Samuel Beckett (1906 – 1989)

- Born in Ireland (Now North Ireland)
- When 22 won a post to teach in the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris
- After 2 years in Paris, his life became a constant shuttle between France and Ireland
- 1937: he made France his home
- In World War II, he joined the French resistance
The Revision of 1946

• 1946: in Dublin, as he watched a harbor, he had a complete revision of what his life and work should be

• Before 1946:
  • Third person, Erudite and generally realistic

• After 1946:
  • Bewildered, first person story telling
  • Absurd (more about this later)
  • Writes in French as a way to “avoid style” when writing in your mother tongue
  • Highly condensed
Selected Plays by Beckett

Waiting for Godot       Not I
Krapp’s Last Time       Breath
End Game               Footfalls
Happy Days             Rockaby
Selected Fiction by Beckett

- Dream of Fair to Middling Women
- Murphy
- Watt
- **The Trilogy**: Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable
- How it is
- More Pricks than Kicks (Short Stories)
- Echo’s Bones (Short Stories)
- Stories and Texts for Nothing (Short Stories)
Other Works

• **Poetry** collections
• **Film** (with Buster Keaton)
• An **Essay** on Proust
• **Radio**: All that Fall, Rough for Radio I and II, Words and Music
• **TV**: Eh Joe, Beginning to End, Quad I and II, Night and Dreams
The Play

• 1948: Written in French (in France)
• 1953: First performed in Paris (Roger Blin)
• 1955: First performed in London in (English by Beckett)
• 1957: Herbert Blau directed a performance in the San Quentin Penitentiary in the USA. The audience: 1400 prisoners.
• Regularly referred to as part of the “Theater of Absurd”
Question: how can we talk about the meaning of a play which deals with meaninglessness?

Answer: just deal with how the play is “built”
Maestro, how do we interpret this passage?

Please don’t interpret my music, just play it.

Igor Stravinsky
The Play is Driven by Two Machines

The Theater of the Absurd

The Absurd
The Theater of the Absurd
The Absurd Theater: Main Triggers

• Roots at that time (30s and 40s)
  • Large number of “expatriate” intellectuals settled in France
  • Political turmoil
  • Advances in science/technology
  • Social upheavals

• Philosophical roots:
  • Albert Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus*
  • Existentialism
Challenge to accept the Human Condition as it is in all its mystery and absurdity and to bear it with dignity, nobly and responsibly precisely because there are no solutions to the mysteries of existence.

Because ultimately, man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions and of comforting solutions may be painful but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. The Theater of the Absurd does evoke tears of despair but a muster of liberation.

Martin Esslin
“The Theater of the Absurd”
Key (Theatrical) Influences

• Early **Expressionism** (Strindberg, Wedekind, Kokoshka)
• **Surrealism** (Breton), Dadaism (Tzara)
• **Artaud**: The Theater of Cruelty
• **Non-sense poetry**: Lewis Carroll, Edward Leary
• **Appolinaire**: Les mamelles de Tirésias
• **Pirandello**: Six Characters in Search of an Author
• **Brecht**: Distancing effect (Verfremdungseffekt)
The Theater of the Absurd

• **Communications breakdown** when human existence is seen to have no purpose
• **Broad comedy**, draws from Vaudeville / Chaplin
• **Irrational** situations drawn from surrealism / dadaism
• Mixed with **hopeless situations** (Tragicomedy)
• Dialog full of clichés, word play, non-sense phrases
• Attacks comfortable **certainties or orthodoxies**
• Aims to shock audiences out of their **complacency**
Playwrights in the Theater of the Absurd

- Alfred Jarry
- Arthur Adamov
- Boris Vian
- Danil Khams
- Edward Albee
- Jean Genet
- Eugene Ionesco
- Fernando Arrabal
- Friedrich Durenmatt
- Harold Pinter
- Luigi Pirandello
- Samuel Beckett
- Max Frisch
- Slawomir Mrozak
- Tom Stoppard
- Vaclav Havel
- Witold Gombrowics
- Jean Tardieu
Up to the Theater of the Absurd, we had Realistic Drama (4\textsuperscript{th} Wall) . . . .

1) The play would start with a problem. It creates a tension. The end would resolve the problem.
2) Characters are developed socio-psychologically.
3) Time flows in a recognizable manner.
4) Language is discourse to communicate the above.

All this would go
1) Realist Drama Begins Tension in a Narrative Which gets Resolved at the End
Can also have Multiple Tensions and Resolutions
Waiting for Godot has Continuous Non-Increasing Tension without Resolution
2) There is no Character Development

- We are not in a realistic “socio-psychological” play
- Characters are not “real”
- DIDI and GODO do not develop / evolve / progress
- We do not know their history
- Following their psychology behavior is difficult (or not valid)
- The characters are “expressionistic”, evoking the philosophy of the Absurd
3) Time Does not Flow in Absurd Theater

- We do not know if Today follows Yesterday
- DIDI, GOGO and POZZO regularly question that truth
- Pozzo has a Lament against time (Act 2)
- GOGOG does not know (or mind) if it is Monday, Tuesday or whatever
- We only know that they meet sometime during the day and then “Let’s Go” at night, when GODOT does not appear
- Memories are brought up and immediately questioned
- Dreams cannot be remembered
4) Language Games and Destruction

• Language is not a communication tool in the play
• It is, rather, an impediment as it often breaks down
• Didi, Gogo and Pozzo often answer metaphoric phrases literally
• They often argue about the meaning of words and phrases
• There are lots of linguistic misunderstandings
  • Example: when GOGO has to repeat after DIDI that he is happy
• Call and Response: cursing each other, inquiring, challenging
More . . .

• Language games: the 4 line repeats
  • Estragon: All the dead voices
  • Vladimir: They make a noise like wings
  • Estragon: Like Leaves
  • Vladimir: Like sand
  • Estragon: Like Leaves

• And illogic ... watch how the next song gets looped
A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.

Then cook came up with ladle
And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb.

And wrote upon the tombstone
For the eyes of dogs to come:

A dog came in the kitchen . . . .
Say the Theater of the Absurd defines the Form of the Play, what defines the Content?
The Absurd

Albert Camus

1913-1960
The Myth of Sisyphus

1942
Camus published “The Stranger” in the same year as the “Myth.”

1942
Camus Asks:

“What happens when a person realizes there is no meaning in his or her life?”
First Path: Suicide

This is a philosophical suicide. You decide that there is no meaning in life and therefore, there is no reason to continue.
Second Path: Leap of Faith

You jump into someone else’s “system” such as a religion, social system, Marxism.

Sartre calls this “Mauvaise Foie”
Third Path:
You decide to face the Abyss/Absurd
and generate your own meaning
For Camus, if we choose the Third Path . . .

• We accept our condition in all its mystery and meaninglessness
• This is the freedom that Sartre talks about

• Giving up of the comforting solutions of Path 2 may be painful
• Selecting Path 3 (with its despair) brings a sense of freedom and relief
• Realizing and facing the Absurd pushes us to generate our own meanings
So where are we in the Play?
First Path: Suicide

Vladimir and Estragon consider, even try, committing suicide

Not from the bottom of their heart!
In several places, they consider leaps of faith . . . .
Leap of Faith

• They question their relation with Godot:
  • What if we are not here? . . . . He’d punish us.
  • What if he comes? . . . . We’d be saved
  • (Then they propose to go . . . And they don’t)

• The Pozzo / Lucky scenes (repeated in Act 2) is their observation of a social structure: master / slave
  • They don’t accept and they don’t reject
  • They simply wonder

• They talk about an early period in their life when they “worked”

• They often choose to do the same thing always

• “Habit is a great Deadener”
Third Path:
Face the Abyss / Absurd
That is the play
How do they Face the Abyss / Absurd

- Play games (Lucky only thinks when his hat is on)
- Disrupt the “idealistic” logic (note Lucky’s Speech)
- Disrupt Communications / Language
- Express **Emotional Extremes**: they Love / Hate each other:
  - Handle Objects: hats, boots, carrots, bones, Lucky’s items
  - Repeat Repeat Repeat Repeat
  - And ...
Are they . . .
Waiting for Godot
Waiting for Godot
In French it was called . . .

“En Attendant Godot” =

“While Waiting for Godot”
So Which of Camus’ 3 Paths do they Take?
We can see that

• Waiting for “GODOT” is a leap of faith (Path 2)
• While “WAITING” for Godot is facing the absurd (Path 3)
• DIDI and GOGO seem to wander between the 3 paths
• Yet, they are short of the promises of Path 3 as they attempt to generate meaning but keep failing
Nothing to be Done
Didi:  Well? Shall we go?
Gogo:  Yes. Let’s Go.

(They do not move).