

## (4) Theatre of the Absurd and Model Drama

Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit, Leroi Jones

### American Drama in the 1960s

New  
Theatres

- in the 1960s the dominance of Broadway was being challenged, alternative theatre was appearing in New York
- Off-Broadway was the first to appear, Off-Off-Broadway followed when the former acquired respectability
- new theatres developed in other parts of the country, new forms of organization and financing were introduced, for instance theatres as non-profit corporations, support from private foundations, repertory companies etc.
- the expanded theatrical area encouraged a degree of **experiment**, new companies challenged domestic realism

Experi-  
ments

- new dramatists moved away from a drama that was author- and text-based and turned to improvisation instead, using a text only as a departure point, to mime, dance and ritual, to a theatre of constant change and process
- the radical technique of **transformation** was introduced, in which actors suddenly switch roles or even plays
- American playwrights never surrendered their allegiance to domestic realism but were encouraged to expand it, embellish it and push it to new frontiers, among others due to the influence of the 1960s theatrical experiment

### Theatre of the Absurd

Criteria

- the term 'absurd' was originally used to refer to something out of harmony, in the meaning of disharmonious
- the two main criteria of absurd playwrights are characters that do **not develop** and structure that is **circular**
- the themes of absurd plays are communication difficulties, exhaustion of language, existential questions etc.
- absurd drama does not aspire to create a realistic situation but the situation presented may be a realistic one
- each absurd drama is at the same time a model drama in that it always follows the given frame or structure

Represent-  
atives

- the literary-critical term was coined by the British critic **Martin Esslin** (1918–2002) in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) to characterize the work of certain key playwrights mostly produced in the 1950s to 1960s
- the key achievement of the theatre of the absurd was *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by the Irish author **Samuel Beckett** (1906–1989), in which two exemplary derelicts wait helplessly for a salvation unlikely to materialize
- plays emphasizing the irrationality of the world and the illogic of human behaviour, often in a harshly comic tone, came from the Romanian-French writer **Eugene Ionesco** (1909–1994), author of *The Bald Soprano* (1950)
- **Harold Pinter's** (1930–2008) *The Birthday Party* (1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (1959) represent British plays
- among American absurd playwrights are **Edward Albee** (b. 1928), **Arthur Kopit** (b. 1937) or **Jack Gelber** (1932–2003), author of *The Connection* (1952), a play on the shapeless and random existence of heroin addicts

### The Absurd in Philosophy

Camus's  
*Sisyphus*

- inspired by an essay by the French philosopher **Albert Camus** (1913–1960) called *The Myth of Sisyphus*<sup>1</sup> (1942) which in its four chapters suggests that man is a stranger in an irrational universe, deprived of 'illusions and light', bereft of purpose, and hence subjected to a metaphysical and moral anguish, or 'feeling of Absurdity'
- Chapter 1, **An Absurd Reasoning**: the fact of human mortality renders all our hopes as absurd, our passion to understand the world cannot be satisfied; our task then is to acknowledge the absurd condition, to recognize the contradiction between the desire of human reason and the unreasonable world, to revolt and then enjoy freedom
- Chapter 2, **The Absurd Man**: ethical rules do not apply to the absurd man because there is no higher purpose; instances of the absurd man are Don Juan, who lives the passionate life to the fullest, the actor, who depicts ephemeral lives for ephemeral fame, or the conqueror, whose actions engage him fully in human history
- Chapter 3, **Absurd Creation**: absurd art is restricted to a description of the myriad experiences in the world because its explanation is not possible; absurd art refrains from judging and alluding to any shadow of hope
- Chapter 4, **The Myth of Sisyphus**: Sisyphus represents the absurd man who lives his life to the fullest because he is conscious of his absurd condition, surmounts it by scorn and reaches a state of contented acceptance; our modern lives and futile jobs are as pointless as Sisyphus's toil, and one must imagine Sisyphus happy

### The Absurd in Aesthetics

Aesthetic  
Categories

- there are two aesthetic categories, the comic and the tragic, and several subcategories mixing elements of both
- **humour**: a subcategory of the comic which contains elements of the comic only, with no elements of the tragic
- **black humour** or gallows humour: a subcategory of the comic which contains mostly comic elements but also some tragic elements; typically uses the genres of a farce, a grotesque, a slapstick comedy or a black comedy

<sup>1</sup> Sisyphus is a figure of Greek mythology who defied the gods by trying to cheat death and was condemned to repeat for all eternity the meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain only to see it roll down again and have to start over.

- **the bizarre**: a subcategory which contains still more tragic elements but comic elements clearly prevail
- **the grotesque**: contains even more tragic elements than the bizarre but the comic elements still prevail
- **the absurd**: a subcategory which is considered to contain 51% comic elements and 49% tragic elements; the absurd is based on the imbalance created by the considerable proportion of tragic elements in a comic mode
- **the macabre**: a counterpart of the absurd in that it contains 49% comic elements and 51% tragic elements

### Edward Albee (b. 1928)

Writing

- the most notable of the many dramatists who discovered the freedom first to experiment outside Broadway
- his obsessive themes include alienation, the human need for and terror of contact and nameless existential fear
- preoccupied with loss, failed relationships, decayed sexuality, broken families and emotionally scarred people
- explores the intertextual realm of our reality as well as the consonance between individual and national decline
- committed to the rhythms of the language, fascinated with linguistic precision, compact metaphor and symbol
- reached his greatest success in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), his later plays lack the verve and bitter vitality, tend to be too abstracted and intent on presenting an intellectual argument rather than a dramatic action
- suffered from a growing sense that language was hollowed out by a history of betrayal, evacuated of humanity

#### *The Zoo Story* (1959)

Anxiety  
for Contact

- his first, one-act play, produced in Berlin, a year later in New York, introduced many of his recurrent themes
- an extended monologue of a young New Yorker so lost and alienated that he feels any contact would be a relief
- the protagonist lights on an ordinary man in the park and attempts a contact, however painful or impermanent
- he fails to move the man by telling him his story, so he starts a knife fight, impales himself on the blade of his opponent and dies giving thanks for the proof of himself and his ability to impinge on another he has received
- the title refers to the experience of the young man who has been to the zoo where he discovered in the caged animals an expression of the human isolation he had experienced and the animal vitality drained out of society

#### *The Sandbox* (1959)

An Old  
Woman

- a one-act play following the dying of an old woman, a brief mourning and a burial in a sandbox by her family

#### *The Death of Bessie Smith*<sup>2</sup> (1961)

Alienation  
& Racism

- based on the actual personality who died from injuries sustained in a road accident, perhaps due to negligence
- argues that if she had been white, she would have received earlier medical treatment that could have saved her
- suggests that the rage and resentment provoked by anxiety and alienation find the illusion of release in racism

#### *The American Dream* (1961)

Absence  
of Feeling

- combines some absurdist dramatic strategies with a devastating analysis of national values implied by the title
- features a typical American family including an emasculated Daddy, abrasive Mommy and cynical Grandma
- presents the characters as empty and evacuated of feeling by the American dream of success, their abuse of life and disconnection from real human emotion are reflected in and expressed by their comical abuses of language
- concludes with the appearance of an equally anonymous Young Man, in whom the family finds their natural heir, as he confesses that since one traumatic moment in his past he no longer has the capacity to feel anything

#### *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962)

Master-  
piece

- his best and his first full-length play, the first to start on Broadway due to the success of *The American Dream*
- unlike his earlier work moves towards domestic realism, though domestic realism edged with a fiery poeticism
- set in a small New England college, depicts the events of one single night of passionate conflict and purgation
- like Tennessee Williams shows characters who find everyday life emotionally exhausting, almost unendurable
- George, a history professor, and his wife Martha invite their young colleague Nick and his nervous wife Honey for a visit to their home and involve them in a torrent of argument and abuse that appears to be a nightly ritual

Existential  
Loneliness

- 'Fun and Games' become pain and purgation pushed to the limit in 'Walpurgisnacht' and treated in 'Exorcism'
- Martha and George have created an imaginary son as some kind of sustenance and defence against the existential dread that haunts their lives and by declaring him dead at the end they acknowledge their illusions
- the couple ends the play facing future with a courage that comes from admitting their fear but not turning back
- their immersion in life is ultimately seen as strangely heroic, life seems to be real when it resists and hurts, life is presented as painful and unbearably difficult for those passionately committed to living rather than evading it
- the title question may be put as who is afraid of the despair and insecurity of modern life, especially modern American life, and answered that George and Martha are, but so is everybody, and the two at least know about it

#### *Tiny Alice* (1964)

Faith &  
Illusion

- explores the absurd but inescapable nature of faith and illusion in a discussion between a lawyer and a cardinal

<sup>2</sup> Bessie Smith (1898–1937), an African American, one of the greatest and most popular blues vocalists of the 1920s and 1930s.

- Human Defence**
- A Delicate Balance* (1966)**
- a Pulitzer Prize winner, dramatizes the human defence systems, how social and family rituals, even argument and aberrant behaviour, act as temporary stays against confusion, a way of shoring up the psyche against dread
- Relationships**
- Box* (1968), *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968)**
- dwell on the banality of human relationships in America, peer beyond the moment of nuclear annihilation into a world in which an off-stage voice comments on an empty stage as a failure of art and of human commitment
- Couples**
- Seascape* (1974)**
- a Pulitzer Prize winner, like his masterpiece focuses on the failure of communication between two couples
- Writing**
- Arthur Kopit (b. 1937)**
- born in New York, educated at Harvard where he wrote and directed several plays, culminating with *Oh Dad...*
  - influenced by the European theatre, especially by the French farce, decadent genres, but also by Bertolt Brecht
  - praised for his ease with language, his impressive theatricality and his skewering of American popular culture
  - shows a considerable versatility in a variety of theatrical idioms, began with humour and shifted to the absurd
  - besides original plays wrote also the book for a musical play *Nine* (1982), based on Frederico Fellini's film *8½*
- Tragifarce**
- Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* (1960)**
- a student play, written in the idiom of European theatre of the absurd, both in imitation and parody of the mode
  - subtitled 'a pseudoclassical tragifarce in a bastard French tradition', styled in a wildly farcical fantastic manner
  - parodies the avant-garde theatre in form and the Oedipus complex in the subject of the dominant mother figure
  - the absurdist title is matched by the absurdist action of the play in which the fabulously wealthy mamma of the title travels the world taking with her the dead body of her husband, a talking fish and two giant Venus fly-traps
  - the mamma is accompanied by a son whom she insists on calling by whatever name first comes to her mind
  - treats the 'silver cord' theme, the connection between the physical body, astral or etheric body and higher self
  - the serious point is the eccentric strategies people use to protect themselves from a hostile and terrifying world
- One-Act Plays**
- The Day the Whores Came Out To Play Tennis* (1964)**
- a one-act play about social climbers at a tennis club whose members are outraged by an invasion of prostitutes
- Sing to Me Through Open Windows* (1965)**
- a one-act play about a magician and his clown-butler living in isolation with the boy unpacking his memories
- Chamber Music* (1965)**
- a one-act play, set in a mental home in 1938, where eight famous women from different historical periods meet
  - the characters include Gertrude Stein, Joan of Arc, activist Susan B. Anthony, politician Queen Isabella of Spain, Mozart's wife Constanze, pilot Amelia Earhart, silent-film actress Pearl White and explorer Osa Johnson
  - the women come together to prepare themselves for an attack that they expect to come from the men's ward
- American Imperialism**
- Indians* (1968)**
- fuses the narratives of erasure of the Indian tribes from their ancestral homes with US involvement in Vietnam
  - uses the bizarrely symbolic figures of Sitting Bull<sup>3</sup> and Buffalo Bill Cody<sup>4</sup> and his travelling Wild West show
  - follows Sitting Bull and his people who are forced to live and starve on a reservation and Buffalo Bill who tries to keep peace when Sitting Bull is promised to meet the President and a group of senators arrives instead
  - explores American mythmaking and the way the nation has suppressed knowledge of its past, including white American imperialism, by transforming the actual into the apocryphal and moral guilt into mythical innocence
- Later Plays**
- Wings* (1978)**
- a poetic drama, produced on the air a year before the stage date, follows a former aviatrix recovering from a comatose state after suffering a stroke, presenting her fractured world by the means of her interior monologue
- Good Help Is Hard To Find* (1981)**
- a one-act play about a servant helping out an elderly couple who eventually turns out to be an 'Angel of Death'
- End of the World with Symposium to Follow* (1984)**
- a parody about the nuclear arms race showing the end of the human world as being threatened by a nuclear war
- Road to Nirvana* (1991)**
- a racy satirical comedy on Hollywood, exposing the vice-saturated and ego-driven underbelly of the film industry in following a failed film producer who is trying to get out of dope dealing and back to film making

<sup>3</sup> Sitting Bull (c. 1831–1890), a Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux war chief, famous for his winning the Battle of the Little Big Horn (1876).

<sup>4</sup> 'Buffalo Bill' (1846–1917), a white American buffalo hunter and showman, famous for his Old West shows with cowboy themes.

***Because He Can* (2000)**

- a mystery play originally produced under the title *Y2K*, following the couple of a professor and his wife who are interrogated by the FBI and who have skeletons in their closets that they would rather not have revealed

**Leroi Jones – Imamu Amiri Baraka<sup>5</sup> (b. 1934)**

Black Arts

- called the father of the Black Arts movement, preached that ‘the black man is the future of the world’ and radically insisted that ‘the black artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it’
- appropriated the mythic power that Western symbolism habitually imputes to blackness, aimed to turn those symbols inside out, so as to make them a source of pride for blacks and a source of fear and wonder for whites
- encouraged a generation to be unapologetic, even proud and aggressive, about their African American heritage
- introduced a prophetic and apocalyptic tone, a sense of a violent and revolutionary redemption of the past sins
- hoped that creation would follow the ritual destruction, that primal innocence and perfection would be restored
- in the 1960s dispensed with his white ‘slave name’ of Leroi Jones and adopted a title more in keeping with his new self and mission, his work became more radical and preoccupied with issues of racial and national identity

Repertory  
Theatre

- opened the **Black Arts Repertory Theatre** in Harlem (1965) a major contribution to the development of black arts, on its demise set up the Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey, with a troupe called the Spirit House Movers
- produced over a dozen of one-act ‘shock’ plays with elements of the ritual theatre and the theatre of the absurd
- his earlier plays focus on the issues of personal identity, his later deal with relations between blacks and whites and show the author’s awareness of himself as a leader of the revolutionary theatre fighting against racism
- in the mid-1970s turned to a Marxist-Leninist perspective, anticipating the fall of oppressive capitalist systems

***A Good Girl is Hard to Find* (1958)**

- his first published work, a minor play, alluding to Flannery O’Connor’s story ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’

***The Baptism* (1964)**One-Act  
Plays

- a one-act play about the hypocritical black church in which a homosexual is the only to admit his perversion

***The Toilet* (1964)**

- a one-act play showing a tapestry of festering bigotry coming to boil in a high school toilet when bullies attack

Master  
-piece***Dutchman* (1964)**

- a one-act play following a violent verbal confrontation between a twenty-year old black bourgeois intellectual and a thirty-year old white woman in an underground train, ending up with the woman stabbing the young man
- expresses the usually suppressed anger and hostility of African Americans towards the dominant white culture

Later  
Plays***The Slave* (1964)**

- a two-act play about a black revolutionary seeking vengeance on his former white wife and her new husband

***Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967)**

- a dramatic pageant with music, dance, elaborate costumes and mass scenes, that depicts the horrors of slavery

***Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969)**

- the plays included in the book show the author reaching out to and trying to teach a largely unlettered audience

***S-1* (1974), *The Motion of History* (1977)**Marxist  
Plays

- the plays demonstrate the shift of his political ideology and aesthetics with a formal commitment to Marxism
- the former is a call for blacks and white to unite and fight, the latter is a history of racial and social injustice

<sup>5</sup> Leroi accepted this name following the assassination of Malcolm X (1965). ‘Imamu’ refers to ‘imam’, a Muslim spiritual leader.