thus, this theme of existentialism has been crucial throughout not only *Godot*, but *Rosencrantz* and many of the other plays within the constellation of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Existentialism: Is it a Humanism?

Despite its long history, the debate surrounding existentialism was thrust back into the limelight in the 1940s through the 1960s. Both *Godot* and *Rosencrantz*, along with most of the Theatre of the Absurd in general, draw on the popular existentialist beliefs of philosophers like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Both Camus and Sartre embraced ideas surrounding the lack of order in a world caught in turmoil (Greenwald et al. 440). In his 1948 *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre emphasizes his idea that “existence precedes essence,” essentially claiming that nothing can define one’s existence except oneself. In other terms, humans are born without a purpose in the world other than what they choose for themselves, or that they are “condemned to be free” (Keretli 1). This theory garnered several popular responses. To some, the belief that one has ultimate autonomy to determine their own fates was attractive. However, to others, this view was depressing, as the only “purpose” for humanity was to exist until they determined what to do with their lives.

Nick Mount argues that the varying public responses make all the difference when looking at *Waiting for Godot*. To Mount, existentialism as Sartre defines it does not quite match with the existentialism presented by Beckett in *Godot*. Those who classify *Godot* as an existential play, in its true sense, share the “popular misconception that [existentialism] is a hopeless philosophy” (Mount 25). Where Sartre believed that one could choose their purpose and shape their own identity, Mount points out that the existentialism of Beckett in *Godot* is far less hopeful (Mount 32). Thus, *Godot* does not represent existentialism in its original form. However,

the ways in which it shifts from a more conventional understanding of existentialism is crucial in understanding the Theatre of the Absurd.

Godot's Gentlemen: How Vladimir and Estragon Inspire Audiences

Much like how *Godot* shifts the narrative on existentialism, plays within the Theatre of the Absurd share an affinity for breaking with traditional conventions of theatre. "Traditional theatre," for the purposes of this paper, is defined by theatre as it had conventionally been performed prior to the absurdist movement. "Traditional" theatre typically follows Aristotle's established Elements of the Drama, which include plot, character, thought, diction, rhythm, and spectacle. Absurdist plays like *Godot* and *Rosencrantz* are willing to follow some of Aristotle's Elements of the Drama to a degree. However, they frequently will break from these rules, or follow "the rules to flout their spirit" (Mount 27). Audiences who have become accustomed to plays with clear characters, or a clear plot, were perplexed by the apparent ignorance that the *Rosencrantz* and *Godot* had for the rules of drama. The attempt to challenge conventional theatre in conjunction with the context of these plays and the underlying theme of absurdism highlights the connectedness within the movement of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Godot and *Rosencrantz* both rely heavily on a relationship with the audience. It is through this relationship that absurd theatre seeks to show the world "as an incomprehensible place" (Esslin 5). Unlike "traditional" theatre, the Theatre of the Absurd seeks fundamentally to defamiliarize audiences from the familiar. Nick Mount explains that the Theatre of the Absurd forces educated audiences to "remain in uncertainty" (29), requiring them to consider guessing throughout the events of the show. Though they can see and hear the events of the play, audiences never know better than the characters on stage. Audiences ultimately are encouraged

to continue asking questions of the events on stage. It is this conversation between the audience and the events on stage that brings such a social nature to theatre in general.

Susan Bennett acknowledges the traditionally social aspect of theatre by looking at the impact that Bertolt Brecht's famous alienation effect has on an audience. Brecht's alienation effect, at its heart, sought to disconnect the audience from the events in the play. Though Brecht was unconventional for his time, his theatre was still far more traditional than the Theatre of the Absurd. What Brecht could "never successfully achieve in his own highly rational theatre, really comes into its own in the Theatre of the Absurd" (Esslin 5). The Theatre of the Absurd can do what Brecht could not in that absurd theatre can truly alienate an audience from the events on stage. Beckett severs the relationship between his audience and the characters on stage where "traditional" theatre could not (Mount 28). Where audiences might have traditionally empathized with characters on stage, they are now faced with the troubling reality of absurdity.

By alienating the audience, Nick Mount argues that *Godot* effectively eliminates the possibility for dramatic irony, thus leaving the audience guessing for the remainder of the show. Where "traditional" theatre audiences might be aware of events going on behind the scenes, the audience is forced to continue guessing alongside Vladimir and Estragon as they wait. By biding their time and questioning one another almost incessantly, the audience becomes their equal. Despite being alienated from the events on stage, the audience can hear the dialogue as an equal, not knowing any more or less than the characters. "Traditional" theatre frequently relies on a disproportionate relationship between the audience and the characters on stage:

Comedy relies on its audience's sense of superiority to its characters, or more precisely to those among its characters (or its audience) who are excluded from its resolution.

Tragedy schizophrenically demands an audience simultaneously inferior and superior to

its protagonist: inferior, because the protagonist is better than us, a ruler or an uncommon commoner; but superior, because we know something he does not, the wincing smirk that is dramatic irony. (Mount 28)

Mount argues that *Godot*, a self-proclaimed tragicomedy, frustrated audiences by shattering their understanding of the relationship between an audience and the characters on stage. In other terms, “the shock of *Godot* isn’t that it departs from theatrical convention, but that it throws those conventions in their well-educated faces” (Mount 27).

The elimination of dramatic irony is crucial for both *Godot* and *Rosencrantz*. No longer do audiences have a sense of authority over the characters on stage. Interestingly, this loss of dramatic irony directly contradicts the influence of Brecht’s alienation effect. Where the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd seek to alienate the audience, *Godot*’s destruction of a hierarchy brings the audience into proximity with the characters on stage. In doing so, Beckett perfectly juxtaposes the immersive element of his writing with the alienating effect of his technique. Nonetheless, by bringing his audience into closer proximity, by highlighting the great divide between the audience and the players on stage, Beckett exponentially increases the possibility for alienating the audience. The audience is forced to scramble for the answers, just like Estragon and Vladimir. When Estragon shares a confusion with what is going on, explaining that he “[couldn’t] have been listening” (Beckett, *Godot* 10), the audience can share a similar confusion. It is in this contradiction that *Godot* fulfills another convention of the Theatre of the Absurd in that it “juxtaposes the real with the unreal” (Cohn). This interesting paradox allows for a greater sense of disconnect between the audience and events on stage. Just as the audience is being pulled closer than ever before, so too are they being pushed away.

By eliminating the possibility for dramatic irony, Beckett puts audiences on a level playing field with the characters on stage. There is no longer any certainty in who Godot is or when he is coming, just as Vladimir and Estragon struggle to answer the same questions. The presence of Christian themes has garnered a significant amount of discussion surrounding who Beckett intended Godot to be. Many critics have attempted to attribute meaning to the character of Godot, most frequently connecting Godot to God. Michael Bennett goes to great lengths to argue that Beckett specifically intended Godot as God by expanding on what he calls the parable of Estragon and the boot. It would be impossible to ignore the discussion of Christian themes found throughout *Godot*. Yet should we even attempt to define who the character of Godot is? As Mount has shown, the absence of dramatic irony puts us on the same playing field as the characters in the play. Thus, our discussion of who Godot is, where he is, or when he is coming, would prove as fruitless as the discussion that Beckett depicts in the characters of Vladimir and Estragon. We know no better than characters on stage, and to assume we do know better defeats the purpose of the play. As Beckett is famously quoted “if by Godot I had meant God I would have said God, and not Godot” (Beckett, *Letters*).

Much of the debate surrounding *Godot* regards who the character of Godot represents. However, what is perhaps more integral to understanding *Godot* is how audiences interpret the events on stage. Through alienating audiences from the action and defamiliarizing the familiar, Beckett presents an important stipulation of absurdist theatre, that there are only particulars. In *Godot*, there are no universal truths, other than the universal truth that there are only particulars. When it comes down to it, we return to Sartre’s theory of “existence before essence.” In *Godot*, the absolute purpose is a construct. Vladimir and Estragon are waiting of their own accord. They believe that Godot will arrive eventually, though they do not know for certain. They have chosen

for themselves the purpose of waiting on stage. This leads to the logical follow-up question of whether human-constructed purposes are enough to act on. If the actions of Vladimir and Estragon, which they chose themselves, led nowhere, what hope does that bring us and our own chosen purposes? In this Beckett, and other playwrights in the Theatre of the Absurd, offer audiences the opportunity to consider their own purposes for existence. Do audiences feel that their “waiting” is worthwhile? Thus, *Godot* leads audiences in circles as they ponder the questions the play presents.

This paradox is exemplified throughout the events of *Godot*, where Beckett depicts his characters doing nothing more than enduring time. Neither Vladimir nor Estragon are doing much to change their condition. Rather, they are simply displayed as enduring it. This appears contrary to Sartre’s “existence before essence,” which calls for the active participation of more or less “choosing one’s own adventure.” Instead of presenting audiences with characters who have the autonomy to freely move about and control their surroundings, Vladimir and Estragon are stuck in the monotony of their environment. They are relieved of this monotony for moments at a time, whether by Lucky and Pozzo or by the boy, yet they always return to the act of waiting. Nonetheless, though the two might appear not to have any autonomy, they are largely staying of their own accord. At several points, the two make as if they are going to leave, only to change their minds at the last moment. Beckett strips away everything aside from time. Vladimir and Estragon go to great lengths attempting to fill the time, whether with games, riddles, broad sweeping philosophical statements, or even simple dialogue between the two. However, they always return to the question of why they are there, further resulting in the question of Godot. In stripping away all but time, audiences are forced to question what they are doing with their own

time. Are they actively making the most of it, or are they mindlessly wandering about the stage of their own lives?

One of the most defining characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd in general is its use of language. Both Beckett and Stoppard, along with most other absurdist playwrights, attempt to redefine the use of language in drama and “to expose the barrenness of conventional stage dialogue” (Esslin 10). Unlike “traditional” theatre that uses dialogue to advance the dramatic action, absurdist playwrights frequently disconnected the language from the events of the play, further disorienting the audience’s interpretation of the events. Beckett especially enjoys disconnecting the events on stage from the words coming out of the character’s mouths. At the end of act one, Beckett includes the following, famous, dialogue:

VLADIMIR: We can still part, if you think it will be better.

ESTRAGON: It’s not worth while now.

(Silence.)

VLADIMIR: No, it’s not worth while now.

(Silence.)

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let’s go.

(They do not move.)

By contrasting the actions on stage from the words that the characters say, Beckett provides not only a humorous exchange, but also further alienates the audience. In this case, as well as others, the language of the Theatre of the Absurd is especially unique. In their discussion of Edward Albee’s *The American Dream*, Greenwald et al. claim that the language of the Theatre of the Absurd “relies on hilarious non sequiturs, the inversion of normal social exchanges... [and the]

gross violations of decorum” (442). Along with this, Beckett, Stoppard, and other absurdist playwrights never sought to answer the questions that they addressed. Both Martin Esslin and Michael Bennett highlight this fact in arguing that the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd never attempt to define the absurdity that they present (M. Bennett 3; Esslin 2). Instead, absurdist plays sought to present these questions in a new light, in a manner entirely unfamiliar to audiences.

Gentle Guildenstern or Gentle Rosencrantz?

After 14 years of fame for Beckett, how could Tom Stoppard possibly fill the enormous shoes that *Godot* had left behind? The answer? By further defamiliarizing the familiar. As mentioned previously, much of Beckett’s writing, along with other absurdist plays, sought to take what was familiar to the audience and reframe it. In doing so, Beckett was successfully able to create an environment that engaged audiences in questions of their existence. Though *Rosencrantz* is still by every means an absurd play, Stoppard’s writing takes many of the conventions that were in place from the time of *Godot* and builds upon them.

One of the most evident conventions that Stoppard builds on is the structure of the play itself. *Godot*, like most other theatre in the Theatre of the Absurd, uses a situational play structure. This situational play structure had been incredibly common in absurd plays, ranging everywhere from Edward Albee’s *The American Dream* to Eugene Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano*. However, Stoppard famously sets the events of his play on the back of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which includes its own existential themes. As John Freeman mentions in his discussion of *Rosencrantz*, “Stoppard has filled the Beckettian void in part by placing his own Vladimir and Estragon in recognizable surroundings, the Renaissance context of *Hamlet*” (20). Unlike Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon, Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern move through the

events on stage. Rather than passively waiting and enduring time like Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have some degree of autonomy on stage. However, this autonomy is still questioned, as the two characters frequently try to remember why they are there, only to return to the fact that they were called for.

This apparent autonomy returns Stoppard's play to a more episodic play structure, which is far more "traditional" than its situational counterpart. Episodic plays are most common in both medieval theatre and the modern theatre of playwrights like Bertolt Brecht and Caryl Churchill (Cohn). The episodic nature of this structure traces characters through a journey, be it spiritual, emotional, or physical, eventually resulting in some type of discovery or understanding (Cohn). Stoppard encourages his audience to view the modern world through the lens of "Renaissance's own anxiety-ridden shift into new modes of conceptualization" (Freeman 21). However, in returning to an episodic play structure by placing *Rosencrantz* on the back of *Hamlet*, Stoppard reintroduces the possibility for dramatic irony. No longer is the audience entirely clueless of the events unfolding. If the audience has had any history with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, they are aware of what eventually happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This once again shifts the dynamic between the audience and the characters on stage. Instead of being forced to watch the events unfold in the same moment Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the audience has some prior knowledge of the action on stage, further blurring the lines between the characters and the audience.

Like Beckett in *Godot*, Stoppard works to bring internal processes to light on stage. Stoppard displays the internal mental processes for all to see, thus externalizing the mind. By setting the events of his play within *Hamlet*, Stoppard further shifts the actions of *Rosencrantz* to an immediate setting. The most immediate setting is that of the mind. As they navigate the events

of *Rosencrantz*, audiences are forced to rely on their memory of *Hamlet*, resulting in the frequent questioning of how well an audience member remembers the events of *Hamlet* (Freeman 25). In establishing the audience's own mind as the location of the play, Stoppard shifts "the action of his play... to the one stage where questions of ontology and epistemology can be properly addressed: the mind itself" (Freeman 25). By encouraging audiences to reflect on their own understanding of *Hamlet*, Stoppard takes a play that is already riddled with existential themes, and further challenge audiences with additional discussions of existence.

It is this reflection on *Hamlet* that is especially fascinating. Though Stoppard has reintroduced the possibility for dramatic irony through an episodic play structure, this sense of irony is not as it was. Dramatic irony, as it is traditionally understood, relies on the audiences' awareness of current events within a play that some characters may be unaware of (S. Bennett 38). However, this awareness does not typically extend far into the future. Though audiences might be able to guess what will happen, they do not know it for certain. Yet, in *Rosencrantz*, audiences rely on their understanding of the events within *Hamlet*. As they reflect on their expectations, audiences struggle with what is real and what is not.

Try as they might, neither Rosencrantz nor Guildenstern can alter the events of *Hamlet*. In their attempts to stop Hamlet from dragging Polonius' body offstage, the pair display their inability to change the events of *Hamlet*:

GUIL: You stand there! Don't let him pass!

(He positions ROS with his back to one wing, facing HAMLET's entrance.)

(GUIL positions himself next to ROS, a few feet away, so that they are covering one side of the stage, facing the opposite side. GUIL unfastens his belt. ROS does the same. They join the two belts, and hold them taut between them. ROS's trousers slide slowly down.)

(HAMLET enters opposite, slowly, dragging POLONIUS's BODY. He enters upstage, makes a small arc and leaves by the same side, a few feet downstage.)

(ROS and GUIL, holding the belts taut, stare at him in some bewilderment.)

(HAMLET leaves, dragging the BODY. They relax the strain on the belts.)

ROS: That was close.

GUIL: There's a limit to what two people can do.

In their inability to stop Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern also prove their lack of autonomy in this world. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are stuck within the world of *Hamlet*. Because Shakespeare never gives them the autonomy to stop Hamlet themselves, Stoppard further emphasizes their inability to do so. Though they attempt to pursue Hamlet throughout the show, they lack the power to do anything about it. Nonetheless, this representation of *Hamlet* encourages audiences to question the morality of Hamlet's character throughout the show. By gaining a new perspective on *Hamlet*, audiences question not only their autonomy, but their understanding of morality.

Why Wait?

In their writing, both Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard pull on the rich history of the Theatre of the Absurd to encourage audiences to ask questions of their existence. Both *Godot* and *Rosencrantz* discuss themes of time, autonomy, and morality, while also encouraging audiences to reflect on their own existence. The presence of the situational play structure, and the ways that Beckett and Stoppard play with this structure offer audiences the opportunity to question their own situation. While Vladimir and Estragon bide their time discussing themes of existentialism and otherwise, audiences question what it is they are doing with their own time, as well as how much control they have over their own lives. These questions of autonomy are

further emphasized in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz*, as the twisting of the play's structure requires audiences to reflect on how much control the characters have over their own lives.

This emphasis on autonomy is further emphasized in the ways that both Beckett and Stoppard play with dramatic irony. The use of dramatic irony is crucial in that it levels the playing field, eliminating the traditional hierarchy between an audience and the characters on stage. Yet, it is also shifted in *Rosencrantz*, allowing audiences to question the morality of Hamlet while reflecting on Shakespeare's original play. Providing a new perspective gives audiences the opportunity to reflect on what "truth" is really told. Throughout a reading of either *Godot* or *Rosencrantz*, audiences are encouraged to reflect on their own situation and compare it to the situations being represented on stage. In many cases, this situation represents their overall existence, and what it means to be alive. The elimination of the god-like perspective through dramatic irony further juxtaposes the real from the unreal. Without this twisting of dramatic irony, audiences would still be able to look at the plays and be unaffected by the events on stage. By utilizing the conventions of absurd theatre, Beckett and Stoppard provide opportunities for audiences to reflect on their own existence, as well as what it means to be human, amidst the brightest stars in the constellation that is the Theatre of the Absurd.

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