



## THEATRE OF THE ABSURD



**WHAT it is:** Name given to a type of drama that constituted the French theatrical avant-garde of the 1950s. The term was coined by Martin Esslin in his study of contemporary playwrights, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962). It also refers to a group of writers, mainly though not exclusively in France, of whom Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, and Genet are the main figures.

*Definition:* Theatre of the Absurd is drama that provides deliberate distortions and violations of the usual conventions of plot and character, perpetrated to undermine ordinary expectations of continuity and rationality to foster a rise in consciousness for the audience.

The absurdity of human existence is often emphasized through disjointed, repetitious, and meaningless dialogue, purposeless and confusing situations, and plots that lack realistic or logical development.

**WHY it is:** The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the “substitute religions” of faith in progress, nationalism, and totalitarian ideologies. All this was shattered by the war. By 1942, Albert Camus was calmly asking why—since life had lost all meaning—man should not seek escape in suicide. In his seminal “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus tried to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs:

*A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.*

Esslin notes that in a musical context “absurd” means “out of harmony,” hence its dramatic definition: “out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.” In common usage, “absurd” may simply mean “ridiculous,” but this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word nor how it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”

**HOW it is:** Characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd

1. Often abandons Aristotle's Three Unities:
  - Time is elastic and non-linear. The structure of Absurdist dramas are often circular (e.g. *La Cantatrice chauve*) or cyclical (*En attendant Godot*, *La Parodie*), ending as they began or containing repeated or very similar scenes.
  - Place: The settings and characters are usually outside a particular time and place, reflecting the metaphysical rather than social preoccupations of this type of drama. The setting may be constant, but it is often a “no-place”; the action could be taking place anywhere.
  - Action: A unified sense of plot, characters, and dialogue—the mainstays of conventional Aristotelian model of drama—is either discarded or subverted.
2. Characters lack motivation and are seen to spend their time either waiting for something to happen (a motif common to Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, and Genet) or engaged in meaningless exchanges of words.
3. Mimesis abandoned: Plausibility and cause-and-effect are dissociated, making events appear arbitrary and unpredictable. Even the laws of nature are sometimes suspended. The absence of a linear plot emphasizes the futility and monotony of human existence.
4. Frequent use of anachronisms. Material objects and stage properties appear incongruous, and thus universal.
5. Laws of nature and science are often abandoned or contradicted, emphasizing the unpredictability of life.
6. Memory—one of our primary tools for creating meaning from our experiences—is questioned or shown to be flawed.
7. The characteristic mood of these plays is inevitably tragicomic because they express a nihilistic view of human existence whilst simultaneously denying man the dignity necessary to achieve genuine tragic stature.

*Compiled from various online sources.*