...These plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries; they must therefore appear as a provocation to people who have come into the theatre expecting to find what they would recognize as a WELL-MADE PLAY.

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<th>WELL-MADE PLAY</th>
<th>THEATRE OF THE ABSURD</th>
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<td>present characters that are well-observed and convincingly motivated</td>
<td>often contain hardly any recognizable human beings and present completely unmotivated actions</td>
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<td>entertain by the ding-dong of witty and logically built-up dialogue</td>
<td>dialogue [in some of these plays] seems to have degenerated into meaningless babble</td>
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<td>have a beginning, a middle, and a neatly tied-up ending</td>
<td>often start at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily</td>
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...If the critical touchstones of conventional drama did not apply to these plays, this must surely have been due to a difference in objective, the use of different artistic means, to the fact, in short, that these plays were both creating and applying a different convention of drama. It is just as senseless to condemn an abstract painting because it lacks perspective or a recognizable subject-matter as it is to reject Waiting for Godot because it has no plot to speak of. In painting a composition of squares and lines an artist like Mondrian does not want to depict any object in nature, he does not want to create perspective. Similarly, in writing Waiting for Godot Beckett did not intend to tell a story, he did not want the audience to go home satisfied that they knew the solution to the problem posed in the play. Hence there is no point in reproaching him with not doing what he never sought to do; the only reasonable course is to try and find out what it was that he did intend. ...

A term like the Theatre of the Absurd must therefore be understood as a kind of intellectual shorthand for a complex pattern of similarities in approach, method, and convention, of shared philosophical and artistic premises, whether conscious or subconscious, and of influences from a common store of tradition. A label of this kind therefore is an aid to understanding, valid only in so far as it helps to gain insight into a work of art. It is not a binding classification; it is certainly not all-embracing or exclusive. A play may contain some elements that can best be understood in the light of such a label, while other elements in the same play derive from and can best be understood in the light of a different convention...

...while most plays in the traditional convention are primarily concerned to tell a story or elucidate an intellectual problem, and can thus be seen as a narrative or discursive form of communication, the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are primarily intended to convey a poetic image or a complex pattern of poetic images; they are above all a poetical form. Narrative or discursive thought proceeds in a dialectical manner and must lead to a result or final message; it is therefore dynamic and moves along a

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1 entire article can be found here: http://www.samuel-beckett.net/AbsurdEsslin.html
2 chart format by Purvis; text excerpted from Esslin
definite line of development. Poetry is above all concerned to convey its central idea, or atmosphere, or mode of being; it is essentially static.

If, in the traditional play, the action goes from point A to point B, and we constantly ask, 'what's going to happen next?', here [with Theatre of the Absurd] we have an action that consists in the gradual unfolding of a complex pattern, and instead we ask, **what is it that we are seeking? What will the completed image be when we have grasped the nature of the pattern?** Thus in Arrabal's *The Two Executioners*...we realise at the end of the play that the theme is the exploration of a complex image of the mother-son relationship; in Albee's *Zoo Story* it is only in the last lines of the play that the idea of the entire dialogue between Jerry and Peter falls into place, as an image of the difficulty of communication between human beings in our world. ...

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<td>implicit assumption that the world does make sense [based on a stable set of values, be they religious or political, etc.], that reality is solid and secure, all outlines clear, all ends apparent</td>
<td>express a sense of shock [&quot;of wonder, of incomprehension,…of despair&quot;] at the absense, the loss of any such clear and well-defined systems of beliefs or values</td>
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[Reasons for] such a sense of disillusionment:

- the waning of religious faith that had started with the Enlightenment and led Nietzsche to speak of the 'death of God' by the eighteen-eighties
- the breakdown of the liberal faith in inevitable social progress in the wake of the First World War
- the disillusionment with the hopes of radical social revolution as predicted by Marx after Stalin had turned the Soviet Union into a totalitarian tyranny
- the relapse into barbarism, mass murder, and genocide in the course of Hitler's brief rule over Europe during the Second World War, and
- the spread ["in the aftermath of that war"]of spiritual emptiness in the outwardly prosperous and affluent societies of Western Europe and the United States

["In its present form the Theatre of the Absurd is a post-war phenomenon."]

Such a sense of loss of meaning must inevitably lead to a questioning of the recognised instrument for the *communication* of meaning: language. Consequently the Theatre of the Absurd is to a very considerable extent concerned with a critique of language, an attack above all on fossilized forms of language which have become devoid of meaning. The conversation at the party which at one moment seemed to be an exchange if information about the weather, or new books, or the respective health of the participants, is suddenly revealed as an exchange of mere meaningless banalities. The people talking about the weather had no intention whatever of really exchanging meaningful information on the subject; they were merely using language to fill the emptiness between them, to conceal the fact that they had no desire to tell each other anything at all. In other words, from being a

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3 chart format by Purvis; text excerpted from Esslin
4 format by Purvis; text excerpted from Esslin
noble instrument of genuine communication language has become a kind of ballast filling empty spaces. And equally, in a universe that seems to be drained of meaning, the pompous and laborious attempts at explanation that we call philosophy or politics must appear as empty chatter [like you perceive in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern]. In *Waiting for Godot* for example Beckett parodies and mocks the language of philosophy and science in Lucky's famous speech. Harold Pinter, whose uncanny accuracy in the reproduction of real conversation among English people has earned him the reputation of having a tape-recorder built into his memory, reveals that the bulk of everyday conversation is largely devoid of logic and sense, is in fact nonsensical. It is at this point that the Theatre of the Absurd can actually **coincide with the highest degree of realism**. For if the real conversation of human beings is in fact absurd and nonsensical, then it is the WELL-MADE PLAY with its polished logical dialogue that is unrealistic, while the absurdist play may well be a tape-recorded reproduction of reality. Or, in a world that has become absurd, the Theatre of the Absurd is the most realistic comment on, the most accurate reproduction of, reality. ...

[Excerpt from Esslin’s “The Theatre of the Absurd” (1960): If the dialogue in these plays consists of meaningless clichés and the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrases—how many meaningless clichés and stereotyped phrases do we use in our day-to-day conversation? If the characters change their personality halfway through the action, how consistent and truly integrated are the people we meet in our real life? And if people in these plays appear as mere marionettes, helpless puppets without any will of their own, passively at the mercy of blind fate and meaningless circumstance, do we, in fact, in our overorganized world, still possess any genuine initiative or power to decide our own destiny? The spectators of the Theatre of the Absurd are thus confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will.]

The ancient traditions combined in a new form in the Theatre of the Absurd are:

- the tradition of miming and clowning that goes back to the *mimus* of Greece and Rome
- the *commedia dell’arte* of Renaissance Italy
- such popular forms of theatre as the pantomime or the music-hall in Britain
- the equally ancient tradition of nonsense poetry
- the tradition of dream and nightmare literature that also goes back to Greek and Roman times
- allegorical and symbolic drama, such as we find it in medieval morality plays, or in the Spanish *auto sacramental*
- the ancient tradition of fools and mad scenes in drama, of which Shakespeare provides a multitude of examples
- the even more ancient tradition of ritual drama that goes back to the very origins of the theatre where religion and drama were still one

[Absurdist plays] present a disillusioned, harsh, and stark picture of the world. Though often couched in the form of extravagant fantasies, they are nevertheless essentially realistic, in the sense that they never shrink the realities of the human mind with its despair, fear and loneliness in an alien and hostile

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universe. ... The realism of these plays is a psychological, and inner realism; they explore the human subconscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence. Nor is it quite correct that these plays, deeply pessimistic as they are, are nothing but an expression of utter despair. It is true that basically the Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. [“the recognition of all these bitter truths will have a liberating effect: if we realize the basic absurdity of most of our objectives we are freed from being obsessed with them and this release expresses itself in laughter.”6]

[Other characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd mentioned in “The Theatre of the Absurd”:]

- characters hardly have any individuality and often even lack a name
- halfway through the action characters tend to change their nature completely
- laws of probability as well as those of physics are suspended
- words seem to go counter to the actions of the characters on the stage, to degenerate into lists of words and phrases from a dictionary or traveler’s conversation book, or to get bogged down in endless repetitions like a phonograph record stuck in one groove
- deep sense of human isolation and of the irremediable character of the human condition
- shows the world as an incomprehensible place
- emotional identification with the characters is replaced by a puzzled, critical attention
- tendency to externalize and project outwards what is happening in the deeper recesses of the mind
- deliberately attempts to renew the language of drama and to expose the barrenness of conventional stage dialogue
- [language is] an earnest endeavor to penetrate to deeper layers of meaning and to give a truer, because more complex, picture of reality in avoiding the simplification which results from leaving out all the undertones, overtones, and inherent absurdities and contradictions of any human situation
- audience is yet spurred on to attempt their own interpretation, to wonder what it is all about... invited to school their critical faculties
- an infinite number of possible interpretations
- the action does not proceed in the manner of a logical syllogism
- always confront the spectator with a genuine intellectual problem, a philosophical paradox, which he will have to try to solve even if he knows that it is most probably insoluble

6 excerpt from “The Theatre of the Absurd”