

Reality and Illusion in Modern Drama

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Absrtact

Critics point, usually in passing, to the phenomenon of mixing reality and illusion (life and art, fact and fantasy) in modern drama, but they seldom elaborate. And in their evaluation of individual plays they use words like "ambiguous", "dreamlike", and "nightmarish" to describe the mixture without discussing the reason(s) for its presence.

In this paper an attempt is made to discuss this feature of modern drama with reference to the dramatic movements responsible for its appearance. Its effect on the receptor also receives attention here.

Mixing reality and illusion, fact and fantasy, life and art in the very same play is a striking feature of modern drama. Mixing the two extremes in the very same play is not of course new, but in pre-modernist drama it is, generally speaking, a careful fusion of contrasted elements which is easy both to understand and analyse. In modern drama it is, however, a volatile combination of the two extremes which assumes varying degrees of ambiguity ranging from the simple to the complex depending on the philosophy and the technique(s) adopted by the playwright.¹ Small wonder that the spectator often finds himself asking questions like: Which is the real and which is the fictive here? Or is the whole thing a bad dream?

The question that leaps to one's mind now is: what is the source of this ambiguity? The answer is not far to seek. It seems to reside in the playwright's own definition of dramatic truth, a term that has been variably defined by the dramatic movements that followed realism and naturalism. All the so-called «revolts from realism» questioned the definition and offered new ones based not on objective, but on subjective internal reality, which in some cases (e.g. expressionism and surrealism) lean heavily on Freudian psychology.

In the following pages, the various definitions offered by the symbolists, the expressionists, the futurists, the dadaists, and the absurdists, in relation to the point under consideration (i.e. mixing reality and illusion) will be discussed in some detail.

II

The philosophy of the symbolists rested on a belief that the ephemeral objective world is not true reality, but a reflection of the unseen Absolute. This explains why they rebelled against the techniques adopted by both realism and naturalism. These techniques, according to the symbolists, were tools created to capture the transient. The only method to attain a vision of what the symbolists call the "essential idea", the "inner eternal reality" or the "ideal world" lies in the power of suggestion and evocation.

Grose and Kenworthy sum up the techniques adopted by symbolist playwrights when they write:

(Symbolist playwrights) brought symbolism into their works by using concrete images to express a larger abstract idea or emotion. The images were generally employed in some combination of two types: particular objects were used in **highly personal and private ways** by the playwright, and concrete images were used to suggest an ideal world apart from objective reality. In the latter case, playwrights **deliberately obscured objective reality** so that the images of the idealized world became clearer for the audience. (My Emphasis)²

Here the spectator not only has to contend with the ambiguous interrelation of what is real and what is fictive, but also with how the playwright presents his material. For the symbolist method, as mentioned above, is to suggest, not "to name. (The symbolists believed that «to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create»)³. When properly used, the method of indirection is capable of producing very good results, but when the symbolism is highly **personal** and deliberately vague or esoteric (this is one of the main criticisms levelled at the symbolists), and when the playwright deliberately obscures objective reality, the receptor has a hard time coming to terms with what is being presented.

I emphasize the word "personal" because symbolists believe that symbolism elevates the artist to the rank of "seer" or "**voyant**". In this respect J.A. Cuddon writes:

Baudelaire and his followers created the image of the poet as a kind of seer or **voyant**, who could see through and beyond the real world to the world of ideal forms and essences. Thus the task of the poet was to create this "other world" by suggestion and symbolism; by transforming reality into a greater and more permanent reality.⁴

This implies that reality is not only defined in various modes by different artists, but that it can also be defined variously in the works of the same artist. It also indicates that the artist is free to use his own personal and private symbolism which as happens in many cases, makes strict demands upon the imagination and intelligence of the receptor.

The receptor's problems are compounded in in symbolist drama, because, according to symbolist theory, the ideal world the playwright seeks to present is not only conveyed by the fusion of images, but also by the musical quality of the verse. (It should be pointed out here that symbolism brought the poet back to the theatre in the works of playwrights like Leonid N. Andreyev, Maurice Maeterlinck, Edmond Rostand, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats). The symbolists stressed the importance of the sound of the verse and, of necessity, the importance of meticulous craftsmanship to create the musical effects they require through words. This was however achieved at the expense of meaning. But this did not worry the symbolists, for they subscribed to the principle of "art for art's sake"

Ambiguity in general and the ambiguous interrelation of reality and illusion in particular, a characteristic of symbolist technique, can be seen in many plays. Maeterlinck's most important work **Pelléas and Mélisande** (1892), where atmosphere is more important than story, is an elusive, shadowy drama. In accordance with the tenets of symbolist drama, the dialogue is here characterised by suggestiveness and abounds in mysterious repetitions and silences.

Yeats's dramas - dismissed by many critics as literary, sentimental, obscure, esoteric and antitheatrical - furnish other examples to illustrate the point under consideration. Audiences were puzzled by the symbolic early play **The Shadowy Waters** (1900). This is also true of Yeats's later symbolist drama, especially **Four Plays For Dancers** (1921).⁵ Derived from classical Japanese Nō drama, they were much more demanding on audiences. These and many of the other plays were not accessible, because Yeats, who believed in occultism, had his own personal mythology - see his **A Vision** (1925) - which permeates his writings. It is worth noting here that audience-response did not worry Yeats in the least. On the contrary, he was pleased to have created a new form "distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way - an aristocratic form".⁶

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's early lyric dramas, which consist of interior monologues, were influenced by symbolism. After a decade of using the technique, Hofmannsthal, however, realised that it was not working and so reverted to more accessible dramatic forms.

The technique also appears in the later Hauptmann e.g. in **Die versunkene Glocke** (**The Sunken Bell**) (1896), in Synge's **The Well of the Saints** (1905), and in O'Casey's **Within the Gates** (1933). Owing to its fairy folklore and love interest, Hauptmann's **The Sunken Bell** remained his most successful play for years. Synge's **The Well of the Saints** has however remained one of his less popular plays and of O'Casey's complex play critical opinion remains divided.

III

Although the definition of dramatic truth in expressionism is not different from that in symbolism in that the expressionists were also against objective reality in the theatre

and in favour of subjective, internal reality, their methods of mixing reality and illusion were different, because their philosophy and production practices were different.

In expressionism the main principle is that "expression" determines form, and therefore every aspect of writing and producing the play. Thus the kind of reality displayed in the work is reality as expressed or seen by "the artist looking out from within, instead of, as with impressionism, reality as it affects the artist inwardly".⁷ Expressionism is therefore "an imposition on the outside world of the describer's concept of it, it is thus a subjective account of a subjective perception"⁸

In expressionist drama, the dramatic truth to be presented on the stage is that of the protagonist. All other characters in the play, and indeed the other aspects of the production, are exaggerated, distorted and emotionally charged. To dramatize the subjective, scenery, lighting, sound, and costumes are given prominent roles. Generally, the production elements strike the objective observer as arbitrary or illogical, but the objective observer must not forget that in this kind of drama, it is the mind of the hero that is being explored and that it is that mind that dictates the reality of the objects presented.

The relationship between the protagonist and the other characters in this kind of drama is rather odd. For in this kind of drama, writes Martin Esslin,

all other characters become either projections of the main character's own personality (hence expressionist drama is full of **Doppelgänger** figures, characters which are merely aspects of the hero's personality which have split off and have taken on an independent existence) or mere ciphers seen from the outside, "feeds" for the central character's musings with himself⁹.

In many expressionist plays only the "author-hero" is psychologically depicted. The subsidiary characters "are always types, virtually impersonal and frequently grotesque. The grotesquerie in expressionist drama stems from the fact that the protagonist's view of people is invariably determined by his personal prejudices".¹⁰

The expressionists went so far as to deny the subsidiary characters' names. "The Girl", "The Friend", "The Engineer", "The Workman", "A Man", "A Woman", "The Father", "The Mother", etc. were therefore used instead of proper names. George Kaiser's "Gas" trilogy - which consists of **The Coral** (1917), **Gas I** (1918), and **Gas II** (1920) - and **From Morn to Midnight** (1916) are classic examples. For in them as in many expressionist plays, characters remain nameless. In many a play even the protagonist is simply the "I" of the playwright. This is usually an undefined young man fighting his way to self-realization: Reinhard J. Sorge's **The Beggar** (1912) is a good example. The play does not only illustrate the point in question, but it also manifests other characteristics of expressionist drama, e.g. nameless characters and the stations (i.e. tableaux) in which they appear; a more or less formless structure heightened by fantasy; stream of consciousness theatricalized by means of floodlighting the part of the scene that occupies the hero's mind; the conflict between father and son, etc.

The primacy of language over plot and action is another striking feature of expressionist drama. (This was one of the factors responsible for its demise). In expressionist drama, which is a kind of monodrama (because, as pointed out above the focus is on the protagonist, the other characters being either "projections of his character" or "mere ciphers"), there is however no dialogue in the usual sense of the word. "Varying from short phrases (telegraphese) to long rhapsodies", it "lacks inter-personal communications"¹¹. The following is a good summary of the main characteristics of the language that figures in expressionist drama:

(The) language is frequently eminently untheatrical, consisting as it does of long, lyric monologues so intensely subjective in feeling as to seem almost incomprehensible. Often the expressionist dramatist uses an elliptical, telegram-like style in which syntax is compressed, often a staccato, machine-gun style abounding in stichomythic phrases but always there is the identifying characteristic of intense feeling. The expressionist does not make a statement: he lets loose what we have come to recognize as the expressionist

Schrei (scream)¹²

Short speeches appear in Walter Hasenclever's **Humanity** (1918) which is a good example to illustrate the most extreme form of expressionist reduction of language. Long speeches figure prominently in Sorge's **The Beggar**. The Poet's declamation of his ideals in The First Act and the Father's numerous outbursts about mankind in The Second and The Third Acts are good examples.

The use of dream sequences is one of the essential techniques employed in expressionist drama. It accounts for the fact that the atmosphere of this kind of drama is "often vividly dreamlike and nightmarish". This mood, writers J.L. Styan,

was aided by shadowy, unrealistic lighting and visual distortions in the set. A characteristic use of pause and silence, carefully placed in counterpoint with speech and held for an abnormal length of time, also contributed to the dream effect¹³

The dream sequence device, a short cut to expressionism, has been successfully used by non-German playwrights who, while subscribing to expressionist techniques, do not believe in expressionist philosophy e.g. George S. Kaufman and Mark Connelly in **Beggar on Horseback** (1924), John Howard Lawson in **Roger Bloomer** (1923), Denis Johnston in **The Old Lady Says "No"** (1929).

So much for expressionist philosophy and general technique. It is now time to deal with the point under consideration, viz mixing reality and illusion in this kind of drama. It is clear from this brief discussion of expressionist drama that certain aspects of the technique do not only lead to mixing reality and illusion, fact and fantasy, life and art, but that the resultant mixture is often so changeable that the spectator cannot always tell the two extremes apart. These aspects can be outlined as follows:

- In this kind of play "expression" determines form. Because it is the expression of the protagonist (often that of the author), whose mind does not believe in objective reality, the selection and arrangement of events tend to emphasize theatricality and not logical sequence (expressionist drama abounds in scenes which are not causally linked). The actual and the factual are rejected in favour of exaggeration and distortion to point up views on the issues in question. The views are real, the way they are presented is not.
- In expressionist drama the subsidiary characters are avatars of the hero's personality. This is obviously not "normal", but the significance of the process, at least from the psychological point of view, is not fictive.
- Characters and incidents in this kind of play are often grotesque. The grotesque may not strike us as real or natural but one of its essentials is that it should be presented "within a realistic framework"¹⁴. In this kind of play it lies in the playwright's aim to attack certain institutions, namely the family and by means of the family society.
- The dream sequence device. Here reality and illusion are mixed on a large scale.
- The nature of the language used in this kind of drama. The language does not strike the spectator as natural, but it seeks to redress a grievance (or a number of grievances) which, from the point of view of the protagonist, is real.

These aspects of technique do not help the spectator in answering the question: which is real and which is fictive here? Generally speaking, however, the fact that the play seeks to criticize or attack the real world (or aspects of it)¹⁵ is real. Moreover, the fact

that the play aims at revealing and projecting the inner feelings and experiences of the characters (especially the protagonist) is real. The rest, i.e. the how, in the majority of the plays, is fictive. The problem is that in a work of art it is difficult to separate "the what" from "the how" - hence the receptor's inability in many plays to see the wood for the trees.

IV

The main theorist of futurism was the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. The movement, which appeared in Italy during the first decade of the present century¹⁶, did not produce many major plays or playwrights. In this connection Martin Esslin points out that:

The Italian Futurists produced few plays of lasting value, perhaps because following their principles, their best work consisted in ultra-short sketches, which they called "syntheses" and which amounted to no more than a few lines, at best a page or two¹⁷.

Marinetti, however, produced a number of more substantial works of which the most important are two: **Poupées électriques** ("Electric Dolls") (1909) in which, in keeping with his belief in technological means, he uses robots to influence and to express the inner life of characters; and **Simultaneità** ("Simultaneity") (1915) in which, on a divided stage, he shows simultaneously, two completely different worlds which remain detached until in the end one of them suddenly invades the other and disrupts its activities.

Russia, where the movement was called Cubo-Futurism, produced the only other major futurist. The poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, one of its founders and a signatory of the cubo-futurist manifesto **A Slap in the Face of Public Taste** (1912), wrote four plays which are considered good examples of futurist-inspired drama. **Vladimir Mayakovsky** (1913) tells, in verse, the tragedy of a rebel who wishes to do away with "old" society and must therefore suffer isolation. It is a monodrama in which all the characters are emanations of the author. The other three plays, though more grotesque and satirical, are more accessible than this play. **Misteriya-Buff** (**Mystery-Bouffe**) (1918) is an allegorical extravaganza in which Mayakovsky uses verse, song, fantasy, and satire to depict the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat during the revolution. **The Bedbug** (1929) is a fantasy in which he uses satire, expressionism, farce and science fiction devices to portray the eventual dehumanization of mankind. **The Bathhouse** (1930) is also a fantasy in which he again uses science fiction devices to satirise petty officialdom.

These futurist plays were not created to reflect objective reality. Each was meant to create its own reality. The futurists deliberately repudiated naturalism and the copying of real life. Marinetti believed in "political and technological motifs and unpredictable turns of events that would disorient and shock the audience".¹⁸ And Mayakovsky believed in mixing styles and means and using "a grotesque language that is a highly original and ingenious welding of literary Russian, street jargon, and poster slogans"¹⁹.

Mixing reality and illusion, we notice, is one of the essentials of futurist drama. Mixing the two extremes was however done to disorient and shock the audience. To this end the futurists sought to compress time and space showing multiple unrelated scenes at the same time in one dramatic setting²⁰, e.g. Marinetti's **Simultaneità** mentioned above. This explains why they denounced most traditional forms of theatres and rejected

traditional theatres in favour of cafes, circuses and music halls.

What they called syntheses were "highly compressed dramatic pieces, intended to be demonstrations of that dynamic, autonomous, alogical, anti-psychological, abstract theatre" which they "advocated as an ideal"²¹. Adjectives like "alogical" and "anti-psychological" in this definition of "synthesis" (which is by the way a new definition of dramatic truth) explain why audiences were puzzled and irritated by futurist drama. This, however, was exactly what the futurists wanted, for "the presentations were deliberately calculated to provoke the wrath of audiences"²².

Theatre historians Grose and Kenworthy shed more light on futurist production practices when they write:

The entire production of the futurists was confrontational. Nontraditional performance forms, such as acting in the auditorium, were combined with a performance mix of forms often operating in conjunction with other happenings. A single audience focus on a single point or event was not readily possible. Readings, visual events, dances, traditionally acted stories, and dazzling displays of light and sound were sequentially or concurrently presented. Indeed, the atmosphere of the circus was appropriate for the totality of a futurist presentation, and the audience reaction was no doubt similar ²³.

Mixing actuality and vision in the other movements was difficult enough for the spectator. Here he has the added problem of distraction for, as stated above, "a single audience focus on a single point or event was not readily possible". The word "confrontational", used to describe the entire production at the beginning of the quotation, and in the last sentence to describe audience reaction, are significant: the production was chaotic and so it was only natural that audience response should be equally so.

V

Dadaism, a nihilistic anti-realism movement which emerged in Switzerland in 1916, aimed at destroying "the bourgeois concept of art as a sacred and solemn ritual"²⁴. The emphasis of the movement was therefore on the non-sensical, the grotesque and the shocking.

The Rumanian poet Tristan Tzara, the leading spokesman of the movement, wrote a number of manifestos which appeared between 1916-1920.²⁵ Negative and pointless, the movement disbanded a few years later. Although it did not produce major plays or playwrights, it did affect other revolts from realism, especially in the form of surrealism. It also provided the foundation for the so-called "happenings" or "theatrical happenings"²⁶ which emerged in the 1960s.

Like the futurist theatre, the dadaist rejected most inherited dramatic traditions as well as most conventions of traditional theatres. Disharmony replaced logical order in all things. For the dadaists believed that the world was mad and lacking in logical order and so insisted that the stage should reflect this "perceived reality". Language, story, music, and events were therefore manipulated to convey "nothing". "Nothing" was the motto of the dadaists. It meant no logic, no order, no meaning, and, above all, no optimism. In their lexicon "order = disorder; ego = non-ego; affirmation = negation" (Wright, 1981).²⁷

Dadaist drama, which for the most part has been lost, reflects the aspirations of the movement. One of its extant plays, Tristan Tzara's **Le Coeur à gaz (The Gas Heart)**

(1920) portrays monotony and illogic. The play consists of indentities or functions of the characters - these are various parts of the head (Mouth, Eye, Eyebrow, etc.). The play begins with the repetition of the phrases, "Statues jewels roasts" and "cigar pimple nose" and ends with each of the characters repeating the words: "Go lie down".

In dadaism we have a new definition of dramatic truth where the stress is on nihilism, destruction and meaninglessness. The stage, according to the dadaists, must reflect "this perceived reality". The fact that the movement was a reaction against World War I does not justify applying the war's principles of carnage and destruction to literature and the arts. What the dadaists called "this perceived reality" (i.e. the destructive actions related to the war) was after all a temporary affair. Moreover, a negative approach was not likely to help humanity or eliminate wars. It is small wonder, then, that the movement waned rapidly and died a natural death.

VI

In all revolts from realism (excluding dadaism and possibly futurism)²⁸ mixing reality and illusion is not a pointless exercise. In dadaism however mixing the two extremes does not only mislead the receptor, but also leads to his confusion.²⁹ However, as pointed out earlier, it was for obvious reasons, a short-lived movement. It is worth noting here that many of its adherents later joined the rising movement of surrealism.

Surrealism ("Super-realism"), another revolt from realism, flourished in France between the two world wars. The basic idea is derived from symbolism, expressionism, Freudian psychology, and, of course, dadaism.³⁰ There emerged a new definition of dramatic truth, based on all these movements. In this respect, Guillaume Apollinaire, the father of surrealism, writes in the preface to his play **Les Mamelles de Tirésias (The Breasts of Tiresias)** (1917).

To attempt if not a renewal of the theatre, at least a personal effort, I thought one should return to nature itself, but without imitating her in the manner of a photographer. When man wanted to imitate the action of walking he invented the wheel, which does not resemble a leg. He thus used Surrealism without knowing it.³¹

For Apollinaire, who coined the term "super-realism", surrealism means "truth to nature at a deeper and more expressive level than that of mere reproduction of surfaces"³².

After the death of Apollinaire in World War I, André Breton, a fervent admirer of Freud, became the leader and theoretician of the movement. In the three manifestos he issued (1924, 30, 34) on surrealsim, Breton (who thought that "there was a 'point' in the mind,..., where, beyond realism, one attained a new knowledge") argues for liberating the mind from logic and reason and recommends studying dreams and hallucinations and their effects and "the interpretation of the sleeping and waking conditions on the threshold of the conscious mind"³³.

In "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)", Breton defines surrealism as follows:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally by means of the written words, or in any othe manner - the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern³⁴.

The definition, we notice, stresses what the surrealists call "automatic writing". They

believe that "the automatic, illogical, uncontrolled fantasies and associations of the mind represent a higher reality than the realistic, deliberately manipulated world of practical life and ordinary literature"³⁵. In defence of the practice of automatic writing, Breton has this to say:

If such and such a sentence of mine turns out to be somewhat disappointing, at least momentarily, I place my trust in the following sentence to redeem its sins: I carefully refrain from starting it over again or polishing it. The only thing that might prove fatal to me would be the slightest loss of impetus. Words, groups of words **which follow one another**, manifest among themselves the greatest solidarity. It is not up to me to favor one group over the other. It is up to a miraculous equivalent to intervene - and intervene it does³⁶.

The defence does not only stress the concepts of free association and automatic writing, but it also decries, by implication, concepts like art and talent, because these imply that the artist is in complete control of his materials. In practice the surrealist tries to express "the workings of the unconscious mind and to synthesize these workings with the conscious mind". He tends to let his work "develop non-logically (rather than illogically), so that the results represent the operations of the unconscious"³⁷. The new reality or superreality (resulting from the synthesis of the workings of the unconscious mind with the conscious mind, a process which is allowed to develop non-logically), according to the surrealists, "was to be free from societal conventions, such as commonly defined morality and commonly held notions of aesthetic correctness"³⁸.

In the field of dramatic art, the playwright, in adherence to the main principles of surrealism, rejects normal logic and order and uses a mixture of art forms to create what the surrealists call a new realism or surrealism. Thus dramatic production assumes a superreality not different from that of the futurists, in the way theatrical and nontheatrical forms of entertainment are mixed. Here extremes are allowed to intermingle freely, e.g. fact and fantasy, the presentational and the representational, comedy and tragedy, the world of the circus and that of the legitimate theatre. Like Alfred Jarry's **Ubu roi** (1896), surrealist plays abound in quick scenes where characters wear masks and move like robots. Like the futurists, the surrealists rejected everything conventional, but unlike the futurists, they tried to bring some order and logic into their production practices.

Surrealism did not however produce masterpieces of its own. Apollinaire's well-known play **Les Mamelles de Tirésias** does not live up to the theories of its author. The play (a humorous, nonsensical verse sketch in two acts and a prologue) which purports to deal with feminist issues³⁹ is famous for its preface which became a manifesto of surrealism.

Of the many plays André Breton wrote with others, **S'il vous plait (If You Please)** (1920), written in collaboration with Philippe Soupault, is cited as an example of "automatic writing". The play, which consists of four acts and presents three different situations and groups and characters, is famous for its irrational dialogue and the absence of its fourth act- the fourth act is a note in which the authors say that they do not want the fourth act to be printed.

The only important surrealist dramatist was Jean Cocteau. **La Machine infernale (The Infernal Machine)** (1934) is a good example to illustrate the surrealist elements in his work. In the reworking of the Oedipus myth in this play, he skillfully mixes fact and fantasy in the best surrealist manner possible. Mixing fact and fantasy in the best surrealist manner is not however good news for the spectator who has to come to grips

with the non-logical and the inexplicable in surrealist works.

From the discussion in this section, it would seem that to be able to appreciate surrealist work, one must be well-versed in, among other things, the interpretation of dreams, the workings of the unconscious, and abnormal psychology generally, which represent a formidable challenge to the average theatregoer.

Surrealism, as envisaged by the founders of the movement (i.e. as presented here) does not seem to work. That is why the movement produced no masterpieces of its own. In small doses (i.e. as an element in the work) it, nonetheless, seems to work. This explains why in the field of drama, elements of surrealism can be found in many modern plays. These elements are more visible in the theatre of the absurd, where mixing reality and illusion is the normal pattern.

VII

Absurd, which in the theatre of the absurd means "out of harmony", was applied - by Martin Esslin in his book **The Theatre of the Absurd** (1961, revised edition 1968) - to a group of playwrights in the 1950's (viz, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter, and other lesser figures: N.F. Simpson, Edward Albee, Fernando Arrabal and Günter Grass) who adopted similar views on "the predicament of man in the universe". These views are not different from those expressed by Albert Camus in his essay (**The Myth of Sisyphus** (1942). Here Camus diagnoses the condition of humanity as aimlessness or meaninglessness in an existence "out of harmony with its surroundings", and points out that knowledge of this lack of aim or meaning in all we do (the legendary figure of Sisyphus, forever rolling a rock up a mountain, forever aware that it will never reach the top, is the perfect prototype here) produces a state of mental anguish. This is the central theme of the absurdists.

This theme is not, of course, new and those playwrights are not the first to deal with it (many writers from Aristophanes to the present day have dealt with aspects of the absurdity of the human condition). The originality of the writers in the theatre of the absurd, however, resides in how they presented their material. For in their plays the idea or themes are allowed to shape all aspects of the play. Thus in their work logical construction and rational thinking are abandoned and the irrationality of experience is allowed to shape what is presented on the stage.⁴⁰

Here is then another definition of dramatic truth. For implicit in what the absurdists present is the idea that they portray objective reality / life which, they believe, is essentially absurd in the sense that it has no clear purpose and is "out of harmony with its surroundings". And although it is sad and distressing, it is, at the same time, comical. In their plays there is also emphasis on the destructive nature of time, the extreme difficulty of communication in words, and the feeling of solitude in a difficult and hostile world where the individual is isolated from his fellow human beings.

In this kind of drama, where "chaos" is the norm, the real and the nightmarish are sometimes mixed in such a manner as to make it virtually impossible for the audience to tell with assurance whether the experience presented on the stage is real or fictive. In Arthur Adamov's play **Le Professeur Taranne (Professor Taranne)** (1953) a well known elderly scholar and gentleman finds himself accused of a number of serious offences ranging from plagiarism to indecent exposure. He denies the charges and

defies his accusers, but at the end of the play, when he knows that he has dismissed and the reasons for his dismissal, he begins slowly to take his clothes off. This happens as the curtain falls. Is he then, the spectator asks, guilty of all these charges, especially indelible exposure, or is he simply conforming to the nightmare of defamation and distortion? From the play, it is impossible to answer this question.

In Ionesco's **Rhinoceros** (1959), particularly the second half of the play, the spectator is brainwashed into accepting rhinocerositis as a fact, i.e. to be a rhinoceros is beautiful, to be a human being is ugly, and in **Amédée or How to Get Rid of it** (1954) a growing corpse threatens to evict the human beings living in the flat. That is not however the only problem for Ionesco allows mushrooms to grow all over the place. Thus an ordinary flat of the type where middle-class people live gradually becomes a bad dream.

Mixing reality and illusion can be very clearly seen in the ritual theatre of Jean Genet. This is particularly so in **The Maids** (1947) (where play-acting is made to look like reality and reality play-acting), **The Balcony** (1956) (where the world of Mme Irma's "house of illusions" and the real world intermingle on a number of levels and so are not easy to separate), and **The Blacks** (1958) (where reality, ritual, and make-believe interlace in the complex pattern of a play-within-a-play-within-a-play).

VIII

Enough has been said about mixing reality and illusion in the main revolts from realism. It is clear from the discussion that mixing the two elements in the very same play is a striking feature of modern drama. Although, as pointed out earlier, the technique is not new (it is in fact as old as drama itself), generally speaking, in pre-modernist drama the elements of the mixture are separable and are therefore easy to understand and to analyse. In modern drama, the two elements are often inseparable, and thus in many cases inaccessible to the uninitiated, and sometimes even to the experts.

It should also be pointed out here that, although the technique of mixing reality and illusion is not new, it is, from the point of view of emphasis, a product of the twentieth century. The emphasis is due to the fact that all revolts from realism define dramatic truth to mean subjective, and not objective, reality. And, although, as we have seen, each defines "subjective reality" differently, the idea of mixing reality and illusion, life and art, fact and fantasy, is painfully obvious in their philosophies, general techniques, and production practices.

The questions now is: does the mixture work? Like any other technique, the technique of mixing reality and illusion sometimes works, and sometimes does not. It is effective, for example, in Pirandello's plays, especially **Six Characters In Search of an Author** (1921) and **Henry IV** (1922) because Pirandello's theatre deals with the ambiguous interrelation of reality and illusion, but it does not work in Eliot's **The Family Reunion** (1939) or in Auden and Isherwood's **The Dog Beneath The Skin** (1935) because the technique is not functional in these plays. The technique has no practical effect in many German expressionist plays, but it does work in many non-German expressionist dramas because the playwrights are selective in their use of expressionist devices. Again the technique does not work in many symbolist plays, but it works in the drama of the absurd, because unlike the symbolists, the absurdists do not believe in the personal or the esoteric.

The reason for success or failure is not difficult to find. The technique, any technique, should be chosen with a special regard to function. The right policy is therefore not to mix reality and illusion in the same play because it happens to be trendy or **chic**, but to let the material, the situation, the event, dictate the technique. This is exactly what Elmer Rice does in **The Adding Machine** (1923) - one of the finest examples of expressionism. To cite a brilliant example from the play - towards the end of Scene 2, the boss discharges Zero, the main character in the play, after 25 years as a bookkeeper with the firm, telling him that he is to be replaced by an adding machine. This is how Elmer Rice dramatizes the effect of the news on Zero.

As music begins and rises in volume, the floor on which Zero is standing starts to revolve madly. The boss's jaws moving soundlessly, while the music and other noises intensify. A peal of thunder is followed by a flash of red, then all plunges into darkness⁴¹.

Expressionism here seems to work. It shows that, for Zero, who has just lost his job, it is the end of the world. It also emphasizes the boss's ingratitude; instead of rewarding Zero, he simply fires him and tells him that a machine will do his job. Life and art, fact and fantasy, in this scene and indeed in the play as a whole, though inseparable, seem to serve one another.

The same, however, cannot be said of the mixture in every play belonging to the movements discussed in this paper. From the preceding sections, it can be accurately assumed that it is not always easy to write a successful play using the techniques of any of the theatre forms mentioned above. That is why most of the successful plays which belong to these extreme movements are short, usually one-act, plays.

To say this is by no means to underestimate the importance of these movements. From the points of view of philosophy, general technique, and production practices, these and other movements not discussed in this paper (e.g. the theatre of cruelty and the epic theatre) have enriched modern dramatic art immeasurably.

These theatre forms also taught the contemporary playwright that the best style to adopt is to use no particular style. This accounts for the fact that there is no dominant style in contemporary drama - which is characterized by eclecticism diversification, and experimentation.

From these movements the playwright also learnt to mix styles and means freely. With this unprecedented freedom to mix styles and means at his disposal, the contemporary playwright is enabled, in the very same play, to mix the sublime and the grotesque, reality and illusion, tragedy and comedy, prose and verse, and at the same time use elements derived from diverse dramatic and theatrical practices and traditions.

Finally, these movements have been instrumental in modifying realism. Critics⁴² now use the term "modified realism" to describe the kind of realism many modern playwrights use. Unlike the earlier form which appeared in the last decades of the 19th century, "modified realism" uses functionally elements taken from other modern dramatic movements, and can thus be said to show the "fusion" of a number of movements. Furthermore, unlike anti-realism theatre forms, "modified realism" seems to appeal to audiences, because it is accessible to the ordinary theatregoer as it does not depart **markedly** from fidelity to the outward appearances of life.

"Modified realism" can be seen in the works of many modern playwrights, but in this

conclusion one striking example should serve to illustrate the point. T. Williams uses the form in many of his plays especially his two masterpieces. Thus although **A Streetcar Named Desire** (1947) is grimly naturalistic, it is also symbolic, poetic and comic. In his first masterpiece, **The Glass Menagerie** (1944), he dramatizes the loneliness and the failures of the Wingfields using symbolism, suggestive music and lighting, pantomime and screens with legends. Williams also uses a narrator here. At the beginning of the play, the narrator, Tom Wingfield, dressed as a merchant sailor, enters. "I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion", he tells his audience, and then describes the impending action and the characters. The nonrealistic devices employed in this "memory play" tend to enrich, and not muddle, the drama.

One of the reasons for the rise of many of the various revolts against realism was that playwrights had felt that the form was restrictive and unimaginative. In "modified realism" the modern playwright seems to have found an acceptable kind of realism. Thanks to the impact made by the movements discussed in this paper.

NOTES

- 1 . In this connection, the difference between premodernist and modern drama can be clearly seen, if we compare a play like **A Midsummer Night's Dream** (1600), where fact and fantasy are mixed on a large scale, and expressionist drama. In **A Midsummer Night's Dream** , the spectator can always tell whether he is in the world of reality and reason of the Athenian court of Theseus or in the magical world of the moonlit forest of the diminutive fairies. In many expressionist play, the spectator does not always know where he is, because the whole play is a nightmare. Again in **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, we know when Bottom and his companions are acting and when they are not. This is not the case in, for example, Edward Albee's **The Sandbox** (1960), an absurdist sketch where the characters break all dramatic conventions governing reality and illusion; or in many of Genet's plays, where fact and fantasy are fused in a way that sometimes confuses even seasoned critics. Finally, in **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, the play or plays within the play, though integral parts of the whole, can easily be separated. This we cannot say of the modern play within a play. In a play like Pirandello's **Six Characters in Search of an Author** (1921) or Genet's **The Blacks** (1958), it is extremely difficult to separate the real from the fictive in many places. More of this point in Sections II-VIII.
- 2 . Grose, B.D. and Kenworthy, O.F., **A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre**, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985, P517.
- 3 . Brown, Calvin S., ed., **The Reader's Companion to World Literature**, New York: The New American Library, 1956, P432.
- 4 . Cuddon, J.A., **A Dictionary of Literary Terms**, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, P673.
- 5 . These are: **At the Hawk's Well**, **The Only Jealousy of Emer**, **The Dreaming of the Bones**, and **Calvary**.
- 6 . Matlaw, Maryon, **Modern World Drama**, London: Secker and Warburg, 1972, P266.
- 7 . Hartnoll, Phyllis, ed., **The Oxford Companion to the Theatre**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Fourth Edition, 1983, P267.
- 8 . Gasner, John and Quinn, Edward, **The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama**, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969, P 256.

- 9 . Bradbury, Malcolm and McFarlane, James, **Modernism: 1890 - 1930**, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1985, P534.
10. Gassner, John and Quinn, op. Cit. P534
11. Banham, Martin, ed., **The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre**, Cambridge University Press, 1988, P332.
12. Gassner, John and Quinn, op. Cit., P 257.
13. Styan, J.L., **Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, volumes 2 and 3.**
14. Thomson, Philip, **The Grotesque**, London: Methuen, 1979, P8.
- 15 In this respect Grose and Kenworthy point out that "whereas the symbolists had sought refuge from the insanity of the real world by creating an ideal world of their own, the expressionists sought to attack that real world through satire and sarcasm". (Grose and Kenworthy, 1985, 520).
16. The first futurist manifesto about the theatre, entitled "The Variety Theatre", however, appeared on 29 September 1913; the second, entitled "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre", two years later, on 11 January and 18 February 1915. The two manifestos, which first appeared in the Parisian newspaper **Le Figaro**, are now included in **Futurist Performance** by Mickael Kirby and Victoria Nes Kirby, New York: PAJ Publications, 1986.
17. Bradbury and McFarlane, op. cit., P552.
18. Hochman, Stanley, ed., **McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama**, New York and London: McGraw Hill Book Company, Second Edition, 1984, volume 3, P321.
19. Ibid, 359.
20. Kirby, Michael and Kirby, Victoria, **Futurist Performance** New York: PAJ Publications, 1986, P 197, 200.
21. Banham, op.cit., P375.
22. Ibid.
23. Grose, and Kenworthy, op. cit., P523.
24. Bradbury, and McFarlane, op. cit., P555
25. Translated by Barbara Wright in **Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries**, New York: Riverrun Press Inc., 1981.
26. These are multimedia presentations that "happen" without extensive planning and preparation. Allan Kaprow's production **18 Happenings in 6 parts** (1959), which gave the genre its name, is a good example.
27. See "Dada Manifesto 1981" pp. 7, 13; see also "Lecture on Dada" pp 107 - 112. Tzara's formula for making a dadaist poem furnishes a good example to illustrate what the movement aimed to achieve. This is what he has to say (presented in the way cooking recipes are presented to beginners):
To MAKE A DADASIT POEM.
 Take a newspaper.
 Take some scissors.
 Choose from the paper an article of the length you want to make your poem.
 Cut out the article.
 Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up the article and put them all in a bag.

- Shake gently.
Next take out each cutting one after the other.
Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.
The poem will resemble you.
And there you are - an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.
See "Manifesto No. VII", p. 39.
- Tzara, Tristan, **Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries**, translated by Barbara Wright, New York: Riverrun Press Inc., 1981.
28. I say "possibly" because when Marinetti recommended the style of the music hall as the right model for futurist drama, he pointed out that the style (which is characterized by comic distortions, unromantic eccentricities and grotesque parodies) is the best way to destroy "the solemn, the sacred, the serious, the sublime of Art with a capital A." (qtd. in Styan, 1981, vol. 2: 51). This does not however seem to apply to Mayakovsky's plays discussed above.
29. From the second manifesto, one gets the impression that the purpose of dadaism was to cause the utmost degree of misunderstanding between artist and audience (See Tzara, 1981: 3 - 13).
30. In this connection Styan's comparison of dadaism and surrealism is illuminating:
- ... surrealism, which evolved from dada, was the great invention of the age. If dada chiefly tried to denounce art by disrupting it, surrealism refined the application of the dadaist principles by exploring through the arts all the mysteries of the irrational mind. The rational control of our perceptions was to be disturbed and questioned by whatever means could be devised, and to do so the surrealist artist would use elements of surprise, the involuntary and the unconscious. Pure dada had wanted only **chance** to rule human activity; surrealism was more purposeful and wanted to **arrange** the derangement of the senses (Styan, 1981, vol. 2: 52).
31. Berton devotes 14 pages of "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924) to the importance of dream, then writes:
- I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality or surreality, if one may so speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going... (Breton, 1974: 14).
- Bradbury, and McFarlane, op.cit., P550.
- Banham, op.cit., 932-3.
32. Bradbury and McFarlane, op.cit., P550.
33. Cuddon, op.cit., P668-9.
34. Breton, André, **Manifestos of Surrealism**, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1974, P26.
35. Brown, op.cit., P429.
36. Breton, André, op.cit., P.33.
37. Cuddon, op.cit., P668.
38. Gross, and Kenworthy, op.cit., P525.
Rice, Elmer, «Scene 2», **The Adding Machine in Three Plays**, New York: Hill and Wang, 1965.
39. The feminist issues are lost, because Apollinaire allows Thérèse, who, at the beginning of the play abandons her role as a woman and becomes Tiresias, to become towards the end of the play Thérèse again and return to her husband, thus defeating his own purposes.
40. T.L.Styan elaborates when he writes:

Absurdist plays fall within the symbolist tradition, and they have no logical plot or characterization in any conventional sense. Their characters lack the motivation found in realistic drama, and so emphasize their purposelessness. The absence of plot serves to reinforce the monotony and repetitiveness of time in human affairs. The dialogue is commonly no more than a series of inconsequential cliches which reduce those who speak them to talking machines. As plays, they do not discuss the human condition, but simply portray it at its worst in outrageous images chosen to undeceive the innocent and shock the complacent (Styan, 1981, vol. 2: 126).

41. Matlaw, op.cit., P8, and Rice, op.cit.

42. Grose, and Kenworthy, op.cit., P594.