

The Theatre of the Absurd

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textbook."

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Martin
Esslin

With a New
Foreword by
the Author

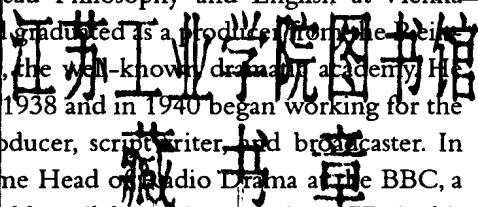
Third
Edition



MARTIN ESSLIN

The Theatre of the Absurd

Martin Esslin was born in Budapest and educated in Austria. He read Philosophy and English at Vienna University and graduated as a producer from the Reisinghardt Seminar, the well-known dramatic academy. He left Austria in 1938 and in 1940 began working for the BBC as a producer, script writer, and broadcaster. In 1963 he became Head of Radio Drama at the BBC, a position he held until his retirement in 1977. At his death in 2002 at the age of 83 he was Emeritus Professor of Drama at Stanford University.



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With a New Foreword by Martin Esslin



VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, JANUARY 2004

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Esslin, Martin, 1918—

The theatre of the absurd.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliography.

1. European drama—20th century—History and criticism.

I. Title.

PN1861 .E8

809.2

61-013814

Vintage ISBN: 1-4000-7523-8

www.vintagebooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

MME MARTIN: Quelle est la morale?
LE POMPIER: C'est à vous de la trouver.

Ionesco, *La Cantatrice Chauve*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks for permission to make use of copyright material are due to: Faber & Faber Ltd for quotations from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Embers*; John Calder (Publishers) Ltd for quotations from Beckett's *Molloy*, Ionesco's essay 'The world of Ionesco' in *International Theatre Annual*, no. 2 and from Ionesco's plays *Victims of Duty*, *Amédée*, *Improvisation*, and *The Killer* in Donald Watson's translation; M. Jean Genet and his translator Mr Bernard Frechtman for quotations from *Deathwatch* and *The Blacks* (published in the U.K. by Faber & Faber Ltd and in the U.S.A. by Grove Press); Methuen & Co. Ltd for quotations from Harold Pinter's plays *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, and *The Dwarfs*; Mrs W. B. Yeats for an extract from 'The trembling of the veil' in the volume *Autobiographies*; Mr N. F. Simpson for a quotation from *A Resounding Tinkle*; and the *Observer* for permission to quote from articles by Eugène Ionesco and Kenneth Tynan. M.B.

FOREWORD FORTY YEARS ON

THIS book first appeared almost exactly forty years ago – in the spring of 1961 – in an epoch which, as one looks back on it, seems almost as remote and different from the present as, say the 1860s or the 1760s. And if continued demand for this text has prompted its reissue in 2001, its nature and function have inevitably changed by the action of time.

I was motivated to write it at the end of the 1950s by impatience, even rage, with theatre critics who seemed to me to have missed the importance and beauty of plays that had deeply moved me when I ran across them, almost by chance, in little theatres on the Paris Left Bank while reporting on boring NATO or OEEC conferences for the BBC World Service.

What had started as a polemic then, had, by the early 1980s, duly updated and expanded, become a history and a reference handbook on a significant segment of twentieth-century drama. The 'theatre of the absurd' had become part of the language. Whenever there was mayhem in a parliamentary debate from Washington to Luxembourg, I would, with some embarrassment, read headlines like 'Theatre of the Absurd in the Senate'.

And, indeed, a title that turns into a cliché used by headline writers is a dangerous thing. I soon noticed that many people who talked about, or criticized, this book, had in fact never read more than its title. That title had seemed to them to sum up its contents – as they imagined them – and they were even ready and eager to criticize me for what they imagined it was saying. Those, who having, without reading it, thought that it tried to present a rigidly defined movement or school of drama, accused me of wrongly including this or

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that playwright. Interviewers who asked some of the authors involved the ludicrous question of whether they considered themselves members of the club or school of the absurd, and got answers in the negative, triumphantly 'unmasked' me as having been disastrously misguided. Yet, more than once, one of the playwrights concerned, such as Ionesco, would ring, me: 'Esslin, dans la nouvelle edition, tu as donné dix pages de plus a Beckett pourquoi seulement six a moi!'

In fact, anyone, who actually has read it, will know that the book tries to avoid rigid definitions and interpretations. When I had sent Beckett the draft of the chapter on him, he very graciously replied: '. . . I like the way you raise hares and then say they are better not pursued . . .', thus agreeing to my policy of avoiding any attempt at rigid interpretations of what these works 'really meant'.

The category suggested by the book's title had merely been intended to draw attention to certain features the works discussed had in common, different and diverse as they were; certain techniques in the handling of exposition, delineation of character, use of dream and hallucination, etc: in fact, elements that arose from the zeitgeist, the atmosphere of the time, rather than from deliberate theoretical considerations. Artists who follow their intuition are usually unaware of what their works may have in common with the general approach or atmosphere of their period. One might as well have asked a palaeolithic potter whether he considered himself part of the Magdalanian style.

The 1980 edition appeared at a time when the heyday of the playwrights it discussed was just about coming to an end. Hence, it was still possible to try to keep it as up-to-date as possible – the polemic had turned into a historical record and a book of reference.

A further twenty years on, in a new century, a new millenium, this text confronts a very different world: Beckett died in 1989, Ionesco in 1994, Adamov as early as 1970,

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Genet in 1986, Max Frisch in 1991, Dürrenmatt in 1990; Harold Pinter celebrated his seventieth birthday in 2000; and Vaclav Havel resides in the castle of Prague as president of the Czech republic. The secondary literature on these and the other playwrights dealt with has become so vast that the bibliography at the back would exceed the actual text in length.

And so the book, I hope, may acquire another status – no longer a polemic, no longer a source of topical reference – its main function now becomes, I believe, to provide an example of how, in its time, an emergent new tendency was recognised, described, discussed, located within a tradition as an attempt to present it to, and make it understood by, a largely uncomprehending public. It thus simply stands for itself, a milestone on the long road along which the art of drama travels through history – that broad highway into which many side roads debouch carrying new concepts, conventions and techniques to merge into the mainstream of traffic.

If the reference section remains unchanged, up-to-date information on its principal subjects is easily accessible in James Knowlson's monumental biography of Samuel Beckett *Damned to Fame* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); in Emmanuel Jacquart's brilliant edition of Ionesco's *Theatre Complet* (Paris: Gallimard, Ed. de la Pleiade, 1990); Edmund White's *Genet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993); and Michael Billington's *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996); as well as my own *Pinter the Playwright* (6th ed., London: Methuen, 2000).

Habent sua fata libelli: this book, like any living organism has undergone ups and downs of growth and various sea-changes, including translation into at least twelve languages. That it is still pursuing its course forty years after its first appearance perhaps compensates its author for some of the misgivings he occasionally felt for having launched it on its hazardous and controversial course.

London, March 2001

MARTIN ESSLIN

PREFACE (1961)

THIS is a book on a development in the contemporary theatre: the type of drama associated with the names of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, and a number of other avant-garde writers in France, Britain, Italy, Spain, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere.

Books on theatre subjects have a tendency to be ephemeral; in most bookshops the shelves with the autobiographies of star actors and collections of last year's hits have a tired look. I should never have written this book had I not been convinced that its subject had an importance transcending the somewhat confined world of theatre literature. For the theatre, in spite of its apparent eclipse through the rise of the mass media, remains of immense and growing significance – precisely because of the spread of the cinema and television. These mass media are too ponderous and costly to indulge in much experiment and innovation. So, however restricted the theatre and its audience may be, it is on the living stage that the actors and playwrights of the mass media are trained and gain their experience, and the material of the mass media is tested. The avant-garde of the theatre today is, more likely than not, the main influence on the mass media of tomorrow. And the mass media, in turn, shape a great deal of the thought and feeling of people throughout the Western world.

Thus the type of theatre discussed in this book is by no means of concern only to a narrow circle of intellectuals. It may provide a new language, new ideas, new approaches, and a new, vitalized philosophy to transform the modes of thought and feeling of the public at large in a not too distant future.

Moreover, an understanding of this kind of theatre, which is

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still misunderstood by some of the critics, should, I believe, also cast light on current tendencies of thought in other fields, or at least show how a new convention of this sort reflects the changes in science, psychology, and philosophy that have been taking place in the last half-century. The theatre, an art more broadly based than poetry or abstract painting, without being, like the mass media, the collective product of corporations, is the point of intersection where the deeper trends of changing thought first reach a larger public.

There has been some comment on the fact that the Theatre of the Absurd represents trends that have been apparent in the more esoteric kinds of literature since the 1920's (Joyce, Surrealism, Kafka) or in painting since the first decade of this century (Cubism, abstract painting). This is certainly true. But the theatre could not put these innovations before its wider public until these trends had had time to filter into a wider consciousness. And, as this book hopes to show, the theatre can make its own very original contribution to this new type of art.

This book is an attempt to define the convention that has come to be called the Theatre of the Absurd; to present the work of some of its major exponents and provide an analysis and elucidation of the meaning and intention of some of their most important plays; to introduce a number of lesser-known writers working in the same or similar conventions; to show that this trend, sometimes decried as a search for novelty at all costs, combines a number of very ancient and highly respectable modes of literature and theatre; and, finally, to explain its significance as an expression – and one of the most representative ones – of the present situation of Western man.

It has been rightly said that what a critic wants to understand he must, at one time, have deeply loved, even if only for a fleeting moment. This book is written from the point of view of a critic who has derived some memorable experiences from watching and reading the work of the dramatists of the Absurd; who is convinced that as a trend the Theatre of the Absurd is