The Two Sides of the Avant-Garde: Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd

Avant-garde theatre pushes the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo, primarily in the cultural realm. In art, the avant-garde refers to works that are experimental, radical, or unorthodox concerning culture or society (Picchione 64). For some, the avant-garde makes a hallmark of modernism, as distinct from postmodernism. Perhaps, in theatre, the most notable works in the vanguard world are done by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd. Together, today, they make two wings of today's avant-garde drama. The purpose of this paper is to propose a formula that corresponds the Theatre of the Absurd with Brecht's Epic Theatre by gathering evidence from the plays “The Bald Soprano” by Eugène Ionesco and “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett and thereby exposing the defamiliarization effect in them, therefore merging the two contemporary experimental approaches.

Inspired by Chinese Theatre, Bertolt Brecht created the Verfremdungseffekt, a principle which translates to "defamiliarization effect." The idea behind the effect is to replace traditional conventions with a fresh style of theatre, which would be didactic. In the Epic Theatre, the Aristotelian emphasis on plot would be replaced with the narrative of a person, and the spectator would become an observer studying the onstage experiences as opposed to being cathetically involved. The growth of a linear story would become a montage of individual scenes, and stage suggestion would be replaced with argument (Brecht 79). In Anglo-Saxon countries and in France, one wing of the avant-garde represents a trend that goes back to the early nineteen thirties and Brecht's Epic Theatre, which could only make its full impact felt after the downfall of Hitler, whose accession to power in 1933 put an end to any creative experiment in Germany (Wright 29). The other wing of the avant-garde gains its popularity in the nineteen twenties through cultural movements that can be found from Ernst's surrealist paintings...
and in the writings of Kafka and Joyce, while another earlier famous work that contribute to the other wing of the avant-garde is Albert Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus” in 1942. Surrealist Theatre and Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" were inspirational to many within the group of playwrights that the critic Martin Esslin termed the "Theatre of the Absurd", a form of theatre that would take away meaning from human, portraying humans as puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces.

These two wings that make the avant-garde drama today were, nonetheless, opposites of each other. The Brechtians violently attacked the growth of the Theatre of the Absurd. The leading spokesman of the Theatre of the Absurd, Ionesco, counter-attacked from every possible platform, including that of his plays. During these times in France, the issue in question concerns the validity of the claim each makes to be truly avant-garde, truly conformist, truly anti-bourgeois (Craddock 15-18). It is argued that the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd have become commercial successes with bourgeois audiences (Wright 24); they give them the illusion of having undergone a process of ruthless self-examination without requiring them to do anything about their imperfections. Ionesco, on the other hand, maintains his argument by pointing the anti-bourgeois attitude of the political left in the theatre represents a conformism as deadly as the bourgeoisie, where it is based on common virtues that are indistinguishable from patriotic and moral virtues of the middle class. Ionesco argued that real art cannot transport propagation of social or political theories, because, in theory, and by definition, a work of art is self-explanatory and a perfect expression of itself (Craddock 11). It cannot be a statement of theories or ideologies that are already in existence and thus must have been more expressed already. Furthermore, art can only communicate individual experience.

It is critical, however, to also note the objective framework of Brecht and Theatre of the Absurd. Theatre of the Absurd is mainly concerned with the outward projection of a psychological reality as opposed to the depiction of external reality for Brecht. The Brechtian Theatre has the emphasis on narrative as opposed to the poetic image in the Theatre of the Absurd (Lyons 297). These two approaches are not mutually exclusive. After all, external and internal reality are various aspects of the same reality. Brechtian realism and Absurdism are fused uniquely in the works of later playwrights such as
Kafka and Pinter, and they can also be found in Ionesco's “The Bald Soprano” and Beckett's “Waiting for Godot”.

In “The Bald Soprano”, one interesting aspect to discuss is the use of the clock, an object that depicts Brecht's defamiliarization effect. The hypnotic effect of the clock chimes makes the behavior of the characters seem to become more and more absurd. Furthermore, the clock defamiliarizes us with the traditional uses of a clock. In the very beginning, the number of chimes does not match the time that is given by Mrs. Smith. Also, in the stage direction, it is instructed that the clock strikes randomly. It may hit three times, twenty-nine times, or as much as it likes, and whenever it pleases. Towards the ending, during a nervous dialogue involving the Martins and the Smiths, following Mr. Smith's "To hell with polishing!", The stage direction orders that the strokes of the clock become more nervous, too. Here we see a personification of a clock. The clock becomes just as much of a character as any of the human beings on the stage. The irrational and absurd behavior from the clock symbolizes the ridiculous and absurd nature of time itself in the play. At many points, it seems as if time does not even exist, and even when it does, it is made to be foul. In the play, there are instances when the clock would skip an hour, go backwards, and completely stop.

Towards the ending, Ionesco showed us a version of an alternate reality through the characters. The characters were screaming nonsense in the dark, and when the lights come on, "Mr. and Mrs. Martin are seated like the Smiths at the beginning of the play. The play begins again with the Martins who say the same lines as the Smiths in the first scene, while the curtain softly falls" (Ionesco 18). Here, not only has Ionesco made us think that the characters are somehow trapped in an endless loop, doomed to repeat the play endlessly, but Ionesco has made us question: whether the Smiths are the Martins? Are the Martins the Smiths?

Here, the blend between Brechtian Theatre and Ionesco's “The Bald Soprano” is evident. In “The Bald Soprano”, it is made explicitly clear that the stage is not a representation of the human reality, but rather the creation of an outer, "external reality." The idea of a linear, continuous progression of time does not apply to the world of “The Bald Soprano”. It is a didactic drama, too: it teaches us on the meaninglessness of existence in his play, thereby teaching us Absurdism.
Another impressive play that marks the blend of Brechtian Theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd is Samuel Beckett's “Waiting for Godot” which premiered three years after Ionesco’s “The Bald Soprano”. In “Waiting for Godot”, defamiliarization is visible notably through the use and deliberate misuse of characters and language.

The characters in “Waiting for Godot” have been created by Beckett to be deliberately difficult to understand (Scott 451). Defamiliarization is evident in the non-traditional method of characterization. Characters in the play have no significance throughout the play. In the play, Godot is made to be the main character despite being absent in the whole play. Godot is unseen yet he is the one for whom Vladimir and Estragon are waiting. There is no precise information about the existence of Godot. Another pair of characters is Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo later suddenly becomes blind, and Lucky becomes mute without any explanation. Both Pozzo and Lucky are portrayed like animals, creating the effect of dehumanization.

Language as a theatrical tool is primarily symbolic, carrying multiple meanings because of its multiple faces in usage. In “Waiting for Godot”, however, the use of language is only meant to pass the time (Brater 195). There is no logic and sequence between dialogue and actions of the characters. Conversations between characters do not make the plot. As readers, it may be boring to read the dialogue used in the play. Readers are unable to reach philosophical meaning through the language utilized in the play. Such isolation techniques are also known as linguistic defamiliarization (Lahu 2-3). Defamiliarization in “Waiting for Godot” shows Beckett's attempt to represent nothingness and uncertainty. For the audience, this is an antithesis to catharsis, suppression, where all pressures are kept inside, because they do not feel empathy with the characters and with the whole theme of the play (McConachie et al. 589). Indeed, that both mentioned plays that use defamiliarization effect gives hints to a philosophical idea: Absurdism.

In the bigger picture, the essence of Absurdism is meaninglessness; its concept refers to the impossibility for the human to seek values and meanings in life. Unlike Nihilism, Absurdism still invites us to accept the "humanly impossible" condition to find meaning in life while defiantly continuing to explore and search for meaning (Camus et al. 157-183). Perhaps Camus' approach is a more honest approach. Nietzsche thought
we would give a kind of meaning in life by embracing "illusion" (Robinson 17). He proposed that we learn from artists, as they are always devising new "inventions and artifices" that give things the appearance of being beautiful when they are not. In my opinion, adopting a religion is analogous to surrendering, to stop learning. Choosing religion amounts to intellectual laziness, emotional weakness, or a combination thereof.

Brechtian defamiliarization effects that separate the stage and the audience is what stops us from having the illusion that the world appears "beautiful when they are not." To give up either by committing suicide or to create a meaning framework such as religion is to avoid teachings our lives offer, which corresponds to avoiding the key principle of Brechtian theatre: a theatre that would be didactic, a theatre that turns the spectator into an active observer, an observer that is made to face something instead of being involved in something.

What about the question of reality? If the Brechtian theatre in its external realism and the Theatre of the Absurd in its subjective realism, each depicts merely one-half of reality; thus, would a fusion of both styles not solve the problem of depicting reality? Because both avant-garde wings defamiliarize us from reality, anyway. They serve to "distance" us from human interiority, including its absurd nature. The primary distinction is that one demands objectivity from the observer and the other demands imagination from the participant. In other words, one has a dual role: the observer and the participant, learning what life teaches, and accepting the “absurd” human nature.

Both wings of the avant-garde, therefore, agree in its cynical purpose—the destruction of naturalistic conventions which impose stage limitations. The similarities between the Epic Theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd can, therefore, be summed up via formula where the stage acknowledges that it is a stage rather than pretending to be a reality itself. The result of the two main wings of the dramatic avant-garde is a theatrical drama that uses the stage with the highest freedom and can move from realism to a heightened expressionist version of external reality, and from there to an internal reality of introspection, dream, nightmare, and obsession, such a theatre would rely on the poetry of the stage image and the freest probable use of a language as seen in the works of Beckett and Ionesco.
Works Cited


