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That's Absurd! (Or is it?)

BY **Tulika Mohan**

When I heard President-elect Trump say 'bigly' (or big league? Phonicians are hard at work unraveling this modern mystery), I was immediately reminded by a similar, brutish figure in the 19th century mispronouncing 'Merde' in a crowded theatre in Paris. Theatre of the Absurd led to the creation of some of the most fascinating characters ever portrayed on stage. I do believe that some of the techniques and philosophies of that era still pervade through society today, and I hope to keep reworking these ideas to fit situations of our current social and cultural realities.

By juxtaposing the Absurdist movement in theater in the 19th century with the campaign and subsequent election of billionaire businessman Donald Trump, we can demonstrate that the 'absurd' is dynamic, constantly changing as society evolves.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This essay has been adapted to fit on these pages. Pages on the left-hand side are to be compared to those on the right-hand side. The essay follows.

‘Merdre!’ screeched Pere Ubu on the opening and closing night of *Ubu Roi* (translated to either King Ubu or King Turd), Alfred Jarry’s most popular play. It featured the greedy and bizarre Pere Ubu feeding the Polish army an excrement covered toilet brush and consequently inviting the common people over to his palace for a massive orgy (Alfred).

Unsurprisingly, his play caused a riot in one of the most upscale theaters of Paris on December 10, 1896, with many people running out of the theater. In fact, this was a typical phenomenon around that time. Several similar plays, defined by their nonsensical dialogues, cyclical plots, subversion of language and logic, and lack of meaning, fascinated and frustrated audience members and critics alike. The type of language demonstrated was a far cry from what was usually seen in Shakespearean or Elizabethan plays—absurdist plays possessed an almost dissonant quality, like they were toying with time. This increased suspense and anticipation for the audience, who were understandably very annoyed when the climax was something glib and meaningless.

These plays were later grouped together under the term ‘Theater of the Absurd,’ which was coined by literary critic Martin Esslin in his 1960 essay of the same name. Written by primarily European playwrights, these plays were shaped in the claustrophobic bubble of oppression, following the needlessly devastating destruction of the First World War.

For an actor, moving between a traditional acting role to an absurd *dramatis personae* from an absurdist play is no easy feat. In traditional theater, the character that the audience sees onstage is not the character initially envisioned by the playwright. Rather, it is a new character, a hybrid created by combining the essence of the role with the actor’s behavior and mannerisms. The actor would attempt to understand the background, ambitions and the intent of the character, creating a purpose if need be, in order to truly portray the character for the audience. In this way, the actor quickly gets lost in the role, and it’s

“You’re fired!” cackled Donald J. Trump to Sam Solovey in the first season of *The Apprentice*, a reality show that propelled him into the eyes of the public, and consequently shaped the character of the President-elect. It was a stroke of good fortune for both Trump and Mark Burnett, the creator of *Survivor*, to have met each other.

When they met to discuss the potential structure of the show, Burnett explained that the show would showcase the Trump empire better than any advertisement or business deal would—viewers would see his casinos, his hotels, his golf courses, and his apartment. They would finally have a chance to understand the life of the ostentatious business mogul. Of course, the show also required Trump to be the judge, jury and executioner of the contestants, who were all eager for a chance to work in leadership positions in Trump’s profitable businesses. Trump was initially hesitant about signing on to a television show. For a long time, Trump had been derisive of reality television, claiming it was for bottom-feeders of society (Kranish).

Though he was concerned about the time commitment the show represented, he also knew it would be a powerful means of showcasing his brand. Finally, Burnett convinced him to sign on by telling Trump that by starring in (and producing) his own TV, Trump would no longer be a product of journalists’ headlines and edited interviews. He would be in control of his own narrative.

For the entirety of his run on the show *The Apprentice*, Trump refused to memorize any lines. He would read the basic outline of the episode in advance and improvise it during the actual shooting of the show. His catchphrase “You’re fired!” was in fact ad-libbed, its iconic status cemented when the production crew cheered immediately afterwards.

As the show continued on for 14 seasons, Trump began to develop his signature style of speaking. The opening montage featured a subversive image of Trump in his limo with a homeless man on a bench

difficult to discern whether it is the actor or the character that bids the audience adieu at the end of a performance. In contrast, there is no ‘meaning-making’ process in theater of the absurd. Characters of absurdist plays don’t bother concealing their motivations, which are usually governed by a single thought without any regard for the consequences. How does the actor justify her character’s actions to herself (and, in turn, to the audience) if the character is irrational, impulsive, and not grounded in reality?

The only solution is for the actor to isolate and then remove the ‘ideal’ self that she has built up over the years, based on interactions with and social cues from the myriad individuals and elements in their environment. She then transforms into the ‘black sheep’ of society, who is not only capable but actually willing to act on deviant thoughts. By indulging her deepest, most outrageous instincts, she is free from the burden of societal expectations, of acting ‘normal’.

In this way, she becomes an amalgamation of her most authentic thoughts, perhaps even revealing her truest self to the audience. The character of *Ubu Roi*, for instance, was a caricature of the baser human instincts. He makes himself King of Poland and proceeds to kill everyone without batting an eye, all while the overall ambience of the production comes across as eerily childlike. Jarry expressed our unfiltered psychological states by objectifying them onstage (Ahmed).

Understandably, the theater of the absurd was initially met with incomprehension and rejection by audiences and critics alike. In fact, after watching Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, one critic summed up his experience by quoting one of the lines from the play, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Bennett). At first, people flocked to see *Waiting for Godot* and *The Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco simply because it was fashionable to express outrage about them at parties. Soon, however, they became eager to dissect each scene of the play, to understand the purpose behind creating a plotless production with grotesque characters and awkward, arrhythmic dialogue.

outside. It was essentially a gigantic promotion for his brand. On the pilot episode, he boasted, “I’m the largest real estate developer in New York. I’ve mastered the art of the deal and have turned the name Trump into the highest-quality brand. And as the master, I want to pass along some of my knowledge to somebody else.” He used brief, declarative sentences, pulled off both playful and vicious taunts to the finalists with equal aplomb, and fascinated the audience with his dramatic sense of timing. “I’ve never had lessons,” he said proudly, “I’ve always felt comfortable in front of the camera. Either you’re good at it or you’re not good at it” (Kranish).

The success of his TV show renewed questions about which aspects of Trump’s public persona reflected his true self and which were pure showmanship, aspects he perfected to draw in the public. Trump sometimes scoffed at the idea that he’d created a separate or different character that he played on the public stage, sometimes insisting that the things he said on TV were intended simply to provoke or entertain.

The show was a runaway success. It was the seventh most watched show of 2004, averaging about 21 million viewers every week. *The Apprentice* transformed Trump from a typical Richie Rich to a straight talking, Simon Cowell-esque politically incorrect truth teller, a persona that he carried into his candidacy for the highest public office in the country. Trump always had politics at the back of his mind—he considered running for presidency in 1988 and 2012 as a Republican, and actually ran a presidential campaign in 2000 for the nomination of the Reform Party.

When he at last secured the nomination of the Republican Party in July 2016, still performing and perfecting the persona he had played on *The Apprentice*, the media was left wondering what reasons were behind his long-running interest in politics.

Thus began the formulation of possible theories for what the absurdist playwright wanted to convey to the audience. Critics compared the techniques used in absurdist plays with other theatrical productions from different time periods and then focused on the similarities between the absurdist plays that were staged in the late 1950s and modernist plays that were staged around the end of the 19th century. The literary and artistic movement of Modernism became more prominent after the First World War, as more and more authors and artists began doubting and reassessing the foundations of civil society. For instance, Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabla* and *The Wild Duck* were performed as though an audience were not watching. In fact, actors went through rigorous training to ensure that they wouldn't acknowledge or even make eye contact with the audience present in order to preserve this carefully constructed illusion of realism (Harrison). Critics also found it useful to focus on the works and techniques of Bertolt Brecht, who may be the most obvious influence on the theater of the absurd. Brecht outlined the principle of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the estrangement effect, which involved "stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them" (Thomson). His techniques often involved harsh, bright stage lighting, or the pronouncement of stage directions. Brecht paved the way for absurdist theater, which aims to provoke the deepest level of the audience's awareness—to push them, frighten them, make them consciously assess their reactions to the happenings onstage.

Martin Esslin's use of the word 'absurd' alludes to Albert Camus' 1942 essay "Myth of Sisyphus," in which he argues that Sisyphus, condemned to push a boulder up a hill for all eternity, can be understood as happy. He knows that his task is absolutely meaningless and embraces that realization. He no longer has any illusions about his purpose in the world (Camus). Jean-Paul Sartre famously observed that "we are nothing and in action become conscious of that original nothingness."

Absurd strategies were therefore a method to cope with and come to terms with a universe devoid of meaning and logic. Martin Esslin

The mainstream media, for most part, implied that the suggestion that Donald Trump could become the 45th President of the United States was simply absurd. As the campaign continued and Trump seemed to become a viable candidate in the eyes of many, the media changed their outlook. Trump had been a spectator in the political arena for decades but made his way to the fore by becoming a major donor to the Republican Party. However, believing his candidacy to merely be a publicity stunt to revive a dying reality TV show, the media refused to take him seriously. However, the country did not—he gained ground in several states that should have been sure wins for Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party candidate and one of the most qualified individuals in US history to run for office. David Keene, the former chairman of the American Conservative Union, admitted, “It’s almost comical, except it’s liable to end up with him as the nominee” (Haberman). The press dismissed Trump’s initial lead as temporary, believing his success was largely due to his celebrity status. However, Trump’s unprecedented win led to the media’s hasty analysis of his past motivations and reasons, in an attempt to understand how and why he had resonated with so many people at a national level. They ‘discovered’ that politics had been Trump’s end game all along. Some believed that the ambition of becoming president was ‘birthed’ at the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner, where President Obama ridiculed his show *The Apprentice*, and Trump’s belief in the conspiracy that President Obama was not born in the United States (Schulman).

By linking incidents, events and conversations, the media wove a narrative that explained their failure of anticipating Trumps’ historic win. They dug up statements he had made years before, speculated over Trump’s ‘casual’ dinners with political advisors and polling agents such as Kellyanne Conway, and his famous endorsement of the 2012 Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, at a Trump property in Florida. The media’s control of the narrative extended in both directions, with famous talk show hosts like John Oliver and Samantha Bee as well as the cast of Saturday Night Live trivializing the possibility of his victory even weeks before the election results were revealed. They reached

attempts to explain the motives behind absurdist plays, nothing that “the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. While Sartre and Camus express the new content in the old convention, the theater of the absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed” (Esslin).

It should be noted that it took theater critics over 60 years to articulate why these plays stood in such stark difference to traditional theatrical productions. Researchers and critics continue to probe the matter, to see if they can predict when the next unorthodox theater style comes to the fore, what shape it will take, and what norms it will disrupt.

Critics echoed the words of the playwright Joe Orton from his play *What the Butler Saw* (1969): “You can’t be rational in an irrational world, it’s not rational.” By tracing the roots of theater and finding traces of established techniques in absurdist plays, critics gradually came to accept the theater of the absurd as a well-researched and precise art form that they had anticipated all along.

Today, people rush to see re-stagings of famous absurdist plays in their local theaters. These productions are enjoyed, not reviled, and techniques that were considered abhorrent are now emulated. The use of crass language, lack of plot, and clown-like characters is now considered to be high-brow, purposeful sophisticated art. What was first considered ‘absurd’ was gradually accepted as convention, no longer breaking the wall as it did before. The absurd is not solely a political and cultural movement from the 1960s. Rather, it is the continuous subversion and embracement of what mainstream society considers normal and expected.

heights of political parody never before summited, continuing to ridicule Trump after his narrow victory.

To this date, people remain in disbelief about the election results. Campaigns on Change.org to restructure the executive branch of the government and dismantle the electoral college have attained considerable Internet traction. At the same time, reporters continue to tug at the seams of political history, attempting to find a similarly disreputable figure from the past that had won against all odds. Others hastily begin writing biographies of the President-elect, guaranteed to fly off shelves. The questions that political pundits and elites must answer seem insurmountable—was this election just an aberration in the well-researched and measured voting behaviors of Americans, or does it set a new precedent for how campaign strategies will work in swing states? Was becoming president a long-time ambition of Trump's, as the media suggested, or was it a series of random actions made by the businessman that somehow resonated with the public?

While a large section of America mourned for their nation, many rejoiced. For them, this unabashedly blunt, anti-establishment businessman with the goal of building a wall between US and Mexico and creating a Muslim registry was a long time coming. They believed America was finally returning to her roots, correcting the prolonged deviance that the last few decades represented. The country would return to the ideal political and economic system that had been envisioned by the Founding Fathers. This fraction of the American voters looked past Trump's derogatory remarks about minorities, women, and the differently abled, remarks which had come under serious scrutiny a few years prior. Eight years ago, the mere idea of a biracial president of the United States might have been absurd. History, with all its triumphs, failures, twists, and ironies, tells us everything and nothing at once. It reveals several possibilities, both plausible and implausible. Which of these is more likely to occur—if at all? The future is unknown but imaginable, and humanity will continue its obsessive fascination with predicting it.

Thus we observe that absurdism is a fluid concept. Since time makes permeable the boundaries between the absurd and the normal, we can hypothesize that everything that exists within the realm of possibility is absurd. Alternately, and more optimistically, we can state that nothing is absurd and anything is possible.

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TULIKA MOHAN '20 completed this essay for her ID1 course, Lose Thyself, with Professor Elijah Quetin, in Fall 2016. Writing Program staff selected it as a prize-winning submission; it has the most original form of any piece published in essay to date. In her free time, Tulika likes to hike in LA and pet the dogs she finds on the trail.