

# Edward Albee and the Theater of the Absurd

## Definition of the Theater of the Absurd:

A kind of drama that presents a view of the absurdity of the human condition by the abandoning of usual or rational devices and the use of nonrealistic form, it expounds an existential ideology and views its task as essentially metaphysical. Conceived in perplexity and spiritual anguish; the *theater of the absurd* portrays not a series of connected incidents telling a story but a pattern of images presenting people as bewildered beings in an incomprehensible universe. The first true example of the theater of the absurd was Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950). The term was invented by the American critic Martin Esslin. The most widely acclaimed play of the school is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Other playwrights in the school, which flourished in Europe and America in the 1950's and 1960's, included Jean Genét, Arthur Adamov, Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit and Harold Pinter.

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What of this theater in which, for example, a legless old couple live their lives in twin ashcans, surfacing occasionally for food or conversation (Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*), in which a man is seduced, and rather easily, by a girl with three well-formed and functioning noses (Eugene Ionesco's *Jack*, or *The Submission*); in which, on the same stage, one group of Negro actors is playing at pretending to be Negro (Jean Genét's *The Blacks*)?

What of this theater? Is it, as it has been accused of being obscure, sordid, destructive anti-theater, perverse, and absurd (in the sense of foolish)? Or is it merely as I have so often heard it put, that, "The sort of stuff is too depressing, too...mixed up; I go to the theater to relax and have a good time"?

I would submit that it is this latter attitude—that the theater is a place to relax and have a good time—in conflict with the purpose of The Theater of the Absurd, in the sense that it is truly the contemporary theater, fascinating as it does man's condition as it is, is the Realistic theater of our time; and that the supposed Realistic theater—the term used here to mean most of what is done on Broadway—in the sense that it panders to the public need for self-congratulation and reassurance and presents a false picture of ourselves to ourselves, with an occasional very lovely exception, really and truly the Theater of the Absurd.