THEATRE OF THE ABSURD
1950s-1960s
Europe & U.S.
The Theatre of the Absurd (French: théâtre de l'absurde) is a designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s, as well as one for the style of theatre which has evolved from their work.

source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_the_Absurd
HISTORY & BACKGROUND

➤ centered in Paris

➤ avant-garde experiments of the 1920s and 30s influence the form

➤ named by scholar Martin Esslin (1961- text)

➤ playwrights considered Absurdists: Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet

➤ some plays by other playwrights considered “absurdist” = Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter

➤ term means- out of harmony or ridiculous

➤ Waiting For Godot- by Samuel Beckett - considered masterpiece of absurdism
TRAILS OF ABSURDISM

➤ without purpose
➤ illogical
➤ out of harmony
➤ useless
➤ devoid of reason
➤ meaningless
➤ hopeless
➤ chaotic
➤ lacking order
➤ uncertain
Plot, Structure

- Plot and Structure

- anti-realistic, going against many of the accepted norms of conventional theatre

- labeled by some critics as ‘anti-theatre’

- often characterised by a deliberate absence of the cause and effect relationship between scenes

- non-linear plot developments, sometimes cyclical – ending where they began

- occasionally appearing as though there is no plot at all to speak of

- deliberate lack of conflict
INFLUENCES & CONTEXT

➤ WWII

➤ aftermath of WWII - Europe

➤ philosophical movements - i.e. Existentialism

➤ Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

➤ Albert Camus (1913-1960)

Sartre - Being and Nothingness (1943)

Existentialism and Humanism (1946)

Camus - associated with Existentialism - he rejected the label - his essay The Myth of Sisyphus introduces the idea of the absurd- man’s futile search for meaning
EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism refers to a particular view of the nature of man’s existence. The existentialist believes that man starts life with nothing. His life is made up of acts; through the process of acting man becomes conscious of his original nothingness. By choosing to act, man passes into the arena of human responsibility which makes him the creator of his own existence. However, the existence inevitably ends with death. Man returns to his original state of nothingness. This existential notion eliminates the Western concept of man’s exalted nature. Life becomes meaningless and useless – a condition which is in essence “absurd”. Man’s only freedom in this condition is the exercise of his conscious mind. However, consciousness means conflict – between man’s awareness of the absurdity of his existence and his need for justification of his human action.

~J. L Crawford: Acting In Person and in Style
NOTABLE WORKS

- *Waiting For Godot* by Samuel Beckett
- *Happy Days* by Samuel Beckett
- *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett
- *The Chairs* by Eugene Ionesco
- *The Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco
- *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco
- *The Lessons* by Eugene Ionesco
- *The Blacks* by Jean Genet
- *The Balcony* by Jean Genet
ACTING STYLE

➤ both presentational and representational modes of acting

➤ sometimes stereotypical

➤ often an absence of character development

➤ absurd characters lack the motivation found in characters of realistic dramas, highlighting their purposelessness

➤ time, place and identity are frequently blurred with characters often unsure about who or where they are

➤ characters are often out of harmony or out of sync with the world in which they live
MOVEMENT STYLE

➤ mixture of realistic and non-realistic

➤ elements of circus, vaudeville and acrobatics

➤ ritualistic

➤ slow

➤ illogical

➤ repetitive

➤ action sometimes defies logic or easy understanding
… the absurdists, while for the most part accepting Sartre’s philosophical outlook, tended to concentrate upon the irrationality of human experience without suggesting any path beyond. By employing a succession of episodes unified merely by theme or mood instead of a cause-to-effect arrangement, they arrived at a structure paralleling the chaos which was their usual dramatic subject. The sense of absurdity was heightened by the juxtaposition of incongruous events producing seriocomic and ironic effects.

~Oscar G. Brockett: History of the Theatre
THE PLAYWRIGHTS

➤ Samuel Beckett- Irish novelist, playwright and poet (1906-1989)- born in Dublin- lived most of life in Paris- as expatriate

➤ Eugene Ionesco - Romanian- French, wrote mostly in French- (1909-1994)- scholar, academic- studied French Literature, taught French, playwright-later in life (1948)- The Bald Soprano- produced in 1950- “ecstatic revelations of beauty within a pessimistic framework"

➤ Jean Genet - illegitimate son - abandoned by mother, raised by foster parents, became a thief- by age 10- frames philosophical & psychological points of view (1910- 1986)
Samuel Beckett’s play  Waiting for Godot

… a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What’s more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice.

WAITING FOR GODOT (1953)

by Samuel Beckett

Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart: Godot

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72xsqNSN10w
WAITING FOR GODOT (1953)

by Samuel Beckett

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wifcyo64n-w
RHINOCEROS (1959)

by Eugene Ionesco

One of Eugene Ionesco’s first full-length plays, Rhinoceros demonstrates the playwright’s anxiety about the spread of inhuman totalitarian tendencies in society. Inspired by Ionesco’s personal experiences with fascism during World War II, this absurdist drama depicts the struggle of one man to maintain his identity and integrity alone in a world where all others have succumbed to the “beauty” of brute force and violence.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYgR1Pb-lk4

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5LEpLaUmiY

source: http://www.theatrehistory.com/misc/rhinoceros.html
Jean Genet

- 1910-1986
- The Balcony (1956)
Jean Genet’s *The Balcony* (Le Balcon in original French) is considered by many to be the one of his masterpieces, though it was written after he said he would give up writing plays altogether. *The Balcony* was his first commercially successful play. Like many of Genet’s works, the play was inspired by Genet’s contempt for society and obsession with topics such as sex, prostitution, politics, and revolution. Set inside a brothel where common men play men of power in their sexual fantasies, *The Balcony* reflects on the emptiness of societal roles. Reality and illusion feed off each other in the difficult play. Dreams may make reality tolerable, but when they come true, as when the customers are forced to live the roles they play, it is not as satisfying.


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vZ1LeJrlUs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vZ1LeJrlUs)

[http://www.ocweekly.com/arts/the-balcony-mirrors-us-6425420](http://www.ocweekly.com/arts/the-balcony-mirrors-us-6425420)