An Absurd Association: Re-viewing Edward Albee’s Eclectic Sixties

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Abstract

This essay traces the origin of the misconception, found in reviews, that Albee belongs in the theatre of the absurd. The paper covers early plays that initiated this miscategorization—The Zoo Story, The Sandbox, The American Dream, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, and A Delicate Balance—as discussed by reviewers in leading journals: New York Times, New Yorker, Village Voice, Nation, New Republic, New York Review of Books, Times Literary Supplement, Spectator, Educational Theatre, Journal/Theatre Journal, tdr, and Hudson Review. The literature review provides comprehensive coverage of how Albee's reviewers arrived at this misinterpretation by conflating absurdism with bleakness, minimalism, abstraction, existentialism, and farce. While he may adopt some absurdist conventions, according to Martin Esslin's definition, Albee primarily dramatizes the realistic theme of familial antagonism, not the absurdist theme of persistence despite futility, which reflects his eclectic combination of conventional and experimental elements.

It is commonplace in America and abroad that Edward Albee is a member of the theatre of the absurd. For instance, Jeane Leure remarks in her review of The Man Who Had Three Arms, for Theatre Journal in 1989 that Albee uses the character “Himself” to lament “the absurdity of human existence.” 1 Writing for the Times Literary Supplement, Muriel Zagha dubs a 2004 production of The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? an “absurdist fable.” 2 Michael Feingold of The Village Voice characterizes the 2010 performance of Me, Myself & I as an “absurd

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melodrama.”3 While the consensus among these reviewers seems to be that Albee is an absurdist, in analyzing the reviews of his plays from his debut off Broadway to the production of his first Pulitzer Prize winning play, it becomes apparent that Albee’s connection to the absurd rarely extends beyond a surface level association. Albee may adopt the conventions of absurdist theatre—such as bleakness, minimalism, abstraction, existential angst, and fabulous situations—that Martin Esslin identified in The Theatre of the Absurd, but his plays more often depict antagonism within familial relationships than the philosophical meaning of the absurd. This is not to suggest that Albee failed as a playwright because he neglected to write consummate absurdist plays. On the contrary, Albee’s originality largely derives from his ability to generate eclectic plays that combine elements from his experimental and conventional predecessors.

This argument relies on Albert Camus’s definition of absurdity, which he broadly outlined in The Myth of Sisyphus as comic persistence despite tragic futility. Camus wrote the Myth in the grim moments following World War II, to explain, as he remarks in his preface, a universal situation in which humankind as a whole now lacks a metaphysical justification for its existence.4 In the essay, he writes that the journey of the absurd figure lies in nostalgically seeking after meaning in the universe, finding the world unresponsive, and nonetheless enduring through the chaos. In Camus’s words:

> The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.5

The absurd figure’s cosmic nihilism, the belief that the universe itself has no essential meaning, leads to a philosophical nihilism, the idea that human life is also meaningless.6 But, instead of choosing to commit suicide, which would

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5 Ibid., 60.
6 Ibid., 117.