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Sea Change: Eastern European Theatre of the Absurd

Eric Kildow

In 1968, Soviet tanks, backed by troops from Warsaw Pact nations, entered Prague and Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. Sent to crush a liberal movement called the "Prague Spring" led by Communist party chair Alexander Dubcek (1921-2992), they enforced "socialist brotherhood" at the point of a gun. While the West was outraged, Czechoslovakia and other nations, such as Hungary and Poland, who had their own reforms suppressed, did not fail to notice the irony. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (1907-1982) justified the invasions by stating that "each man must choose between joining our [the Soviet] side or the other side. Any attempt to avoid taking sides . . . must end in fiasco."¹ This black and white approach set the stage for a deepening of the Cold War, and also reminded people in the dissident community of the inherent absurdity of their situation. Many capitalized on this absurdity to create an Eastern European Absurd theatre.

Here I intend to explore the Theatre of the Absurd as it grew on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain. Marketa Stankiewicz questioned why two regions that sat in such isolation from one another were able to spawn such similar art forms.² Martin Esslin speaks of such writers as Vaclav Havel, Slawomir Mrozek, and Tadeusz Rozewicz alongside better known Absurdist luminaries such as Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov. Indeed, it seems an interesting coincidence that Adamov and Ionesco are from Eastern Europe (Armenia and Romania, respectively), and though they studied extensively in France and did their work in French, they still provide at least a circumstantial tie to the East. That there are ties cannot be denied, but what of it? While there were similarities of situation on both sides of the Iron Curtain, it should be noticed that there was a resounding difference in the ramifications in each region. The revolt of the East was far more social in nature, comprising what Robert Brustein called "social revolt," which differentiates it from Western Absurdism and its highly detached "existential revolt."

Social revolt is possibly Robert Brustein's most self-explanatory form of revolt as outlined in his work *Theatre of Revolt*. "Social drama, in short, represents modern life for the purpose of whipping and scourging it."³ All of the veneers are stripped away and we are shown the ugly realities in order that the playwright may reveal the problems which are inherent in our society. It stands between the resigned frustration of Existential revolt and the soul wrenching struggle of Messianic revolt. He has no alternative to what he seeks to tear down,

and yet is becoming more skeptical of human perfectibility.⁴ We cannot push God from his throne, and while we're becoming more skeptical of human perfectibility, we haven't given up yet.⁵ Instead we are set up against our society, attempting to make changes here in the world. Our revolt has moved down a rung on the universal food-chain, god no longer enters into it and corrupt heroes fight the temporal authorities instead of the divine. The social order is "whipped and scourged" by the playwright because he still desires to change his lot on Earth, but realizes that he cannot be a god.

Absurdist Theatre is best known for its existential revolt. Yet, in Communist Eastern Europe, existential revolt equated to a social revolt. Just as the Western Absurdist questioned the nature of our existence and fought resignedly against what they saw as meaningless, so too did their brothers and sisters behind the Iron Curtain. In the USSR and Eastern Europe "Soviet-type socialism proudly proclaimed that it had answers to all these questions [those of the meaning of life] and, moreover, that it was capable of eliminating suffering and setting all injustices right."⁶ To even question these assertions, as Absurdism does in its existential revolt, rebels against the society the Communists promoted. Martin Esslin points out that a theatre which makes modern psychological doubts concrete on the stage for all to see would indeed be perfect for commenting on a society which was inherently absurd.⁷ The Theatre of the Absurd has often been lambasted as being socially unaware, and this may seem true in Western Europe.⁸ However, when the Absurd questions existence in Eastern Europe, it is demonstrating a high degree of social consciousness. After all, to question the validity of ourselves runs immediately counter to the dogma of the Communists, and therefore calls into question their political validity by proxy. Brezhnev summed it up when he quoted Lenin in his infamous Brezhnev Doctrine: "A man living in a society cannot be free from the society."⁹

The next step in Brustein's hierarchy of theatrical revolt is known as "existential revolt," which only bears passing resemblance to the intellectual movement of Existentialism. After we come to the conclusion that we cannot change anything, we enter what he calls "existential revolt." It is "fatigued and hopeless, reflecting—after the disintegration of idealist energies—exhaustion and disillusionment."¹⁰ Indeed, after looking at the monolithic totalitarian power ranged against the dissident, one can see how these artists would see no real hope for significant change, and as such there is a note of existential discord in their works. Havel's *Largo Desolato* shows us a dissident who has essentially been crushed and paralyzed not only by his resistance to the regime, but also by his friends. *The Memorandum* similarly shows us a man set up against a system he cannot possibly hope to beat, and as such we can find the seeds of existential discord even in the social revolt of the East's Absurd Theatre.

It should also be noted that the theatres, and theatre practitioners, of Eastern Europe itself constituted a revolt. After the 1989 revolution, Czechoslovakia elected Absurdist playwright Vaclav Havel to be its president, a post in which he served until after 2000, and several leading theatrical figures entered the cabi-

net. This seemed the natural evolution of their role as opposition leaders. Indeed, Olga Chtiguel pointed out that "Czech off-mainstream theatres assumed a leading role in shaping the political consciousness of their countrymen and women."¹¹ The Czech "stone theatres"¹² sat firmly underneath the thumb of the Communist regime and their Soviet allies, so therefore other theatres were established. It was these theatres which staged the revolt. One commentator even asserted that, if he were dictator, he would only allow productions of Ionesco, in order to make real life seem more sensible. Yet Marketa Stankiewicz points out that staged Absurdity often enlightens people to the absurdity of their own lives.¹³ The very performance of this unapproved theatre, much of which was Absurd in content, began to inform the people of their condition and comment on the society, and as such constituted social revolt.

Even Western European Absurdism undergoes a sort of sea change when it crosses the Iron Curtain. Dr. Jan Culik reports that *Waiting for Godot*, a play which is often considered to present futilism, was received as a beacon of hope in both Poland and Czechoslovakia.¹⁴ While it was, admittedly, hope against hope, the perceptions of this piece is slightly different in the East than it is in the West. There is another story regarding a production of Shaw's *Saint Joan*. In 1966, in Prague, the audience burst into laughter at the Earl of Warwick's line "My congratulations on your rehabilitation" as opposed to waiting for Joan's "funny" response.¹⁵ The line had a whole new meaning to the Czech and Polish audiences which it did not hold for their Western European counterparts. The effect was exactly the same with *Godot* and, one can assume, with all other Absurd pieces which made it past the censors. The differing situation had changed even the most innocuous and apolitical statement into one of highest social satire. Therefore, even if a piece was not written for the purpose of commenting on Soviet oppression, the most innocuous lines could be construed as a criticism, and therefore would constitute a social revolt even if it was not intended by the playwright.

Finally, unlike Absurdism in the West, rationalism is not only used, but also encouraged. "The Western absurd play is aimed at the audience's response to irrationality, the Eastern absurd play at its response to rationality."¹⁶ Much like Brecht's socialist *verfremdung*, the audience is presented that which is rational (at least in the rhetoric and paradigm of the Communist regime) and asked to mull it over. Are they living up to their promises? Is what they have done to this man right? Are they completely wrong? And yet, true to the nature of social revolt, they offer no sort of alternatives. They just bring it to light that the situation as it is in intolerable. This rationality is perhaps Eastern Absurdism's largest split from that of the West, where the audience was expected to respond to the irrationality they saw, not to think reasonably.

Yet, it must be noted that there was a great deal of social revolt in Eastern European theatre, so why such a focus on the Absurdism that grew there? There were many forms of protest theatre, from improvised performances to actor generated "Text-Appeal" performances, but it seems the most common pieces

we have with us today are the absurd ones. "Paradoxically, with a new democracy, the most progressive and non-conventional theatres of the '70s and '80s face the rather puzzling problem of what their function as well as their artistic and intellectual merits will be."¹⁷ Now that the revolution is complete the social revolt is no longer necessary. The society which it is revolting against has been swept aside, so the timeliness of their work is over. Stankiewicz points out that plays needed passports to cross the Iron Curtain, and the Absurdist pieces contained that grain of existential revolt with which they are built.¹⁸ That gives these pieces, relevance and, appeal in the West that works such as "Text-Appeal" did not, and as such they remain an important part of our theatrical canon. "Scanning Western comments on East European plays one discovers that the political fable of East Europe has to pass the existentialist-absurd test before it becomes respectable in the West."¹⁹ It seems that only the Absurd pieces have passed this test, and thus continue to warrant study.

Despite their political, cultural, and forced geographic isolation from one another, Eastern and Western Europe both birthed leading figures in the Theatre of the Absurd. While the movement is largely the same in both places, conditions in Eastern Europe led Absurdism to be far more socially conscious than its Western counterpart. From rebelliously performing Absurd works off the mainstream, the exercise of reason, the Communist conviction that existence equaled society, and the differing perspectives of the audience, the Eastern theatre of the Absurd became a forum not only to address man's alienation, but also the weaknesses of a society supposedly designed to provide all answers. That these plays remain with us is a testament to their depth and appeal to the West, but they remain at heart fundamentally different in their aim. They began by commenting on a society that was largely swept away in 1989 and 1990, but they still speak to us.

Notes

¹Leonid Brezhnev. *Modern History Sourcebook: The Brezhnev Doctrine, 1968*. Novosti(trans), Halsall, Paul (ed). 11/28/2005 <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1968brezhnev.html>> August 1997.

²Marketa Goetz Stankiewicz, "The Metamorphosis of the Theatre of the Absurd or the Jobless Jester." *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 7 (April 1972), p. 57.

³Robert Brustein. *The Theatre of Revolt*. Chicago, IL (Elephant Paperbacks 1991), 24.

⁴Brustein, 24-25.

⁵Brustein, 25.

⁶Jan Culik. "The Theatre of the Absurd: The West and the East." 12/01/05 <<http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/Salvonic/Absurd.htm>> 2000.

⁷Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York, NY (Vintage Books, 2001), 317.

⁸Martin Esslin, "Brecht, the Absurd, and the Future." *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer 1963), 44.

⁹Brezhnev.

¹⁰Brustein, 27.

¹¹Olga F. Chtiguel, "Without Theatre, the Czechoslovak Revolution Could Not Have Been Won", *IDR(1988-)*, Vol. 34, No.3 (Autumn 1990), 89.

¹²Stankiewicz, 62.

¹³Jan Culik. "The Theatre of the Absurd: The West and the East."

¹⁴Stankiewicz, 54.

¹⁵Stankiewicz, 57.

¹⁶Chtiguel, 89.

¹⁷Stankiewicz, 57.

¹⁸Stankiewicz, 56.

Works Referenced

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Eric Kildow is an MFA student at the Savannah College of Art and Design. This paper was a prizewinner in the 2006 Scholars Debut Panel sponsored by the Texas Educational Theatre Association.