

THE ABSURD WORLD IN EUGÈNE IONESCO'S ANTI-THEATER
“THE BALD SOPRANO”

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Abstract

The after effects of the two Great Wars have been felt by human civilization through varied mediums. It brought in revolutionary changes to the interpretations of the superiority of human beings. Conventional Theatre no longer could justify human existence. The theater of the absurd gives us a new philosophy to our existence in terms of a search for meaning. The aim of this paper is to trace the anti-theatrical elements used in “The Bald Soprano”. Eugène Ionesco questions if theater is adequate enough to answer the individual’s “obsessions, nightmares and anxiety”? Ionesco thereby used the anti-theatrical mode to reconstruct the idea of theater itself by extending the language of theater. It is this aspect that this paper focuses to explore.

Keywords: Absurd, Existentialism, anti-theater.

Anti-theater deconstructs the conventional idea of theater by undoing certain elements such as language, structure, form and the context. Historically, “The Bald Soprano” can be located at a post-Holocaust, post-World War position. But it does not present any such documents of history. However, it is composed of certain word games composed in a circular manner to capture the human condition itself where characters are interchangeable. The theater of the absurd, being a product of the avant-garde raises the shaky status of human civilization. In a musical context, “absurd means ‘out of harmony’”. Its dictionary meaning is “out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical” (in Chaudhuri, 193). 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.” (in Esslin, 23) Broadly, this sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of human condition is the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, and others. But it is not only the subject-matter that makes it the Theater of the Absurd. Much of the works of Camus and Sartre too has the themes of senselessness and purposelessness of the human condition. Yet they differ from the dramatists in the sense that “they present their sense of the traditionality of the human condition in the form of...logically constructed reasoning” (in Chaudhuri, 194), whereas the Theater of the Absurd expresses the senselessness of the human condition by “open abandonment of rational devices” of logical reasoning. The Theater of the Absurd goes a step further than Camus and Sartre in trying to

achieve a unity between its basic assumptions of human condition and the form in which these are expressed”(in Chaudhuri, 194)

“The Bald Soprano” experiments with all the absurd tools to establish certain fixities of life. But before delving into the absurd elements in the play, we should be clear that the Theater of the Absurd is not a formal school practicing a definite mode of writing. But rather those who are now regarded as Absurdist, were individuals writing from different corners without any connection to each other. It was Martin Esslin, who in his work “The Theater of the Absurd”(1961), innovated a sect of experimental play which includes works of writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and to an extent, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard and Jean Tardieu. Eugène Ionesco ties up the beginning and the end of his play. It begins where it ends and it ends where it begins. This circular way is similar as in Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942). Camus’ idea of the “absurd” claims that there is a conflict between what we want from the universe (whether it be meaning, order or reason) and what we find (formless chaos). “The Myth of Sisyphus” talks about living a life devoid of purposes. According to the Greek mythology, Sisyphus was punished for all eternity to roll a rock up a mountain only to have it roll back down to the bottom when he reaches the top. Camus claims that Sisyphus is an ideal absurd hero and that his punishment is representative of the human condition: “Sisyphus must struggle perpetually and without hope of success.” (Cruickshank)

Ionesco’s personal life, to a great extent, led him to raise such questions of existence. He was born in 1909, in the city of Slatina, Rumania. He moved to Paris with his parents, where he spent his childhood. Ionesco returned to Rumania. He moved to Paris with his parents, where he spent his childhood. Ionesco returned to Rumania at the age of thirteen and stayed for over a decade. He saw the Fascist air blowing, the mass murder of the Jews by his own fellow friends. Ionesco questions the very existence of God; for if there was religion and a God, how had the Holocaust been possible? How could the two World Wars be executed? So, he at once unsettled the entire cultural principles that abide the human existence. This black chapter of history shattered the illusions of so-called civilization, and man began to question his existence. A new form of theater was necessary to authenticate such questions- the anti-theater. “The Theater of the Absurd was illogical, ‘conflict-less’, surreal and without plot. This is anti-theater where language seemed to convey no meaning: the dialogues conveyed no ‘sense’. Language in this world had become a mere amalgam of stereotyped, meaningless and clichéd interactions; words could not possibly express experience- absurd theater mounted its chief assault on language-revealing its unreliability. It used everyday speech, technical jargon, wordplay, nonsense slogans, and clichés that distort parody and break down meaning rather than achieve communication”. (Chaudhuri, 186)

“The Bald Soprano” expresses the futility of meaningful communication in modern society, which is a key feature of absurdist plays. The idea for the play came to Ionesco while he was trying to learn English with the *Assimil* method. An idea struck his mind that “the repetitive non-sensical plot of his Lingaphone record” can be compiled into an absurd play. It cynics and satirizes the failure of language as a tool for communication, and re-imagines the way in which language can be used to communicate meaning. Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” is in fact another absurdist play which enacts the failure of language as a mode of communication. The use of colloquial language makes it extremely lucid. But this lucidity has another purpose to serve. The dangerous lucidity captures the audience into mere confusions. The script of “The Bald Soprano” is such that it gives the impression that the characters are not even listening to each other. Rather they are in a race to make their own voices heard, like:

“Mr. Smith (still reading his paper: Tsk, it says here that Bobby Watson died.

Mrs. Smith: My God, the poor man! When did he die?

Mr. Smith: Why do you pretend to be astonished? You know very well that he’s been dead these past two years. Surely you remember that we attended his funeral a year and a half ago.

Mrs. Smith: Oh yes, of course I do remember. I remembered it right away, but I don’t understand why you yourself were so surprised to see it in the paper.

Mr. Smith: It wasn’t in the paper. It’s been three years since his death was announced. I remember it through an association of ideas.” (The Bald Soprano, Act I, page 11)

The association of ideas that Ionesco deals with is no other than our sub-conscious mind. Ionesco often instills a dream situation upon the stage. The world in his play “Amédée” is an example of such a world, where the corpse keeps on growing within the flat of the middle-aged couple and later bursts out. Ionesco was against realist theatre and dreams quite clearly transgress the rules of realistic theatre. Dreams do not develop logically but by associations. This association of ideas communicates the images which carry multitudes of meaning.

This one-act play successfully experiments with the plot. There is actually no logical plot in “The Bald Soprano”. There are only illogical blabbers ending up with no meanings but just as a tool to pass the time, to release boredom. He has tried to “exteriorize the anxiety...of my characters through objects; to make the stage-setting speak; to translate the action into visual terms; to project visible images of fear, regret, remorse, alienation, to play with words...I have thus tried to extend the language of theatre.” (in Ionesco, 132) Ionesco made it clear that “use of language to make oneself understood is difficult, but not absolutely impossible.” If it would have been impossible, the very act of writing plays would be meaningless. He tried to renew the language of the theatre, and “to renew the language is to renew the conception, the vision of the world”. (in Ionesco, 132)

Through “The Bald Soprano”, Ionesco succeeds in explaining the unexplainable gap between language and communication. In theatres or plays of Shakespeare, there are loaded logical soliloquies that try to interpret human psychology. In Ibsen, there is an attempt to showcase the monotonous boredom of life through different situations of irritation and frustration. But, Ionesco, unlike other Absurdist, do not profess through such literary dialogues. He uses simple colloquial language. Like, “Waiting for Godot”, “The Bald Soprano” too has one liners. These lines juxtaposed one after the other and then another leads to utter confusion. These elements of confusion are used by almost every Absurdist to highlight the confusion of the human condition itself. Like conventional theatres, Ionesco does not put up heroic characters, but simpletons, who keep on discussing petty issues merely confusing the audience throughout. The clock is another significant absurd element in the play. The time in the play is very indefinite. It keeps on striking without a definite precision. The setting is claustrophobic like in other Ionesco plays.

Human life moves in a circular sphere. One generation ends and another begins with the same “obsessions, nightmares, and anxieties”. This spherical nature appears in “The Bald Soprano. The final scene contains stage direction to start the performance over from the very beginning, with the Martin couple substituting for the Smith couple and vice-versa.

“The words cease abruptly. Again, the lights come on. Mr. and Mrs. Martin are seated like the Smiths at the beginning of the play. The play begins again with the Martins, who say exactly the same lines as the Smiths in the first Scene, while the curtain softly falls”. (The Bald Soprano Act I, 42)

Ionesco successfully loads “The Bald Soprano” with implications that theatre is inadequate to present a human condition which is so confused searching for meaning about his/her existence. The gap between the intended meaning and the meaning that is understood is achieved through the jumbling up of time and space in “The Bald Soprano”. Instead of answering the questions, Ionesco provokes his audience to question the absurdity of life. Ionesco has revealed the tragic sense of life through comic means.

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