

**TWO MINUTES TOO LONG: THE IMPORTANCE OF
ABSURDIST THEATER**

Honors Thesis

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre**

In the College of Arts and Sciences
at Salem State University

By

Emily Henry

Dr. Michael Jaros
Faculty Advisor
English Department

Commonwealth Honors Program
Salem State University
2021

Theater in which standard or naturalistic conventions of plot, characterization, and thematic structure are ignored or distorted in order to convey the irrational or fictive nature of reality and the essential isolation of humanity in a meaningless world (“Theater”).

Theater of the Absurd is an elevated genre of theater-making that is not what people typically expect in the entertainment business. Filled with critical analysis and contemplation, the Absurd makes an audience think more critically about life itself. Perhaps that’s why I like it so much. Perhaps that’s why this genre has grabbed my attention so heavily over the last ten years of my life. As an artist, I love things that are different, things that are outside the box of the ordinary. I would say Theater of the Absurd has fulfilled my dream to live and appreciate art that is outside the box. I began this thesis with the dictionary definition of what Theater of the Absurd is because it specifically states that standard conventions of the plot are “ignored”. I think that’s interesting to note: we spend many hours in the profession of theater studying standard plot structures, characterization, and analysis of motivation. As a theater student and more importantly as an actor, it is one’s homework to understand a character and the “journey” they go on throughout the script. However, Theater of the Absurd proclaims: “Forget that! The *normal* structure of a play can be ignored!” That is not to say the Absurd has no structure. There are many key elements to understanding the Absurd, quantified through the course of this thesis.

When talking about something so specific it is important to note the people who know a great deal about the subject such as Martin Julius Esslin OBE. In his book, *The Theater of The Absurd*, Esslin offers a deeper critical understanding of the genre. Just because Theater of the Absurd ignores “normal” plot structure, that is not to say that it is a complete free-for-all; there is a certain distinct structure within the genre. Esslin attempts through the course of his book on many occasions to use his expertise to quantify these elements of the Absurd:

The abandonment of the concepts of character and motivations; the concentration on states of mind and basic human situations, rather than on the development of a narrative plot from exposition to solution; the devaluation of language as a means of communication and understanding; the rejection of didactic purpose; and the confrontation of the spectator with the harsh facts of a cruel world and his own isolation. (Esslin 233)

As Esslin dictates, the Absurd focuses more on ‘the concentration on states of mind and basic human situations,’ ie. themes, images, and ideas that relate to the human condition which is more abstract than the episodic structure of ‘exposition to solution’ that occurs in more realistic drama. Even though there is a structure of Theater of the Absurd that can be quantified, it is not the structure we as actors are used to studying. This interesting genre presents a certain level of dramatic freedom within the Absurd even though it is a structure I don’t often explore as an actor. It is exciting to explore the literary side of the genre because it offers up new perspectives on theater and human existence which has been greatly appealing to me as a theater artist.

Suzan Lori Parks, renowned playwright and the first African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, described elements of plot structure in her essay, *Elements of Style*, the introduction to one of her most well-known works, *The America Play* (Parks). Parks describes her writing style and details why she sometimes goes outside the realm of a “normal play” structure: “Content determines form and form determines content; that form and content are interdependent. Form should not be looked at askance and held suspect - form is not something that “gets in the way of the story’ but is an integral part of the story” (Parks 7). Parks describes the structure, i.e. form, as something that shouldn't be getting “in the way of the story.” Parks’ idea that a form shouldn't restrict a narrative, the narrative should determine the form relates to my point that the Absurd's structure is unique and determined by the content of the story. Parks goes on to mention that traditional linear narratives are often expected in the theater, “Playwrights are often encouraged to write two-act plays with traditional linear narratives; those sorts of plays are fine, but we should understand that the form is not merely a docile passive vessel, but an active participant in the sort of play which ultimately inhabits it” (Parks 8). The idea that an audience comes to expect this linear narrative is often what shocks audiences of the Theater of the Absurd. To Parks's point the form a show is written in is not just a “docile passive vessel,” it is important to the creative work as a whole. The form furthers the play as an ‘active participant’ in the storyline and can influence how an audience interprets a story. Parks adds, “If a playwright chooses to tell a dramatic story, and realizes that there are essential elements of the story which leads the writer outside the realm of a ‘linear narrative’, and the play naturally assumes a new shape” (Parks 8). This ‘new shape’ Parks describes is what the

Theater of the Absurd is based on. Non-linear plotlines allow for the story to dictate the form, not the other way around.

Whereas the dictionary definition of this genre is understandably limited in its scope of understanding, Esslin has dedicated his book to the genre as a whole. While Parks may offer some insight into why different structures in the literature help further a plot, Esslin dives deeper into the structure of the absurd genre itself. Esslin continues to pioneer our definition of the genre, “[Theater of the Absurd] is in fact merely an expansion, re-evaluation, and development of procedures that are familiar and completely acceptable in only slightly different contexts” (Esslin 327). In other words, Theater of the Absurd is a reflection of real-life in many different ways. Playwrights use Theater of the Absurd to mirror humanity in a way that parallels our life and can be interpreted and connected to the life of each audience member. Jean Genet, another author discussed in Martin Esslin’s book, was in a unique scenario much like humanity being reflected on an audience. Esslin describes Genet watching a drug dealer named Stilitano who was lost in a hall of mirrors, “The image of a man caught in a maze of mirrors, trapped by his own distorted reflections, trying to find a way to make contact with the others he can see around him but being rudely stopped by barriers of glass” (Esslin 200). This is the reflection of the human condition, it is a look in the “mirror” at the reflection of oneself. These images and symbolism are part of what makes Absurdist theater accessible to audiences of any time period. Theater of the Absurd exhibits characters that portray images we relate to, symbols that remind us of our daily struggle of existence. They show us an extension of ourselves, searching for meaning in our reality.

Theater of the Absurd also has a unique style of writing that uses verbal wordplay, nonsense, and pacing to convey meaning to an audience, “It’s turning away from language as an instrument for the expression of the deepest levels of meaning” (Esslin 328). The element of wordplay uses the English language to give hidden, dramatically ironic meanings and subtext that create a sense of humor and elevated thought throughout the work. As Esslin also observes this verbal wordplay is not just mere nonsense on a page, “The literature of verbal nonsense expresses more than mere playfulness. In trying to burst the balance of logic and language, it batters at the enclosing walls of the human condition itself” (Esslin 341). Thus, Theater of the Absurd is reflecting the human condition through this use of wordplay which elevates the audience to a place of real critical thinking that is unlike most other forms of entertainment today and therefore more interesting. Verbal nonsense is not the only defining characteristic of Theater of the Absurd. Esslin attempted to list some of the definitive elements that characterize the Absurd genre including: pure theater, clowning, verbal nonsense, the literature of dream or fantasy, and nonlinear plot structures; here I shall be discussing the dreamline, nonlinear plot structure, and pure theater.

Theater of the Absurd is the illusion of reality, of the subconscious, of dreams, “...In the Theater of the Absurd, and, indeed, as in the vast world of the human subconscious, poetry and cruelty, spontaneous tenderness and destructiveness, are closely linked” (Esslin 343). The “human subconscious” as Esslin states is “closely linked” to the Theater of the Absurd. What links them together is the non-linear plot structures audiences recognize from the subconscious of their dreams. For example, August Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* is a precursor to Theater of the Absurd. Characters in this

play are suspended in a nonlinear time structure that jumps around through time and space just like a dream. *A Dream Play* has many elements that made it hard for the original author, August Strindberg, to produce on the stage. However, Barbra Lipman-Wulf describes elements of *A Dream Play* that made its unique timeline stand out and become a hallmark for how dreams have influenced the Absurd. Lipman-Wulf describes the unique structure of *A Dream Play*, “The overall structure of traditional Western plays is not found in *A Dream Play*. There is only a semblance of an outer shell that contains interacting and changing images to reproduce... The disunited - although apparently logical-form of dreams” (Lipman-Wulf 319). Lipman-Wulf directly correlates the structure of this show to that of dreams, saying that it follows the same form. Much like dreams, the main character Agnes jumps through time in a nonlinear way, “Agnes visited 10 different places. But it is misleading because it does not indicate the return to places she had visited earlier... so that her paths actually crossed, and thus, her route could not have been circular” (Lipman-Wulf 320). The fact that “her route could not have been circular” shows how closely *A Dream Play* mirrors the structure of an actual dream. This proves Esslin’s earlier point that Theater of the Absurd mirrors the subconscious, making it accessible to us, is one of the great feats of the Absurd genre. Accessibility to our human condition is key to understanding our lives and the reality we live in. When we dream, time is nonlinear; there is no real episodic structure, there are only pure subconscious thoughts. In this way, our dreams reveal our inner reality and our innermost demons. As Ernest Sosa says, dreams do often reflect our daily lives which are one of the aims of Theater of the Absurd, “If while dreaming we have real beliefs based on real phenomenal experiences, then a normal perceptual judgment could always be matched by

a subjectivity similar, similarly based judgment, made while one dreams” (Sosa). When dreaming we have our “real beliefs” based on “phenomenal experiences” that mirror how we perceive the world in our waking life. To dream is to have a free-flowing stream of consciousness that represents our reality through this dreamlike structure. Theater of the Absurd attempts to do the same thing: “Theater of the Absurd is the use of mythical, allegorical, and dream-like modes of thought- the projection into concrete terms of psychological realities” (Esslin 349). By using this dream-like structure the Absurd mirrors our reality in a unique and interesting way. This structure allows the audience to relate to the Absurd on a deeper level, connecting to the themes of the human subconscious. It is in the discovery and analysis of dreams that we interpret life itself. Analyzing our dreams makes us contemplate our true reality unfiltered, and we are left with only truth.

Dreams are in a sense the human condition mirrored back to us through our subconscious; “It is the desire to represent reality, all of reality, that at first leads to the ruthlessly truthful description of services, and then on to the realization that objective reality, surfaces, are only part, and a relatively unimportant part, of the real world (Esslin 353). In other words, this unfiltered depiction of our reality is in a sense more truthful perhaps than the reality that we do live in. It is in this analysis of our ‘objective reality’ that we realize it may not be as *real* as in our dreams. This is because in our dreams our true feelings are displayed, our truth is found out. Whereas in our ‘objective reality’, people filter what it is they think to please society’s norms. Theater of the Absurd aims to capture this ‘ruthless truth’ of the dream world that beautifully reflects the human condition in a more *real* way than perhaps reality itself. It is this evolutionary thought

process about our dreams within the Absurdist genre that helps us to better understand our lives and the world around us.

This type of Absurd, avant-garde theater can unsettle an audience. Holding up a mirror to reality, distorting it, and shining it back can be a jarring experience for an audience to endure. As Esslin explains, “The public's expectation as to what constitutes theater proper that attempts to widen its range meets with angry protests from those who have come to see a certain closely defined kind of entertainment and who lack the spontaneity of mind to let a slightly different approach make its impact on them” (Esslin, 328). When Esslin describes the public's expectations of ‘theater proper’ he is talking about the episodic structure people are accustomed to seeing in Realism and Naturalism. However, the idea of familiarity is not completely omitted in Theater of the Absurd. Pure Theater, another element of the Absurd defined by Esslin, uses “abstract scenic effects as they are familiar in the circus or revue” (Esslin, 328). This genre includes things that are familiar to an audience and can ground them in the world of the play. The world of the play, represented through scenic design, is symbolic in its real-world connections and an audience can understand what the scenic elements represent. All aspects of the Theater of the Absurd come from somewhere; they are grounded in reality so there has to be an element of recognition for it to represent reality. Being able to recognize symbols and images that are grounded in reality is key to the comprehensiveness of the Absurd; it is also what makes us think. I personally love theater that makes people think.

I have become very connected to Theater of the Absurd over the last decade of my life. I first encountered Theater of the Absurd at a theater camp when I was in the eighth grade; every year our wonderful director would pull something random and

hilariously funny for our Advanced One-act play. This particular year the director selected *Cafe Le Monde* by Charles Mee, a play in the genre Theater of the absurd. *Cafe Le Monde* is about human connection and relationships through wild music and dance numbers as well as emulation of other literary works. Taking place in an existentialist french cafe, *Cafe Le Monde* aims to portray a truer version of reality through dance, movement, and exploration. When I was younger, the exercises of exploration that we did to prepare for this show came more naturally to me. The idea that we could “play” was a fun journey backward into childhood memories, discovering old things as if they were new for the first time. There was a certain humor, I found, to dancing about and circling dialogues that in my eighth-grade mind didn’t have a purpose other than to have fun. It made this show accessible to me even as a child. Upon growing older, I remembered the childlike fun I had once had with the show when I was asked to direct for the Spring Plays at my high school. The Spring Plays was a showcase for which the Advanced Acting and Directing class provided directors. *Cafe Le Monde* gave me a clear avenue into the more serious theater I wanted to pursue in college whilst still encapsulating the fun I had with this show when I was younger. Now upon re-examination in High School, I found new feelings and interpretations that I hadn’t discovered before. However, I didn’t yet have the educational knowledge to fully appreciate the show to its full extent with the scholarly references it makes to other works of literature. In researching for this thesis I have come full circle in a journey that started in eighth grade, continued through high school, and is now culminating the ending of my time in college. Now, understanding the literary references I have come to understand the detailed scholarly analysis of *Cafe le Monde* and it remains my all-time favorite play. Because of the

journey I have experienced with this show, I can concretely say that Theater of the Absurd is accessible to all ages.

High school was a time of exploration into many aspects of my life, and through that, I found many more aspects I loved about Theater of the Absurd. When I directed *Almost Maine* by John Cariani, my heart was jump-started by the abstract way Cariani connects us to the literal meanings of abstract themes such as love and pain that almost come to life throughout the play. When I directed a section from *Almost Maine* called “Story of Hope,” I got lost as a director playing to the serious nature of the story. This section was about a young woman who after many years came back to the small town she had grown up in, expecting to find her former lover in the same house he had always lived in. However, once she arrived a stranger opened the door instead of the man she had once loved. Through the course of the dialogue, however, she comes to find that this indeed the man she had once loved only he has changed over the time that they had spent apart. She *physically* didn’t recognize him because of the *emotional* change. This is a uniquely Absurd idea, that a person physically wouldn’t recognize someone because they are emotional strangers after spending so much time apart. I think the mistake I made in my directing when I got stuck in the “seriousness” of the scene’s subject matter was to not let the heavy themes outweigh the language. When I directed it I did not find any of the text all that humorous. However, when I put it in front of an audience of my fellow peers they were laughing hysterically. I don’t think either I or my actors were quite prepared for that. Being stuck in the serious nature of the scene I made the mistake of taking the form more seriously than the text. I hadn’t stopped to see the lighthearted and sometimes humorous dialogue. I suppose that is what makes comedy funny, when an

actor has committed so thoroughly to the seriousness of the scene that then it becomes comical in how serious it is. At first, I was shocked that something I had thought was so serious my peers were all laughing at it. I was quite offended. However, I began to laugh with them because for the first time, in the final performance, I was seeing the humor in the scene. The audience was laughing at the way the two characters didn't recognize each other, at the dialogue between them, at the confusion. The fact that both the audience and I could have such different interpretations of the same scene is what I think is so special about Theater of the Absurd. Everyone can interpret it differently, and tragedy and comedy are so close that they can often interact as one.

Furthermore, when I was a sophomore in a modern drama class at Salem State University taught by my thesis advisor, Professor Jaros, we were introduced to another staple of Absurdist Theater, *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Immediately the witty humor, along with the fast pace, intrigued my dramatic senses. Upon having revisited it in Twentieth-Century British Drama this year, I have grown so fond of this show and consider it a hallmark for the Absurd genre as a whole. *Waiting for Godot*, while an Absurdist work, differs from the American works discussed above. However, I believe these different works show the difference between American Absurdism and European Absurdism as well as the importance of the Absurdist genre as a whole to theater around the world. In studying these works, I realized it was the genre that I had grown to have such an appreciation for. Both American and European works show the genre's relatability and to that aim, I felt I needed to explore both in my thesis.

In introducing the American play *Cafe Le Monde*, my summer camp director advised the theatergoers to just appreciate the language and to "let it hit you how it hits

you.” In other words, there was no need for hardcore analysis and erudition, one could just take this show in and enjoy it. In my opinion, contemporary audiences sometimes don’t have the attention span to think critically about a piece of theater. They most often want spectacle, something they can get in movies with eye-catching special effects or at the press of a button. However, what makes theater so special is the reflection of the human condition so close, live, across from you sitting in the audience and allowing it to hit you. For the educational purposes of a show, of course, we need dramaturgs and dramatists who do understand the nuances culturally and connections to literature. However, anyone can enjoy absurdist theater because the works are universal and understandable not just on the academic level. Whether an eighth-grader just playing and having fun or a professional dramaturg assessing out all the scholastic references, anyone can find Theater of the Absurd enjoyable and comprehensible.

In theater classes during my time here at Salem State University, there is typically a dreaded groan that goes up throughout the room, amongst my peers, whenever an Absurdist show is introduced by a professor. I think the reason for this hesitation is that yes it is rather complicated to understand and takes quite a bit more effort to analyze dramatically than a realistic play in which regular plot structures are in place. I understand that it is more difficult to pay attention and in the era of social media and the absence of self-control on nearly everything in this world, this could present a problem for Theater of the Absurd. Larry B. Rosen, a professor of Psychology at California State University wrote an article entitled, “*The Distracted Student Mind-Enhancing its Focus and Attention*”, in an attempt to understand and educate the public on the facts behind what social media has done to students of various grade levels in relation to their study

and attention habits. Rosen opened the article in bold by saying, “Due to the constant temptation to check their smartphones, today's students are spending less time focused on their school work, taking longer to complete assignments, and feeling more stressed out in the process” (Rosen). In today's society, the era of social media has taken precedence and forced the youth of today to be extremely unfocused and highly distractible. The constant usage of smartphones and social media subsequently has led students to be so distracted when having to think critically about the assignments they simply take a break and check their phone. Rosen continued with facts that directly correlated to the college experience, “Typically, college students unlock their phones 50 times a day, using them for close to four and a half hours out of every 24-hour cycle. Put another way, they check their phones every 15 minutes - all day long (and sometimes all night) - and they look at them for about 5 minutes each time” (Rosen). Due to the high volume of college students and young adults checking their phones, their attention spans have significantly decreased so that they can't even go on average fifteen minutes without checking their phones. As one could imagine, this would mean trouble for Theater of the Absurd, a genre that requires the utmost attention and focus to critically think about. There is a big difference between analysis in a class and enjoyment on a stage.

However, I think that Theater of the Absurd can break through these initial roadblocks if audiences take the time to enjoy the shows, not just to think critically about it. The Absurd deserves to be enjoyed, not just overanalyzed. Theater of the Absurd, and theater in general, will always have something that cinema, television, and the mass media does not... live actors. Artists learn what works and what doesn't in entertainment from the stage. This idea that the theater influences the mainstream media got me

thinking about my friends and the people I know. What do they think of Absurdist theater?

It is for that reason that I decided to take a poll to see how students and young people around my age were feeling about this subject. I conducted a poll on Instagram of my 1,500 followers, mostly theater students from various walks of my life including Salem State. I asked if people thought that absurdist theater was harder to connect with than Naturalism and Realism, genres where regular plot structures are prevalent. Overwhelmingly my hypothesis was confirmed. I believed that we as people have become so distracted in our daily lives that even the thought of having to do extra brain-stimulating activity would make something “hard to connect to.” I was right. The results were 80% of the people polled said yes that Absurdist Theater was harder to connect to than Naturalism and Realism (Poll). 20% of the People polled said that the level of connectivity was the same (Poll). Real students my age feel this way! Has critical thinking become outdated? Do we not have the capability anymore to want to connect with something on a deeper level? Are we destined to push buttons for the rest of our life, never having to think again! In order to not let this age of social media and short attention spans overtake the critical thinking and importance of erudition my solution lies in keeping Absurdist Theater alive! Forcing audiences, even the most unexpected kinds, along with students in various theater curriculums to continue to experience absurdism even if it's not their favorite genre. By forcing audiences, especially in this Covid-19 pandemic to witness the revamping of shows that are easily done with two or four characters, we can create live theater again! The theater is so much more important to our society to keep alive than the tradition of spectacle. Theater of the Absurd allows people

to experience elevated thinking patterns in a way that other genres of entertainment simply cannot.

The path for such engagement was already laid out half a century or more ago in one of the most interesting plays *Waiting For Godot* By Samuel Beckett. In Esslin's book, a production of *Waiting For Godot* was mentioned that was put on at the San Quentin Penitentiary in California. On November 19th, 1957 a production of *Waiting For Godot* was showcased there for the prisoners' enjoyment (Esslin 19). The Prison's paper wrote a column about the show and was quoted saying,

The trio of Musselmen, biceps overflowing... parked all 642 lbs on the aisle and waited for the girls and funny stuff. When this didn't appear they audibly fumed and audibly decided to wait until the house lights dimmed before escaping. They made one error. They listened and looked two minutes too long and stayed. Left at the end. All shook... (Esslin 19)

The imagery of all these prison men sitting for a "show" expecting to see "girls and funny stuff", and it ends up being *Waiting for Godot* is not only humorous but it speaks to the unlikely audiences Theater of the Absurd can relate to. As Esslin continues, "A teacher at the prison was quoted saying, 'They know what is meant by waiting... and they knew if Godot finally came, he would only be a disappointment'" (Esslin 20). The whole premise of *Waiting for Godot* is that of a show in which two men wait endlessly for the entire production for a character named Godot to show up in the wasteland of nothingness where they live and he never comes. This was a situation to which prisoners could most definitely relate, according to their teacher. The Absurdist genre strips us of all distractions and allows us to be confronted with the absurdity of the universe. Once away

from our habits of distraction, like the prisoners looking for “girls and funny stuff,” they are forced to face and honestly confront the abstraction of the universe as a whole and reflect inwards. One must wonder, why did this old European Absurdist show resonate so much with these prisoners? Esslin attempts to speculate,

Why did the play of the supposedly esoteric Avant-garde make so immediate and so deep an impact on an audience of convicts? Because it confronted them with a situation in some ways analogous to their own? Perhaps. Or perhaps because they were unsophisticated enough to come to the theater without any preconceived notions and ready-made expectations, so that they avoided the mistake that trapped so many established critics who condemn the play for its lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense. (Esslin 21)

Yes, the premise of *Waiting for Godot* was similar to that of these prisoners, but it was what they expected caught my eye. They expected to see a show about girls! They wanted to be distracted from the pain of their lives and instead, they were confronted by it within the premise of the show. Better yet, they were able to on an existential level critically think about what it meant! To Esslin’s point, we as a society view convicts on the lowest tier, and somehow they also got so much out of this show along with all the highly educated critics of theater. Perhaps it was because they were unfamiliar, as Esslin points out, with the structure of a normal theatrical show that was notably missing from *Waiting For Godot*, as with all absurdist shows, and didn’t know that a show is *supposed* to have episodic elements such as, plot, development, characterization, etc. Perhaps that is why they had no expectations of it being a certain way structurally and then, therefore,

no disappointment that it was not as expected, “The reception of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin, and the wide acclaim given to plays by Ionesco, Adamov, Pinter, and others, testify that these plays,[Absurdist shows], which are so often superciliously dismissed as nonsense or mystification, *have* something to say and *can* be understood” (Esslin 21). Therefore, the prisoner’s understanding of a show as theatrically complex as *Waiting for Godot* proves that Theater of the Absurd can be understood by everyone because even people who have not had access to advanced educational opportunities were capable of enjoying something so complex, proving that our human capacity for elevated thinking has not yet gone past the point of no return! *Waiting for Godot* proves that contemporary audiences haven’t lost the talent for interpreting the Absurd, it is still relevant to our reality and deserves a place at the table with the rest of the entertainment industry today!

Some of why Absurdist theater has been portrayed as hard to understand stems from theater critics trying to compare Naturalism and Realism to that of the absurdist genre,

Most of the incomprehension with which plays of this type are still being received by critics and Theatrical reviewers, most of the bewilderment they have caused and to which they still give rise, come from the fact that they are part of a new and still developing stage convention that has not yet been generally understood and has hardly ever been defined. Inevitably, plays written in this new convention will, when judged by the standards and criteria of another, be regarded as impertinent and outrageous imposters (Esslin)

To Esslin's point that critics trying to judge and therefore critique plays of the Absurdist genre cause some of the confusion because the genre is still developing and as Esslin says, "has hardly ever been defined." This was true when Esslin wrote this book in the 1960s and is still ever-evolving today. The "theatrical reviewers" Esslin mentions are feeding this confusion by judging plays based on the elements that Naturalism and Realism portray and the genres are incomparable, and therein lies the confusion,

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by the subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. (Esslin 22)

It is this discussion of what makes a "good play" that constitutes the basis of what these critics are critiquing. If their basis of judgment is determined by what Realism and Naturalism portray then of course Theater of the Absurd would seem like an "imposter" in that circumstance. Realism and Naturalism have been perceived in the theater to *be* reality, however, that is only one way of perceiving it. Absurdism offers a different structure into the perception of what true reality looks like. One cannot compare genres that have completely different structures, as Esslin points out in the grocery list of

comparisons above. Some elements that Naturalism and Realism have are utterly the opposite or not even in the same category as elements of Theater of the Absurd and for that reason should not be critiqued on the same scale.

Esslin began his book, *The Theater of the Absurd*, by mentioning a well-known British fairytale, *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Esslin believed that *Alice in Wonderland* was absurdist, and presented many elements that can help one to understand Absurdist Theater. In doing more research on the subject, I came across an article by George Hubbell. Hubbell aims to understand the reason behind some of the Absurdist elements of *Alice in Wonderland*,

...We are not mad. We have saved ourselves from any such calamity by a definition; by defining madness relatively... No evasive rationalizing can never save society from that manifest conviction of wide-open absurdity. (Hubbell 387)

Hubbell points out that by 'defining madness relatively' we can't avoid the ridiculous nature of our society and its Absurd elements. There are elements of society that are reflected in *Alice in Wonderland* that are shown as Absurd to call attention to how outrageous they are in our reality. Hubbell continues that in *Wonderland* "We learn to run frantically without any hope of getting anywhere" (Hubbell 387). This is a theme we see later on in *Waiting for Godot* when the characters continue day after day waiting for Godot to come and being uncertain whether he will show or not. Another consistent theme in *Alice in Wonderland* is the theme of nonsense, "Any child who had the wisdom to ask for nonsense in their tale - in other words, who held the fast to a critical view of life - demands and is worthy of the world's greatest storyteller" (Hubbell 391). In other words, children with imagination will not think twice about the nonsense in *Alice in*

Wonderland and accept it as fact in their reality simply because the story says that it is true. This is not unlike my own childhood experience with *Cafe Le Monde* where I just accepted every radical nonsense scene as circling dialogue on a roadmap of eighth-grade fun.

One of the most influential absurdist plays, *Waiting For Godot*, by Samuel Beckett made a long-lasting impact on how we view the Absurdist genre as a whole. I have always loved *Waiting For Godot*, its witty humor and fast pace caught my attention early on. I have developed a deeper appreciation not only for the play but for the genre throughout my life. I was most interested in understanding the American interpretation for comparison purposes. To do that I had to understand the American interpretation of the European show. The first American director of the show, Alan Schneider, asked Beckett's for his input when producing the show overseas in America,

When Alan Schneider, who was to direct the first American production of *Waiting for Godot*, asked Beckett who or what was meant by to do, he received the answer, 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play' this is a salutary warning to anyone who approaches Beckett's plays intending to discover *the* key to their understanding, of demonstrating inexact and definite terms what they mean.... *what* is said in its indissolubly linked with the *manner* in which it is said, and cannot be said in any other way. (Esslin 44)

In other words, the aim of *Waiting for Godot* is not to find out who Godot is, although clearly, this American director was asking just that. If you try to understand and analyze some of the key aspects of the play then you as the audience, are then missing the point. Godot is about 'what is said in the play, it is about the waiting, it is about the 'manner' in

which the dialogue is said. That syntax is what determines the meaning. Upon further analysis, Stephani Smith commented about this quote of Beckett's,

He was being both coy and honest. Godot is an unknown factor, a posited solution which is never either realized or excluded from the domain of possibility. In the experience of man, something is always missing, be it the god needed to give meaning to existence, the knowledge needed to conclude, or the ending which would complete, rather than simply continue to renew the cycles of time. (Smith 892)

In my opinion, Smith is right. *Waiting for Godot* is about a continuation of existence that we are “always missing,” the something needed to give meaning to our existence. As a result, we are bound to go round and round in circles searching for that meaning until the conclusion of our lives. It seems to me that it is only at the very end of our lives that we can determine the meaning of our existence. Since our life is bound to be a constant waiting for any sort of resolution, once we finally know we are dying we can weigh our lives and give meaning to them based on what we have accomplished. However, to be alive is to continue “renewing the cycles of time and continue the everlasting circle of existence. This circle of time is shown by the non-linear plotlines that Samuel Beckett is exceptionally good at. In Beckett's existential writing, like *Waiting For Godot*, he proves these nonlinear plot lines to be a staple of not only his writing but the absurdist genre as a whole,

Beckett's plays lack plot even more completely than other works of Theater of the Absurd. Instead of linear development, they present their author's intuition of the human condition by method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront their

audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpret each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony, which gain meaning by their simultaneous interaction.

(Esslin 46)

The comparison of these nonlinear plot lines to that of a symphony of various instruments that all “interact simultaneously” for them to be “apprehended in their totality” really speaks to the way music plays such a big role in Absurdism. Beckett is also well known for this element of Absurdism, he is exceptionally good at producing his shows to have a distinct rhythm and pacing. Specifically, in *Waiting for Godot*, he does this by making the dialogue between the two main characters trip over each other as they finish each other’s sentences. This is the music that is associated with the language that can often be heard in Beckett’s home country of Ireland. Another notable element of Beckett is that he deprives all his works of any element of spectacle. This element of spectacle seems like it is all modern audiences want in the entertainment industry today. This is why the absence of spectacle in this show stands out, “[*Waiting for Godot*] appears to be intentionally deprived of any element of spectacle” (Josbin 204). This deprivation of something so commonplace in the entertainment world today is what makes the play so unique and interesting to see something stripped back, like when an artist we are used to hearing autotune suddenly picks up a guitar and sings acoustically. We are drawn into this stripped-back version of reality and reminded of its importance in our lives.

However, this stripped-back version is not so simple as just an artist with a guitar. Like Schneider, it is normal to question *Waiting For Godot*. It is understandable why an audience would try to explain it and comprehend it. This desperate need for

comprehension much like our need to explain our existence is futile. There is a fallacy within our desire to explore these explanations of the show, “The source of this fallacy lies in the misconception that somehow these plays must be reducible to the conventions of the ‘normal theater’ with plots that can be summarized in the form of a narrative” (Esslin 45). The Absurdist genre cannot be simplified to that of the ‘normal’ plot structure and analysis that comes with almost all other genres of storytelling. There is a human need to *understand* a play, and that need stems from us trying to *understand* life itself. However, if life itself cannot be understood then how could a genre of theater about life ever be fully understood? Life is to be enjoyed, much like Absurdist theater, and there is no need to understand the reasoning behind an author’s plot structure to enjoy what the play has to say overall. Herein lies the fallacy of our desperate attempt at comprehending the genre on the scale of ‘normal theater’ plot structure. However, that is not to say that the Absurd has no structure. There is a structure to the Absurd that can be quantified and understood on the more abstract level of images and themes,

To avoid the pitfall of trying to provide an oversimplified explanation of their meaning, this does not imply we cannot subject them to careful scrutiny by isolating sets and images and themes and by attempting to discern their structural groundwork. (Esslin 46)

Theater of the Absurd’s structure is to quantify major themes and images that relate to overall messages and relate them in a creative symbolic way for the audience. As with *Waiting For Godot* the rope they attempt to hang themselves with is not long enough, representing the eternal struggle for happiness in life and the struggle of existence. This is an attempt to understand the ‘structural groundwork’ of the show and how that relates to

the human condition and by extension, life itself. However, that is where the analysis ends. Concerning *Waiting for Godot*, attempting to analyze the show in any other way than the major themes and images that relate directly in the text to the ‘structural groundwork’ would be a disservice to the genre as a whole. Critically it is hard to not make assumptions about some of the themes in *Waiting For Godot*,

The critic will be greatly tempted to offer a clear explanation of the meaning of such a performance. But there is a double danger waiting for him. The first would be to minimize the possible spiritual extension of the action which, it seems clear, gives this play its real direction and its dimension. (Jobsin 205)

Again, the “spiritual extension of the action,” as Raoul Josbin puts it, relates to the way *Waiting for Godot* reflects life itself and the immeasurable question of what gives our lives purpose. Another warning Josbin gives us is to not attribute the meaning of the author in this play to have any reflection on religion or atheism because that would be too far an analysis and if Beckett meant to bring that aspect into the play as he says, he would have “said so,” “It would be an even greater mistake to harden and systematize the symbolism of the story. It would be ridiculous to try to lend to the author any intention of taking a position in regard to faith or atheism, and to construct the justification or trial of one or the other” (Jobsin 205). To try and relate, as some critics do, the similarities between Godot and God would be to disvalue the overall message of the play. Beckett made no attempt *in* the text of the play to try and relate the two so it is then one’s reevaluation of what *they* think the play means to go off on that tangent. What is so important about the Theater of the Absurd is that one works with the actual text and doesn’t try to derive your meanings from it. Everything one needs to understand the

Absurd is on the pages of the dialogue itself. However, that is not to say that one is not allowed to have questions, as there are many in *Waiting for Godot*, some questions

Jonathan Kalb had about the play are as follows,

One's thoughts quickly finish with local questions - who is Godot and why doesn't he arrive? Why do Didi and GoGo stay together and keep returning? - moving presently, almost automatically, on to more comprehensive ones: for whom is any performance given and what expectations? Why am I in the theater, and what am I waiting for? (Kalb 35)

Having questions is okay, as long as one doesn't try to derive the meaning of textual context from outside the world of the play as many critics often do with the correlation between Godot and God. Questions like that of Jonathan Kalb are important to the overall message of *Waiting for Godot*, and what makes the Absurdist genre a genre of critical thinking and constantly puts an audience on the edge of their seat as they look at the commentary of their reality.

Beckett was asked about the theme of Godot all the time, and as we know from his earlier quote, he seldom gave answers,

When Beckett is asked about the theme of waiting for Godot, he sometimes refers to a passage in the writings of St. Augustine: 'There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine.'... 'Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned'. And Beckett sometimes adds 'I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them... That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters' (Esslin 53)

The fact that Beckett is so interested in the sentences ‘shape’ really depicts who he is as a writer, and what is most important to him. The shape of ideas is what matters to Beckett and the message is less important than the way the message was delivered because therein lies the art of the Absurd, the language. This is the idea Suzan Lori Parks spearheads about shape and form. Her ideas relate so closely to Beckett’s analysis of shape. Parks’ main idea is that the shape should not determine the form a narrative is written in, the narrative should determine the shape (Parks). Parks and Beckett are on the same page about the shape being the most important part of a narrative. Furthermore, this quote from St. Augustine must have been extremely important in Beckett’s life because it is also prevalent in *Waiting for Godot*, after all, it is brought up several times, “The theme of the two thieves on the cross, the theme of the uncertainty of the hope of salvation and the fortuitousness of the bestowal of grace, does indeed pervade the whole play” (Esslin 53). As Esslin notes, these themes “pervade the whole play” in *Waiting For Godot*. Thus, making it the themes that are quantifiable structures we as an audience can latch onto, even if the rest of the play is alien one can see the overarching themes and interpret them depicted by the structure of the Absurd. This theme of salvation was the most prevalent in *Waiting For Godot*, as it finds itself even on the first pages, setting the stage for the rest of the play,

As the play opens Vladimir introduces the theme of the arbitrary choice of the gods and refers to the event which prompted that remark of Saint Augustine. Vladimir wonders why the version that one of the theories of the crucifixion was saved, and the other damned, is the accepted version when the gospels are not in agreement. Although he does not answer his question, the reader may surmise that

this version is the accepted one because it reflects the conception which man has of his existence and which he offered project into his divine miss. Out of two, one is saved at the last minute, so both are guilty sinners. One can be saved or damned until the last moment before death, on either the right hand or the left of a dozen Gods, among the sheep or among the goats, with no way of being certain in advance. (Smith 890)

The character of Vladimir questioning right from the beginning, this theory of why one of the thieves of the crucifixion is saved and one is damned directly correlates to Beckett's mentioning of the St. Augustine quote. Thus, proving that Beckett only reveals that which can be correlated to his work already, things he has mentioned in his life that relate to his work. This question of salvation and the damned continues throughout *Waiting for Godot* when the characters question when Godot will arrive and if he will save them from their miserable life? Furthermore, they question if they are damned and will they continue living, waiting, forever. This theme of salvation carries throughout the whole play in many more instances,

St. Augustine warns the Christian that he must neither presume that he is saved, lest he fall by the sin of pride nor assumes that he is damned, lest he sin by doubting the efficacy of grace and lose his means of Salvation. The Christian's dilemma is to be caught between the true prohibitions with no clear path of conduct between them. To turn away from one it's a turn towards the other.

(Smith 889)

This idea that no matter what we do in life we are at the mercy of two negatives relates directly to *Waiting for Godot*, specifically the line "To turn away from one it's a turn

towards the other” the two main characters are constantly repeating things they have already done before and seemingly going in a circle waiting for Godot to arrive. The idea that no matter where they turn they are both turning toward and away from the meaning of life and their salvation is key to the plot of this play. It is the hope of their salvation that *keeps* them waiting and *keeps* them circling in this way because to stop would be to accept that they have been damned much like the thieves of Saint Augustine. This is of extreme importance to Beckett as a playwright and the question of uncertainty furthers the literal waiting for Godot, “For Beckett, the question of salvation is only the most evident sign of the dilemma of uncertainty which is the lot of man” (Smith 889). This “dilemma of the uncertainty” of what will happen when we die? Will we like the one thief be saved? or like the other be damned? These are the questions that plague *Waiting For Godot*, and the questions that make this show so connectable to how we as humans wonder about our lives. These essential human moments are what make Godot mirror our reality and question our existence, and therefore will forever be approachable to the general public.

There are so many questions about Godot himself that it is important to give some background. In this play, the main characters are waiting on another character named Godot. This character is the person on whom the play is centered. Once Godot arrives, he will tell the poor lost souls what to do with their lives for their lives to have meaning. Only there is one problem with that plan, they don't know when or if Godot will ever arrive, “Godot may or may not come. If he comes, he may grant their prayer or he may not. He may bring good or evil. What it is thought that he is approaching, one of the tramps' fears, and the other is eager to meet him, both for no apparent reason” (Smith

891). Little is known about this supposed savior yet they have the utmost faith in him that he will do something when he arrives. The characters have all the faith in the world that he will come at all even though they've heard no news that he was coming, but they also hadn't heard he wasn't. Herein lies the paradox, "The information given about Godot presents him as cruel, arbitrary, and possibly kind, at least it's something, but all of the information comes from secondary sources" (Smith 894). Because all of the information about the character comes from "secondary sources" it is up to the audience to determine what to believe about who or what Godot is, and if or when he will come. Who is Godot? What is his purpose? These questions are the ones that make us curious and want to know more about the play, "Yet whether Godot is meant to suggest the intervention of a supernatural agency, or whether he stands for a mythical human being whose arrival is expected to change the situation or both of these possibilities combined, his exact nature is of secondary importance" (Esslin 50). The point of Godot is that he is "expected to change the situation" for both characters onstage. Who or what he is is of little importance to the theme of what he stands for. There is a meaning for existence, after all, their suffering will come to an end once he arrives. This idea of thematic reflection of humanity is what makes this show so relatable, we are all in a sense hoping for our own Godot to come save us from our respective realities and end our cycles of suffering.

Another powerful theme in *Waiting for Godot* is of course the waiting. We all can relate to waiting for something, if not as existential as waiting to understand the meaning of existence, we can understand waiting for the bus, for dinner at a restaurant, or for someone to love us back. It is the human condition to wait, therefore it is relatable to

everyone. This is something the Absurd does so well, quantify something everyone human can relate to and portray it on a stage,

The tramps endure the painful weight even though it is never clear what Godot will do if he arrives... Most important, his arrival would end the interminable progression of time that the tramps are trying desperately to fill. If he came or gave certain evidence that he would not come, they could then do something besides wait for him. (Smith 892)

The fact that Smith mentions, “If he came...they could do something besides wait for him” is the whole premise of the play. Without this uncertainty there would be no action, no structure to this work... in a sense, we wouldn’t have a play. It is that premise that the Absurd plays with, this routine that they have to no matter what a. Stay together and b. Continue to wait until he gets there is key to the dramatic action of this play. Waiting is a theme anyone can relate to and it is a part of the human condition as a whole, “The routine of waiting for Godot stands for habit, which prevents us from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being” (Esslin 59). To wait is to be in denial, another human condition, of what the true suffering of our existence is. To question Godot is to be alive. Two very important things to understanding our reality as a whole and both major themes in this play.

Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* is another influential work of Theater of the Absurd and important to understanding reality and the human condition especially that of the suffering Beckett begins to explore in his earlier work *Waiting for Godot*. In both shows, Beckett makes clear his views on humanity and the patterns that emerge within that structure, “In *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett is concerned with probing down

to a depth in which individuality and definite events no longer appear, only basic patterns emerge” (Esslin 76). This idea of “probing” into what humanity is really about is clear in both shows, discovering the ‘patterns’ of reality is the most important message Beckett could portray with his work. *Endgame* is a play in which two characters, much like *Waiting for Godot*, are intrinsically connected. The difference between the two is that Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* much earlier in his life and *Endgame* much later, which some critics attribute to *Endgame* being darker. *Endgame* centers around two main characters, Hamm and Clov, one master and one servant, one blind and one who can see. These two live together in a space where Clov brings things and waits on Hamm, who sits center stage in a wheelchair for the entire play, blind. Notable staging elements Beckett includes in this play are intrinsically Absurd. For example, the show begins in a tableau, “The tableau begins with Hamm covered by an old sheet; at the end, he places near his face the handkerchief, his last possession” (Adorno 131). This sheet that is covering Hamm represents his blindness. Furthermore, in the end, the handkerchief being his last possession after Clov has left him reminds us of the earlier sheet. This symbol that carries from beginning to end about the loneliness and blindness Hamm endures is a characteristic of the Absurd.

Another characteristic of *Endgame* that demonstrates how our society functions today is between the characters Nag and Nell. Both Nag and Nell are older people who live in the trash cans outside of Hamm and Clov’s house. Today, as a society we often throw away our old, metaphorically (Adorno 142). Whether it is to nursing homes or hiring in-home care, we as a society make them someone else’s problem. Nag and Nell were not in these trash cans by accident, “*Endgame* trains the viewer for a condition

where everyone involved expects - upon lifting the lid from the nearest dumpster - to find his own parents” (Adorno 143). Beckett deliberately forces us to look at the way our society treats older people without passing judgment, he just simply showcases the truth. That is what is so important and relevant about Beckett, “Beckett suppresses the delicate elements no less than the brutal ones. The vanity of the individual who indicts society, while his rights themselves merge in the accumulation of the injustice of all individuals...” (Adorno 126). The “injustice of all individuals” can be shown through the depiction of Nag and Nell literally in trash cans to symbolize how society treats the elderly. The fact that Beckett chooses to not only showcase the ‘delicate’ but also the ‘brutal’ elements of society is what makes his work not only so compelling but also relatable.

Many dramatists attribute *Endgame* to being a reflection of the state of the world after World War II. Theodore Adorno is no exception that, Adorno discussed the relevance of the Second World War, “After the Second World War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one’s own battered state” (Adorno 122). *Endgame* often teeters along that edge, the notion that there is nothing outside the walls of Hamm and Clov’s house is often surmised, there is a strong premise that only danger will await them if they were to go outside. But *Endgame* is not just about World War II, it is about so much more substantial a theme than that, “[*Endgame* is] not about life after nuclear holocaust, which neither Beckett nor anyone else could depict; it is about *our* lives, which are lived under the threat of disaster, nuclear or otherwise” (Kalb 81).

Endgame is about the end of all times, not just the post-apocalyptic World War II era because there is no specific time and place mentioned, it *can* be about all time. *Endgame* depicts what it is like as a society to worry about a disaster, to be locked metaphorically inside worrying about what chaos lies beyond the walls of one's safe space. Something everyone can relate to throughout quarantine in this pandemic. Adorno wasn't the only critic to notice this pattern; Esslin also commented on society's apprehensiveness,

In *Endgame* we are also certainly confronted with a very powerful expression of the sense of deadness, of leaden heaviness and hopelessness, that is experienced in states of deep depression: the world outside goes dead for the victim of such states, but inside his mind, there is ceaseless argument between parts of his personality that have become autonomous entities. (Esslin 70)

This sense of 'deadness' relates to how our society functioned after the second World War when there was a sense of chaos in Britain. *Endgame* depicts the way society felt, shut-in, cut off, and in shambles, in a sense locked in their own houses as they had been for much of the war for fear of air raids. This caused a lot of fear and depression around the world, and I think *Endgame* aims to capture that feeling. *Endgame* brings about the emptiness one feels in existence that humans will keep on existing through the endless cycles of time and the cycle of time will never end,

In Beckett's *Endgame*, in particular, the crucial issue is not the absence of hope... but *absence* as such. From absence itself, neither suicide nor death results, but rather the awareness of the end - and end that does not end. The stalemate of *Endgames* characters concerns the entire universe of the world ... (Oppo 311)

This awareness of the end, the 'end that does not end' represents how society functions through time, through life and death time does not end. Time will always continue but everyone human has an awareness that the end, death, will always come. As Oppo notes, the issue is not the 'absence of hope', as one might think it would be. It is the realization of being human, and that there is no end to the cycles of time that are most important in *Endgame*. It is this idea that "All existence is leveled to a life that is itself death" (Adorno 145). As Adorno relates, life in and of itself is about struggling to exist and find meaning in a meaningless world, an idea Beckett so eloquently presents in both his work at the beginning and the end of his life. Beckett asks many questions about what it means to be alive in his theater; he discovers the struggle to exist and give life meaning even though life couldn't possibly have meaning because everyone that lives will die and everything that dies will soon be forgotten. Beckett attempts to pose these types of questions throughout his works and doesn't really give a clear answer. "Beckett deciphers the lie of the question mark: The question has become rhetorical" (Adorno 140). I think that the purpose Beckett serves is to pose the questions in life that can not be answered, only pondered about in the audience of a show and discussed afterward... However, there might not even be an answer to the questions that arise about the meaning of existence in both *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*. Esslin surmised that the questions in *Endgame* are of more importance than the actual premise of the show itself. It makes the audience think about the broader picture and the world around us,

Yet *Endgame* undoubtedly has a very deep indirect impact, which can spring only from its touching a chord in the minds of a very large number of human beings.

The problems of the relationship between a literary master and his pupil [Hamm

and Clov] would be very unlikely to elicit such a response; very few people in the audience would feel directly involved.... It nevertheless arouses profound emotion in its audience, this can be due only to the fact that it is felt to deal with a conflict of a far more universal nature... (Esslin 69)

Esslin's point that *Endgame* has had a 'deep' impact on a 'very large number of human beings' speaks to how well this show can connect with people on a large scale. This show is relatable because we all, as humans, suffer. Everyone who is alive wonders about what will happen to them in their life, and if their life will have meaning. These are existential questions that people are always struggling to answer, not just Beckett. Part of what makes Beckett so relatable is that he poses the questions through his characters simply living and breathing on stage. This is what makes his theater so compelling to watch, these seemingly ordinary people struggling with extraordinary themes. As a whole, although the Absurdist genre may be spearheaded by Beckett's work, a lot of what he employs in his writing applies to the entire genre. Beckett is not only relatable to our society today, but will always be relatable and important to the understanding of the human condition which is an extension of existence itself.

American Absurdism is different from its European counterpart, while still concerned with the human condition and its existence, it does so in a more existentially joyful way. American Absurdist authors like Charles Mee and John Ciani seem to as a whole have a very different perspective than Samuel Beckett when it comes to the production of their work. To discuss the American authors, it is important to understand Beckett's perspective. Beckett was famously very adamant that his plays be produced exactly as they were written, and when some American directors took liberties with his

works, that was met with the utmost outrage from Beckett and his associates. Famously, American director JoAnne Akalaitis put up a production of *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge Massachusetts that did not exactly follow Beckett's clear staging and set design. While the Beckett script specifically states that there should be a bare interior, grey light, two small windows, and a picture hanging in the center (Kalb 80), this is not what JoAnne Akalaitis did, she decided to set the whole play in a Subway car (Kalb 81). While this is not what Beckett originally intended, it does have a certain unique thematic element to it. However, Beckett made so clear with his work that his plays are to have no time and place, and setting this play in a Subway car gives it a clear time and place, most likely in America, New York (Kalb 81). What was so absolutely abhorrent about what Akalaitis did was that she did not understand what she was doing was wrong,

Candidly admitting that she does not 'understand the meaning of the play', she nevertheless thinks it needs contemporizing or at least Americanizing, and thus she uses it to pursue her own artistic agendas, and most pressing being consciousness of present time and place in the theater event. (Kalb 82)

Akalaitis made the mistake of not only ignoring Beckett's stage directions which were of precise importance. Much like in *A Dream Play*, *Endgame* was not supposed to be set in a linear timeline or a quantifiable place but since JoAnne Akalaitis did not "understand the meaning of the play," she wouldn't have known that. Beckett not only went so far as to condemn this production of *Endgame* but came out with a public statement saying,

Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows.

The American Repertory Theater production which dismisses my directions is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn't fail to be disgusted by this. (Kalb 78)

Understanding Beckett's strong feelings about his plays being produced exactly to the letter as described shows the seriousness European Absurdism takes on. Uniquely adamant that nothing be interpreted outside of the world Beckett himself has created, he called this American theater's production of his play a 'parody' of his authentic work. There is no room, as I mentioned earlier, for unwarranted interpretation in Beckett's work. *Endgame* and all European Absurdism cannot be consolidated to a specific time and place because that would go against its relatability to all of society. To quantify a time or a place for this show is to exclude all the rest of society who do not belong to that time or place. It is of the utmost importance to Beckett that his work is followed to the letter so that it would encompass all of society in its message.

While Beckett and European Absurdism seem to be very strict about what can be interpreted within the works, American Absurdist authors seem to be of the opposite opinion entirely. Specifically, Charles Mee, author of *Cafe Le Monde* and *Big Love*, quite literally puts his plays on his website, Charlesmee.org, for free and even encourages directors to take his plays and produce them any way they want without his consent or licensure (C. Mee). Mee offers a unique insight as to why he chooses to operate this way when asked how he is different from Beckett concerning control he answered,

Eventually, we all die and we lose control over our work. If the stuff you left is worth anything at all then people will take it and mess with it. If you're lucky, that's what will happen after you die: people will do your plays, but they'll do

them, however, the f*** they want. If you're not lucky, nobody will do anything with your plays, and they'll be neglected. It seems silly to me to try to preserve control over my work for the comparatively tiny time I can. (E. Mee 93)

Charles Mee's philosophy is clearly, very different from that of Samuel Beckett. Mee believed that allowing directors to interpret, meddle, and even re-work his plays was what was going to keep them relevant and applicable to society even after his death. It is so interesting that both author's goals are to preserve their work and keep them relatable to society after they are gone, but they both have such strong ideas about how to do that that go in completely different directions. While Beckett believed that in keeping his text exactly as it was, not altering anything, it would keep its relevance general enough that his plays would apply to all of society, Mee believed that allowing directors to alter his work and change anything they wanted would make his plays always relevant to society because they were always changing to what was relevant now.

I have fallen in love with many aspects of American Absurdism, the physicalization of emotion being the key element that I believe makes Absurdism so relatable and comprehensive. As when I directed a section from *Almost Maine* by John Cariani, there are many instances of emotional aspects affecting physical behavior in American Absurdism. For example, in *Big Love* by Charles Mee the main character, Thyona quite literally throws herself on the floor to symbolize the times that she has been down in her life and gets back up to show her perseverance. At another moment in *Big Love*, Bella, a secondary character, is talking about her children and their accomplishments. She holds up a tomato, lovingly, symbolizing her son. Then when she starts to talk about his failures in life she splats the tomato on the floor to symbolize his

failures. This physical smushing of the tomato represents her son physically failing in life, a symbol the audience can comprehend. Similarly, in *Almost Maine*, in the section entitled "They Fell" Chad, one of the main characters, falls to the ground to symbolize how in love he is, "Chad completely falls on the ground. Maybe it's more of a crumple to the ground. Love is, after all, often described as making people weak at the knees" (Cariani 47). This stage direction comes right after Chad falls and describes the way love itself is portrayed by Chad *physically* falling. These many moments throughout American Absurdism show how strong emotion can be, that it would physically make you do something such as an involuntary action like falling, or not recognizing someone, that these emotional conditions elicit a physical response.

Overall Both American and European Absurdism are engaging and relatable to modern audiences today. Instead of being overlooked in this time of a global pandemic, I believe they should be celebrated. Not only does Absurdism reflect our reality in the most unique and jarring way, but it forces us to look inwards at ourselves and our place in the world. Amid Covid-19, not a lot of live theater can be produced the way it once was. I believe we, as theater makers, should be looking to the Absurd for the answer on how to continue live theater. Not only is it relevant, but most Absurdist shows like *Endgame*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Almost Maine* have sets of two characters at a time onstage. This is something that could be feasible to do socially distanced and with masks. Most of the dialogue happens spread out across the stage and the characters hardly ever have to physically touch; I think that the resurgence of the Absurdist genre is what will save the theater profession today. In an overall sense, Theater of the Absurd is the theater that will remind us what it is to be human, "The spectators of Theater of the Absurd are those

confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will. In this sense, the theater of the Absurd is the true theater of our time” (Esslin 6). Esslin believed as I do that theater of the Absurd is theater that makes us think, that makes us question our reality and the strength of what we believe in. Theater of the Absurd is theater that helps us imagine, dream, and use our brains! Theater that is deprived of the spectacle that the rest of the entertainment industry relies on to stay afloat. There are no special effects, button-pushing, mind-blowing stunts in Theater of the Absurd. There is only our reality, mirrored back at us in the most jarring way. Forcing us to look, like the prisoners of San Quentin did, two minutes too long and see the truths of our society. That is why Theater of the Absurd is so important, it is the truth even more so than our reality claims to be.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W., and Michael T. Jones. "Trying to Understand Endgame." *New German Critique*, no. 26, 1982, pp. 119–150. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/488027. Accessed 8 May 2021.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theater of the Absurd*. Penguin Books, 1968.
- Esslin, Martin. "The Theatre of the Absurd." *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1960, pp. 3–15. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1124873. Accessed 11 May 2021.
- Hubbell, George Shelton. "The Sanity of Wonderland." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1927, pp. 387–398. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27534201. Accessed 23 Apr. 2021.
- JOSBIN, RAOUL, and Joseph E. Cunneen. "'WAITING FOR GODOT.'" *CrossCurrents*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1956, pp. 204–207. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24456672. Accessed 23 Apr. 2021.
- Kalb, Jonathan. *Beckett in Performance*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Lipman-Wulf, Barbara. "Thematic Structure of Strindberg's 'A Dream Play'." *Leonardo*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1974, pp. 319–323. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1573061. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Mee, Charles. "The (Re)Making Project." *Charles Mee / the (Re)Making Project*, www.charlesmee.org/.
- Mee, Erin B. "Shattered and Fucked Up and Full of Wreckage: The Words and Works of Charles L. Mee." *TDR/The Drama Review*, MIT Press, 1 Sept. 2002,

direct.mit.edu/dram/article/46/3%20(175)/82/42097/Shattered-and-Fucked-Up-and-Full-of-Wreckage-The.

Oppo, Andrea. "BLACK HOLES: A Philosophical View on 'Endgame's' and 'Bartleby's' Stalemates." *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, vol. 23, 2011, pp. 307–317. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41699041. Accessed 8 May 2021.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. "From Elements of Style." *The America Play*, Dramatists Play Service, 1995, pp. 6–18.

Poll Screen Shot from Instagram. 20 Sept. 2020.

Rosen, Larry D. "The Distracted Student Mind – Enhancing Its Focus and Attention." *The Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 99, no. 2, 2017, pp. 8–14. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26388265. Accessed 22 Apr. 2021.

Smith, Stephani Pofahl. "Between Pozzo and Godot: Existence as Dilemma." *The French Review*, vol. 47, no. 5, 1974, pp. 889–903. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/387390. Accessed 23 Apr. 2021.

Sosa, Ernest. "Dreams and Philosophy." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 79, no. 2, 2005, pp. 7–18. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30046211. Accessed 22 Apr. 2021.

"Theater of the Absurd Definition ." *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com.

"They Fell." *Almost, Maine*, by John Cariani, Dramatists Play Service Inc, 2018, pp. 44–49.