

**THE SOCIAL FUNCTION, A DISTINCTIVE FEATURE OF THE AMERICAN
THEATRE OF THE ABSURD. EDWARD ALBEE'S THE ZOO STORY – CASE STUDY**

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Abstract: It is a well-known fact that America has always wanted to distance itself from all that is European, from the tradition of the old continent and it seems that, in the literary field, the Theatre of the Absurd has offered it the chance. Even though the majority of absurd drama employ a number of techniques – the partial or total absence of plot, of rational characters, farcical situations, the disintegrated language or the ridiculous or meaningless dialogues – The American Theatre of the Absurd, unlike its European counterpart, has a unique way of revealing itself to its public, the plays acting like vivid mirrors skilfully placed between the audience and the on stage actors.

Keywords: *Theatre of the Absurd, American drama, social function, society, tradition.*

We are perfectly aware of the fact that literature is written not only for the readers' pleasure and that it does not represent just a pleasant way of spending the spare time. To some extent, literature has been always used as a "manipulative" tool, as a powerful force with which ideas have been induced in the minds of the people, for various reasons. When reading a novel, for example, we let our mind and thoughts to wander, pleased by the beautiful, safe and pleasant alternative universe which it offers, forgetting about our daily routine, with all its difficulties. In that special, comfortable space, which we tend to contemplate over and over again, reason and logic are distracted. This also happens when we read "classical" plays in which time and actions are determined, whose characters we know and identify with but what happens when, instead of reading such plays, we go to the theatre and what we see or hear on the scene has nothing to do with what we know or have experienced before? What is the public's reaction to a play belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd?

As Martin Esslin correctly points out,

The theatre of most previous epochs reflected an accepted moral order, a world whose aims and objectives were clearly present to the minds of all its public. (...) To such audiences, right and wrong were never in doubt, nor did they question the then accepted goals of human endeavor (1960: 7).

Taking in consideration these statements, we might say that the previous forms of theatre did not engage the audience in an active, analyzing process of what is going on the stage. They could, however, ask themselves what happens next but they did not have to linger on that issue, because the solution was to be offered to them. On the other hand, when it comes to the plays written by the "absurdists",

the audience is confronted with actions that lack apparent motivation, characters that are in constant flux, and often happenings that are clearly outside the realm of rational experience. Here, too, the audience can ask, <<What is going to happen next?>> But then anything may happen next, so that the answer to this question cannot be worked out according to the rules of ordinary probability based on motives and characterizations that will remain constant

throughout the play. The relevant question here is not so much what is going to happen next but what is happening? <<What does the action of the play represent?>> (Martin Esslin, 2001: 253).

When facing such controversial plays, the public, taken aback by the “outrageous” new features of the play, are not concerned anymore with what is going to happen; instead, they ask themselves what *is* happening before their eyes. Witnessing a play in which nothing happens, with grotesque and maybe nightmarish characters, whose language is meaningless – meaningless until the audience eventually discovers the hidden message of their words – “*the spectators of the Theatre of the Absurd are thus confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world in without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will*” (Martin Esslin, 1960: 6).

In this particular situation, not only that the members of the audience are

unable to identify with the characters, they are compelled to puzzle out the meaning of what they have seen. Each of them will probably find his own, personal meaning, which will differ from the solution found by most others. But he will have been forced to make a mental effort and to evaluate an experience he has undergone. In this sense, the Theatre of the Absurd is the most demanding, the most intellectual theatre. It may be riotously funny, wildly exaggerated and oversimplified, vulgar and garish, but it will always confront the spectator with a genuine intellectual problem, a philosophical paradox, which he will have to try to solve even if he knows that it is most probably insoluble. (Ibidem,14).

Confronted with a new context, the public must strive to search for the meaning, to identify the intellectual – and philosophical – question and maybe, just maybe, provide it with an answer. In order for one to understand, one must make an effort; in this lies the greatness of these plays, that they, through their apparent “nonsensical” exposure of things, succeed in making as us think outside the box.

To conclude, we can say for certain that, through the nature of its plays,

The Theatre of the Absurd speaks to a deeper level of the audience's mind. It activates psychological forces, releases and liberates hidden fears and repressed aggressions, and, above all, by confronting the audience with a picture of disintegration, it sets in motion an active process of integrative forces in the mind of each individual spectator (Martin Esslin, 2001: 251),

this being the distinctive feature of the American Theatre of the Absurd, the social function: that of making the public think about what *is* going on, not about what *happens*, of making it question everything it sees and hears on the stage, hoping that this will raise its awareness towards its own condition, that of a modern human being, “trapped” in an “absurd society”. Once it arrives to this conclusion, once it identifies the absurd in its own existence, only then it can choose to react against it. “*In this sense, the Theatre of the Absurd is the true theatre of our time*” (Martin Esslin, 1960: 6), the theatre that “forces” us, by awakening our consciousness. In his turn, Glenn Goodwin, states the same idea: “*this type of literature can be extremely functional in forcing us to reexamine our own perspectives concerning man and society*” (1971: 835).

Given the fact that, until now, the subject approach has been mainly theoretical, we have considered that is necessary to examine one play, belonging to the American playwright

Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story*, in order to see the manner in which this play mirrors certain aspects related to the condition of the modern man. We have chosen this particular play not only because it is one of his most famous ones but because “*he deals with the alienation of the individual in the middle-group oriented society*” (Odette Cauffman-Blumenfeld, 2005: 47) occupying, thus, a special place among the playwrights labeled as “absurd”.

The Zoo Story, written by “*inescapably the American playwright of the 1960’s*” (Gerald Weales, 2005: 21) is the play with which “*Albee aligned himself with the Absurdists in his illustration of the frustration of human connection and communication*” (Annette Saddik, 2007: 36).

Despite the fact that the majority of the plays belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd lack action, this one seems to be an exception, one being able “to sum up” what happens. This time, as to provoke us in searching his affiliation with the “absurdists”, Albee provides us with almost all the necessary details: he mentions both the time “*a Sunday afternoon in summer*” (Edward Albee, 2004: 14) and the space of the action “*Central Park*” (Ibidem). We said almost all the details because he does not exactly specify the year, nor the precise hour. By doing so, by employing the use of the present time as the time of the action, Albee is making a suggestion upon which, the readers must dwell, and this is the fact that the “scenario” might, at some point in time, repeat itself, having a “*universal relevance*” (Ludmila Martanovschi, 2012: 42). Moreover, he offers a detailed description of his two characters, Jerry and Peter, description that has the role of placing the men in certain social categories.

A man in his early forties, neither fat, nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger” and “A man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness (Ibidem)

are the two characters that “help” Albee presents his own vision on life and the condition of man.

The action of the play can be easily summed up by Jerry’s attempts to communicate, to socialize with Peter, efforts that fail in the end because, unfortunately for him, Peter is too absorbed by peacefully manifesting his habit, that of reading his book on a Sunday afternoon. Peter, from our point of view, is “trapped” by living the pain of habit, which perfectly matches with Beckett’s vision of life:

Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit. (A. Alvarez, 1973: 21).

Peter is so involved in this sick relationship with his habit that he cannot break up, despite Jerry’s attempts to establish a connection between them. He has become accustomed to living in his own way that he cannot, for any reason, make a compromise. We might even say that he exhibits that “*primitive hostility*” (Albert Camus, 1955: 50). Whenever Jerry tries

to speak with him, his answers are either short or evasive and, thus, Jerry is the one who mostly talks, giving long – extremely long – speeches about his personal life. In this way, he does nothing but to show how lonely he feels. If, at first, “*neither hope, nor despair totally governs Jerry at the opening of the play*” (Robert B. Bennett, 1977: 60), things take a somehow unexpectedly turn in the end, the final of the play presenting Jerry’s suicide. “*The lonesome and lovesick Jerry*” (Zoltán Szillasy, 1986: 14), not willing to give up, commits the final gesture, that of taking his own life.

What are we, the readers, to understand from this desperate action? What should we think? What did Albee try to make us see? From our point of view, Jerry’s suicide is the proof that he has become aware of the fact that he cannot change Peter just by talking and, thus, chooses to take his actions further, committing an extreme gesture. “*Whatever our condition, it always includes the possibility of moving beyond it*” (Thomas Flynn, 2006: 67) and, in Jerry’s case, this possibility was suicide.

“*Zoo Story represents dramatically the increasing alienation and isolation that many Americans of this period were feeling in the face of a creeping conformity*” (Don Shiach, 2000: 43). With this play, Edward Albee succeeds in emphasizing the social function of the American Theatre of the Absurd. Unlike his European counterparts, Edward Albee does not linger upon philosophical issues; he does not endlessly meditate upon the condition of the twentieth century man but takes a stand against what he observes, he takes a stand against the alienation that has secluded MAN from his companions, *The Zoo Story* being his manifest, his sincere and desperate call he addresses the humankind.

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