



Research on the Theater of Absurd

Enyue Tong, Li Liu

Longjiang Road Primary School, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

DOI: 10.32629/asc.v4i1.1210

Abstract: This essay aims to do research on one of the most important modern drama movements in Europe — the Theater of Absurd, through doing the background research at first and then comparing works of the same type and period including Nobel Prize work. The authors want more people to get to appreciate the art form of Absurd Drama which precisely reveals very serious social issues fundamentally but through vivid and very comic form. That's quite novel and classic! After researching on the wide ranges of drama movements in the same period like Environmental Theater, Theater of the Oppressed (TO), Epic Theater, and even Music theater like Off-Off Broadway, the authors finally chose to conduct in-depth research on the Absurd Theater. The background research includes but not limited to the period from 1950s to the late 1980s in Europe, and elaborates the development of absurd theory in detail. This paper is represented by Ionesco's famous drama — *Rhinoceros*, conducting research from the perspectives of forms, themes, literature technologies and moral to show readers what absurd drama is and its characteristics. Different histories can lead to different forms of literary works including drama. We should always constantly explore new forms of Drama which is extremely interesting and challenging!

Keywords: absurd theater, movement, *Rhinoceros*

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition

'The Theater of the Absurd was a dramatic movement in Europe from the 1950s to the late 1980s, originally rose abruptly in French, and it belongs to the Modernist Drama. It evolved from the emerging philosophical theory of Existentialism. the Theater of Absurd explored through a dramatic lens the central idea that life was inherently meaningless and humans were fundamentally incapable of controlling their fates in a harsh and uncaring universe. According to Martin Esslin, 'The Theater of Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysterious of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theater of Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.' [7]

'Absurdist' plays often move between silly comedy and serious ideas about politics and the meaninglessness of human life.

1.2 Brief History

After one of the most brutal, violent conflicts in the world which also included the unprecedented tragedy of the Human being. As a result, people were struggling to reconcile its preexisting political and moral faiths with such painful reality of the inhumanity in this harsh uncaring world. Previous notions of rational moralistic purpose were unfounded which undermined the idea that human existence has any good purpose, or indeed any purpose at all. As a result of these new ideas about the meaningless of life, a lot of people felt as though their lives no longer had a purpose or there was no longer any reason to do any of the things they had done before.

The Theater of Absurd essentially suggests that previous faiths in religious and political certainties are no longer reliable. These absurdist playwrights that time want their audience to see the fact that the life itself is meaningless. Meanwhile, they don't want to distress the audience by showing them this harsh fact, instead they want the audience to embrace the freedom and all the possibilities to create their own meanings in their lives!

In 1942, the French-Algerian philosopher Albert Camus published his famous work "The Myth of Sisyphus". From this, he developed his Theory of the Absurd that this juxtaposition is something that all free-thinking and honest people must eventually come to accept. According to Camus, human beings should not strive to find purpose where there is none, and that

true contentment can only be felt once this is acknowledged, by using example of The Greek myth of Sisyphus. [8]

And this Theory of the Absurd offered a great challenge to the artists and writers that day, posing a question of what kind of art, if there is any, could be created if one accepted that the whole world was fundamentally absurd and meaningless. The first absurdist play is Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, first performed in 1950, with other seminal productions such as another notable work *Rhinoceros*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday party*, etc.

In 1960s, a formal name was given to this movement by British famous critic Martin Esslin in his seminal essay "The Theater of the Absurd"! Over the next decades, the movement's influence would steadily wane. However, the Theater of Absurd had a profound impact on the modern theatrical landscape, and many of the plays associated with the movement are still highly regarded and frequently performed today. [1]

2. Rhinoceros by Eugène Ionesco

The famous absurdist play *Rhinoceros* was written in 1959 by Eugène Ionesco, a play in Three Acts and Four Scenes. It was first produced in Paris by Jean-Louis Barrault at the Odéon, the 25th January, 1960. And it was first produced in London by Orson Welles at the Royal Court Theater, the 28th April, 1960. Eugène Ionesco was born in Slatina of Romania on 26th November, 1909. His nationality is French. He spent most of his childhood time in French and moved back to Romania due to the outbreak of the War. In 1942, he settled down in Marseilles and experienced the whole War time there. He is one of the most famous absurdist playwrights in Romania and France.

Rhinoceros is the most notable absurdist play of Ionesco, set in a small French town where the inhabitants slowly turned into rhinoceros, aside from one man-Berenger.

2.1 Act One

One day morning, Jean and Berenger were chatting in the café house. A rhino was rushing through the street, all the victims felt shocked except him. Berenger was not conscious of something happening until the second rhino trampled the housewife's pussy. This time, all the people in the town were quarrelling about the breed of these rhinoceros and how many horns on each to judge the possible quantity of them. Especially, there was a fierce quarrel happened between Jean and Berenger, so they ended on a sour nose.

2.2 Act Two

2.2.1 Scene One

Berenger went back to his office, everybody was talking the rhinoceros except Botard. Botard insisted there were no rhino at all until he saw that Mrs. Boeuf recognized and went with her rhino husband with his own eyes! The stairs were destroying by the rhino, so the office people called the fireman for help. They finally were rescued though there were more and more rhinoceros in the town.

2.2.2 Scene Two

Berenger came to visit and apologize to Jean after work, but only find that he became more and more manic and finally became a rhino. When he tried to save Jean, he found out that all the residences of the building became rhinoceros too. And then, the whole street was full of rhinoceros, which shocked him a lot!

2.3 Act Three

After experiencing that nightmare and managing to flee back his flat, Berenger was extremely afraid of becoming a rhino. His colleague Dudard came to visit him with the information that his boss Papillion, and the Logician became rhinoceros too! Later, Daisy came to visit him too, brought the worse message that even Botard and other upper-class persons like the Cardinal became rhinoceros too. When Dudard thought Daisy cared about Berenger more than himself, he left and became a rhino too. Berenger and Daisy were the only humans left, everything around them were rhinoceros. Eventually, Daisy left after exclaiming the totally different attitudes towards be or not be the rhinoceros. The only human being Berenger fell into extreme dilemma, but soon insisted not to be with rhinoceros and decided to fight against the rhinoceros till the end!

3. Analysis

3.1 Themes

The play is commonly read as a response to the rise of the so-called National Socialism during the War. It's about the tension between mentality and conformity and human morality. Furthermore, it challenged the blind obedience psychology from philosophic point of view.

Main Characters Analysis

The main character Berenger is a working-class person, he is honest and kind, somehow cowardly, pessimistic and even stubborn. He has his free will and does not want to be a rhino. It is this honesty and stubbornness that makes him stand firm in the face of the sudden change. It is his free will, his ability to freely choose not to become rhinoceros that protect him from being tricked in the way that the other citizens of the town are.

The rhinoceros represent those citizens who have become involved with the dangerous ideas of so-called National Socialism. They are symbols of people who have been convinced that the new policy at that time is a good idea, and therefore lost their human freedom and intelligence. They were rude, destroyed everything, lost their free will and finally became animals as the governor's wish!

Jean represents cultured person who thinks moderate is a good thing, and believes that culture is the solution to Berenger's problems. In fact, culture is indeed a way to improve yourself, but only up to a point, and it cannot determine your political choices.

The new emerging policy that time is actually a way of organizing society so that the government is ruled by one governor who controls everything about the lives of the people, taking away their personal freedom and freewill and the people are not allowed to disagree with anything that government does. And that is exactly what Ionesco is revealing.

The writer wants to show us that so-called National Socialism is not as good as it appeared. It's tyrannical and brutal. It's so uncivilized and immoral that they act like animals! That's why we should resist their ideas and governing! Just like the rhinoceros in the play, they become more and more beautiful and violent as the play goes on, even like God in the end. This is exactly what Ionesco wants the audience to think about - it appears to be beautiful and desirable in the first place, but in fact it turns you into a violent, thoughtless animal.

Faced with the oppressive rule, the majority of people chose to obey the violent rule. This is conformity. But the writer wants to awaken the audiences to go against it. It's a person's right to have freedom, and it's immoral to deprive the Human Rights.

The writer also wants to tell us that even if everyone else is turning into a bad guy, you must not lose your marbles. You need to clear your mind, be yourself, and hold on to your sense of what is right and wrong, even if everyone around you seems to disagree with you. This showing us the importance of keeping an independent mind and spirit, especially in the face of great and sudden change!

3.2 Form

This is a play in three Acts and four scenes, both comedy and tragedy. There are many funny and absurd scenes which make people laugh heartily through many literature techniques. Meanwhile, it's a tragedy because Berenger is left alone by all the other people, and he is the only human being to stay awake and fight against the rhinoceros. It's a pity!

Ionesco mainly uses absurd and ironic techniques to depict the spoiled process of a country, and describe the chaos caused by collective mental variation to this country. Meanwhile, he extensively introduces the traditional Drama elements (attractive plots, clear beginning and ending, etc.) to make the play more colorful and more complete.

Irony is often about the gap between what we expect from someone and what they actually do or are like.

E.g., in Act I, Jean clearly thinks of himself as a more moderate person than Berenger, and also clearly that being 'moderate' is a good thing. This is ironic because in the end it is Berenger who is only one not to become a rhino and who fights against them. Ionesco is showing us that being 'cultured' or being 'moderate' does not mean that you won't become a rhino. It is not enough simply to be moderate, and you have to actively fight against in order to resist it.

Another ironic point is that although Jean appears to be cultured, when rhinoceros run past, he makes a series of prejudiced statements about so-called 'Asiatic' people. Whereas it's Berenger who is actually making the morally right argument that the 'Asiatic' people are no different from them.

At the end of Act I, the Old Gentleman keeps telling Berenger to stop interrupting, because the Old Gentleman thinks that the Logician is called 'the Logician', so he must be both logical and intelligent, and therefore assumes that the Logician must have all the answers. Whereas, Berenger is a low status character, so the Old Gentleman assumes that he cannot possibly have anything useful to contribute. But on the contrary, the Logician's speech has no logic at all, and his 'logical thinking' is nonsense! This is ironic, because people often assumes that if someone has an impressive title like 'Professor', that must mean they are clever and logic. In addition, all the others apart from Berenger are so keen to listen to the Logician, this also shows that Berenger is the only character who seems able to think independently with his primeval integrity.

The story of the play is one that goes from logic to absurdity, as the play goes on it becomes more and more absurd.

E.g., in Act I, the logician is an example of absurdist, he doesn't seem concerned that people are turning into rhinoceros, and just wants to count how many rhinoceros there are and what breed they are. Moreover, his logic itself is nonsense and his

speech also doesn't make sense, like so-called syllogism. The logician character represents how useless logic can be when trying to understand or resist so-called National Socialism, prejudice and stupidity. This is because none of these things are logic, and so the logician's way of thinking can do nothing to resist them. This also shows us that the logic is not always logic, and you need to use your own mind to think through any so-called facts. Also, logic cannot prevent you from being blindness like becoming a rhino.

The scene that the Logician and Old gentleman's conversation overlaps with and interrupts Jean and Berenger's conversation is also creating a busy feeling to make the audience harder to follow Jean and Berenger's conversation, which make it all confusing as their conversation is also nonsense and ridiculous.

In Act II scene I, the writer vividly portrays another absurd or comical character Botard, who is suspicious of the journalist and the Press even many characters tell him about the rhinoceros. On one hand, Botard is clearly right to be wary of the Press and their motivation. On the other hand, his suspicion means he ignores the warning as the Press is not lying. With the escalation in Act II, the play is getting more and more absurd. Any character, who is, at this point, still unwilling to accept the reality of the rhinoceros and how many people are turning into rhinoceros, which looks particularly silly.

Another exemplar represents the crucial aspect of Theater of Absurd (Thesis vs. Antithesis) is in Act II scene II P. 66-68, there are four layers or many things happening at once, which are a scene in a play + a conversation between two different characters + a dialectical argument + a political parable. Two characters Berenger and Jean who symbolize two different sides of an argument. Berenger represents Thesis, which is Humanity and Humanist Values are better and more moral than wild nature, while Jean represents Antithesis which is on the completely opposite side.

The writer also uses many other literary techniques like personifications, exaggerate and contrast techniques to depict the ugliness of human beings in the contrary of the beauty of the rhino. At first glance, you may think why Berenger not become rhinoceros too, they are so nice and cute. Maybe Berenger is an outcast. But with the play goes on, we find that the rhinoceros become more and more brutal and uncivilized just like animal. The writer indirectly satirizes the hypocrisy of the government, showing the audience that the new policy it's not what it looks like, it's only appeared to be beautiful and moral just like the rhinoceros in the play.

3.3 Story and the Moral

The story revolves around the main character Berenger. Berenger was an untidy dispirited nobody who was addicted to alcohol and indifferent to things around him. But when facing with the sudden change of the environment, he was starting to have his own self-consciousness. When Jean concluded that the breed of these two rhinoceros were different and they had different horns, Berenger openly refuted him for the first time. This exposed his honest nature. And Jean felt his dignity had been challenged, so screamed abuse at Berenger, which reflected that he could not tolerate others holding any different opinions from him. This is exactly the social and psychological basis for the formation of tyranny!

Berenger went back to his office, and later on the stairs were broken by Mrs. Boeuf's husband. When the office people called the fireman for help, the response received was that there were more and more rhinoceros. All the people's lives were under threat, but none of them considered that this was a common phenomenon. This conveys the message that when the mutation becomes more and more popular, people are still ignoring the warning or don't want to accept the reality which is in vain and unwise. What we should do is to fight against it at the very beginning!

When Berenger came to visit Jean who became more and more manic and finally became a rhino. Soon, all the residences of the building, and then the whole street became rhinoceros too. This shows the majority of people already chose to become rhinoceros blindly!

After getting information about many other colleagues and even Botard became a rhino, and then Daisy, Berenger fell into extreme dilemma, but still not to be with rhinoceros and decided to fight again them till the end! This shows that in spite of other faults, Berenger is still a good citizen. He knows that he cannot avoid the 'brutal facts' of the situation, he still wishes people could come together to improve it. In the end, because of his conscience, he cannot ignore what is happening, and this is the main thing that separates him from all the other characters in the play!

On the whole, this play exposes the brutal and immoral rule in the raw, by using a vivid and absurd artistic form. Ionesco wants to awaken people to actively resist so-called National Socialism, though it's extremely difficult in the real world. But you still should stand firmly to do the right thing right! It's painful to realize that life itself is inherently harsh and there is no easy solution to the existence, and ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world (just like the main character Berenger in the play), but you still have to bear the cruel word with dignity, nobly and responsibly. Berenger is not engulfed by the flooding rhinoceros, instead maintains the independence and his dignity, thereby obtaining freedom and relaxation without any worry and burden.

4. Comparison with Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett

Rhinoceros and *Waiting for Godot* are both absurd dramas in the same period of time. They have both similarities and differences. Their respective characteristics are as below table.

Table 1. *Rhinoceros* Vs. *Waiting for Godot*

	<i>Rhinoceros</i>	<i>Waiting for Godot</i>
Set	It's more realistic, like the Café house, Jean's flat, and office building, etc.	It's less realistic, and cannot distinguish where it is and it goes nowhere.
Form	With the play goes on, the form is increasingly unlike the traditional theatrical form which is clear and make sense, and the language is getting more and more nonsense and ridiculous.	The form is a very important aspect of this play. It communicates one's personal intuition or single idea of the human situation. The language is full of cliches, puns and repetitions. It conveys an underlying serious message of distress through a comic surface.
Characters	The Old Man, the Logician, Jean, Botard, Dudard and Papillon all seems to be polite, cultured and with good title, at least better than Berenger. But finally, all of them turn into rhinoceros which is immoral and uncivilized. This is ironic. The main character Berenger is a naive everyman figure, though he doesn't look intelligent as others, he is the only one who has the conscious which separate him from the others in the end. Berenger is as simple and determined as the main character in <i>Waiting for Godot</i> Vladimir and Estragon, but the difference between them is that Berenger has a sense of what's right and wrong or wisdom, while Vladimir and Estragon are just placing hope in the God and a little bit silly.	Vladimir represents human mind and Estragon represents human body, though Estragon obeys Vladimir's words in most cases which means mind can control body, they still lack of wisdom. They would rather die if Godot won't come to them.
Plot	It's more of a story even though getting more and more absurd as the play goes on. By the end, the story is less important than Berenger's response to almost everyone turning into a rhino.	The whole play is lack of plot and without clear beginning and ending, it's more of a situation or a problem that defines the whole play.

5. Opinion and Evaluation

5.1 What I like

I like the Theater of Absurd because I like historical things very much, especially the war related topics. I want to know the impact of the war, how people are changed by

the war, what are the differences before and after the war, including the life and thoughts. I'm also wondering about the history of European countries too. I think history is fascinating, and it's always repeating itself! Only the one understands history truly could hold the future in hand, just like the Chinese saying “以史明鉴”. Moreover, understanding history is understanding the development of human beings and the humanity, we could gain precious experiences from the Long River of History, we could reflect on what we have done before to find the mistakes, and eventually we could avoid the same tragedies happen again!

The absurd play is just like a dramatic lens through which I can know what the thoughts of people that time in Europe, their religions and even their daily life. About the specific play- *Rhinoceros*, I like its form most, how does tragedy appear in comedy? It's impressive and novel! Its comic side is really comical, how come human beings can become rhinoceros, how come Berenger thinks the rhino has been nesting on some withered branch or hiding under a stone. Even finally there is only Berenger to fight against the fierce rhinoceros, it is as funny as *Don Quixote*. From the perspective from rhinoceros, Beranger is like a crazy person, while from Berenger's perspective, the whole thing is a completely tragedy! I also like the main character Berenger, he is honest, have a sense of conscious, brave and values friendship, though in the very beginning he is sloppy and cowardly which I don't like at all.

5.2 What can be improved

The absurdist play is pretty attractive to me, however, it's a bit hard for no-native speakers to understand it's underlying meanings if not do the research work about the creative background, because its language is not that direct and the logic is somehow in a chaos. Meanwhile, a translated work may lose its original charm and moral. So, how to make the play easier to understand its underlying moral and to associate with war may be something can be improved in the future.

The whole play of *Rhinoceros* is really worth reading! However, if you don't know the background of war, you are not quite able to perceive the cruelty of war or even can't associated this play with war as it's a bit too comic. In my opinion,

maybe can use a more subtle language or stage symbolic to contrast out the tragedy in the comedy to make the theme clearer and make it more literary. E.g., in *Waiting for Godot*, there is a scene impressed me most! When Pozzo finishes his meal, Estragon stares at the bones and calls Pozzo's slave Lucky Mister, after making sure that Lucky doesn't want them, he darts to it, picks them up and begins to gnaw them. This can make me understand the distress caused by war or something else instantly and directly, and can reflect the underlying highly abstract theme related moral through this vivid description.

5.3 What I've learned

Through the research, I have learned the perspective of people at that time, how they response to the oppression of the emerging new rule. And the most interesting thing is that how to communicate serious problems in a comic way, and this is amazing! I also learned that it's unwise to follow blindly! It may be beautiful to follow new things at the beginning as it appears good and news things are always attractive and easy to become popular. But people should awaken when it reveals its nature and resist it till the end!

Different histories can lead to different forms of literary works including drama. We should always constantly explore new forms of Drama which is extremely interesting and challenging!

References

- [1] Donald James Johnson, Jean Elliott Johnson. *The Human Drama World History: from 1900 to the present*. America: Markus Wiener; 2011.
- [2] Eugène Ionesco, Derek Prouse. *Rhinoceros*. New York: Grove Press, Inc.; 1960.
- [3] Samuel Beckett. *Waiting for Godot*. America: Grove Press; 2011.
- [4] Andrew Matthews, Tony Ross. *Julius Caesar*. Available from: www.orchardbooks.co.uk [Accessed 8th October 2022].
- [5] Jinkai, Huang. A mutated tragicomedy-Analysis of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. *Foreign Literature Review*. 2005; 3.
- [6] Zheng, Yang. *A history of Chinese and foreign drama for children*. Beijing: Tiandi Press; 2020.
- [7] Martine Essline. Introduction, *Absurd Drama*. Available from: www.notable-quotes.com [Accessed 16th January 2023].
- [8] Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. London: Penguin Great Ideas/Efinito; 2022.