THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD

Licda. Jessic Montejo de Orlich *

In his excellent book, The Theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin, speaking of the wide incomprehension which besets the avant-garde contemporary theater, says: "Indeed, the verdict of most critics was that it was completely obscure, a farrago of pointless chit-chat" (1). Although he goes on to say that the speed in which this new genre is being accepted is astonishing, I believe that a large number of people, though interested in works written within this new convention, still find it lacking in artistic performance and meaning.

This article is an attempt to transmit my own feeling towards the plays of the Theater of the Absurd; to enunciate my own interpretation of the extraordinary significance that I find in them. I only intend to point out my own personal point of view which I consider of fundamental importance in understanding the ultimate purpose of this new artistic representation, a dramatic form which at first glance will perhaps seem utterly absurd.

Some of the reasons that this movement is dismissed by audience and critics alike, are that it has transcended theatrical formulas; it has ignored traditional and conventional standards; it defies existing patterns of comprehension and it has overcome the need to make sense word-wise. Most of the plays have no conventional plot at all; the motivation of the characters is usually irrational; there is no development towards a climax, a prerequisite in all traditional theater; the language is devaluated to the point where it becomes non-communicative; the characters are unidentifiable or interchangeable and the dialogue seems irrelevant and largely incomprehensible. The theatrical situation reverts to its barest essentials.

This new movement upsets the expectations of even the most loyal theater devotees, not receiving what is expected from conventional standads and values. The conditioned public feels confused or indignant at such absurd performances.

Too hastily the general public tends to form an opinion of this movement. Too hastily the audience judges before confronting its dimensions and discerns the purpose such plays represent. Too hastily it dismisses a performance as ugly, chaotic or meaningless.

To understand the ultimate meaning of this avant-grade movement, we must have a profoundly liberal attitude towards what at first may seem eccentric, towards the inarticulateness and incoherence of the characters. We must be extremely attentitive, we

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* Profesora del Departamento de Lenguas Modernas. Facultad de Ciencias y Letras
must awaken the perceptive capacities of our senses, and see and feel beyond them. Thus, fully aware, we must—unprejudiced—observe the situation that is presented to us.

The motivation of a playwright who belongs to this movement is to write a play from an inner experience, an insight, a revelation of his own reality, a perception of his work. He may accomplish this by using concrete stage images, without plot, without characters as we traditionally know them, without theatrical rules. Then, he goes about creating a passionate reflection of that insight. This situation might refer to any of the different facets of the human condition but his essential purpose is to make the audience aware of the absurdity of such human conditioning.

Consciously or unconsciously, every author of this type of drama expresses a perception of his inner world in a symbolic situation. One way or the other, these playwrights revolt against the ridiculous superficiality in which man is living, they rebel against the falseness of our values, they reject our cruel, chaotic societies. Because man is enveloped in a world of egotism, ambition, greed and hate and because he is forced to live in a petty society, to love purely, to perceive the essential, to see the ultimate reality in all this is a virtual impossibility unless man becomes fully aware of his situation. The theater is the medium these artists use to shock their public into an awareness of such a state of affairs. The essential dimension of the Theatre of the Absurd is to present our social and human condition, touching each of us individually in our actual lives. It does so with passion, sometimes with tremendous cruelty, castigating us satirically, showing us the absurdity of a life unaware of its conditioned state. A play of the Theater of the Absurd may begin with a humorous situation but generally it will end in a hopeless situation. Hearing, feeling, seeing, our own love–hat in the absurd dialogues of the characters, we realize they reflect a vision of our world. In their dialogue of non-communication, their cruelty, their fear, their verbal sadism, the claustrophobic settings, they reflect our own conditioning, which hinders the realization of the self.

The Theater of the Absurd has a highly universal resonance. Man is afraid to see things as they really are. Reality therefore must be presented symbolically. Our societies are organized in such a way, that they prevent freedom and authenticity. Our moral law—so tremendously immoral—makes man his own slave. He cannot live fully and joyously; he must perpetually conform, he must play roles that do not correspond to his deep inner self. This creates a duality that can only bring conflict to his existence and thus his very life becomes a problem.

Man must break these chains if he wants to become an integrated human being and give sense to existence. Society tells us this is impossible. We must go on, insensibly and insensitively agreeing and conforming, until we destroy ourselves and will no longer be able to feel or perceive reality.

But man is beginning to see the urgency of a change. We see it expressed in the arts; bravely searching, struggling, writing, trying to free himself from the established standards, concepts, and traditions from the laws of conduct which have lost their validity in our day and age.

The Theater of the Absurd is one of the expressions of this urgency. It is a desperate effort to make man aware of the ultimate realities, of the profound significance of dignity, and to shock him out of this unauthentic and complacent state. The Theatre of the Absurd is an attempt to make man aware of his conditioning and a challenge to see fully the importance self-realization before man can proceed to fulfill his destiny. This he cannot do in chains. His only road towards finding himself is in freedom. The Theatre of the Absurd valiantly tries to make man aware of these chains he smugly refuses to acknowledge.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


