

From Beckett to Havel: Absurdist Playwrights of Western and Central Europe Compared

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The creator of the term of the absurd drama, Martin Esslin (who was born in Budapest, Hungary) published his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1961. The term he used to characterize a trend in then contemporary drama soon became popular and mis-used. Esslin felt it important to draw attention to the sense in which he had intended to use the term. In the preface to the 1968 edition of his book, he stressed that the term of the Theatre of the Absurd was only a working hypothesis, a concept to give basis for the comparative analysis. "How could that have led to the assumption that Beckett and Ionesco should behave towards each other as members of the same club or party? Or that Pinter subscribed to the same views on politics or law as Genet? Only by profound misunderstanding" (Esslin, *Theatre* 12).

In spite of Esslin's intention and his effort to make his idea clear, the "theatre of the absurd" soon became a label, a box, a catchphrase, a category used in the history and theory of drama, theatre, and aesthetics. The book's reception and afterlife created a static concept from Esslin's working hypothesis. In the preface to the third Pelican edition in 1978, Esslin declared that "writing this book, it was mainly intended as a polemical contribution to the then current debate on what seemed to many an aberrant and debased form of drama" (Esslin, *Theatre* 9). Today not only the debate is over, but also the type of drama Esslin described in his book. In the 50s and 60s, absurd drama was a creative new form, but by the mid-70s this creative force was spent (Benston 157). Symbolically the Theatre of the Absurd came to an end in 1989 with the death of Samuel Beckett.

Not only do Esslin's term and his book's reception involve problems, but also the fact that the term *absurd* is used in other disciplines as well. The nature of the absurd thus can be approached from different and conflicting directions. As its ideas come from philosophy, aesthetics, theory of literature, history of drama and so on, the arguments and descriptions of the phenomenon of the absurd are inconsistent with each other. In the next passages I intend to circumscribe a specialized meaning of it. I am not going to give a definition, but instead I will outline the

field of signification in which the term will be used, and to which the Central European dramas will be compared and related.

Absurd from this time onwards will be used not as a term of philosophy or aesthetics, but as a type of drama. The absurd thus is related to genre theory and genre history. The latter approach identifies the absurd as a new type of drama emerging in Western Europe in the late 1940s, and flourishing until the mid 1960s. This is the period to which Havel and the other Central European playwrights will be related.

The general features of the absurd drama can be summarized as a version of universal comedy or a mixed tragicomic form. There appears a significant difference here between the Theatre of the Absurd and the plays written by Sartre and Camus, the philosophers of the Absurd. The existentialist thinkers tried to create *tragic* forms using the structures of realism to examine and demonstrate the metaphysics of their philosophy.

The Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, produced a new genre, a new dramatic form and a unique theatrical language. The Absurdists went beyond Expressionism and Surrealism through the discovery "that humor is the essential formal weapon against banality, not only because humor alone saves a critique from falling into the sentimental, but also because it prevents art from remaining private nightmare" (Benston 162). The significant novelty of this genre is its disposition of opposition between the rational and the irrational, which creates a new relationship between stage and audience, as this oscillation between the rational and the irrational is very much dependent on the audience's knowledge and creative participation.

In the new form, in absurd drama, the rhetoric of logical discourse has mostly been neglected. This leads to the uncertainty of the "world" depicted in its plays. Language becomes devaluated and disintegrated; it appears to contradict reality (Esslin, *Theatre* 406-407). Beside language, further generic features are different in absurd drama. These plays do not provide an unified action since they focus on situation rather than evolving action (Hernadi 174). The sequence of events is secondary in this structure, as is the authenticity of characters. "Many of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd have a circular structure, ending exactly as they began"; in these plays we are "confronted with actions that lack apparent motivation, characters that are in constant flux, and often happenings that are clearly outside the realm of rational experience" (Esslin, *Theatre* 415-16).

An illogical world appears in absurd drama, and as it has no logical reference to reality, it is a sterile, ir/rational world. Deformed language demonstrates the general difficulty of communication. This difficulty is part of the whole universe, as efforts to communicate with the other world, with any transcendentality, seem to fail. God is deaf and dumb. "The Theatre of the Absurd expresses the absence of any . . . generally accepted cosmic system of values" (Esslin, *Theatre* 402). This bizarre form of communication within the play, between the characters,

and between them and quiet transcendency, is supplemented by a new stage/audience relationship. Absurd drama forces the audience out of its ordinary expectations. According to Eva Metman, "it creates a vacuum between the play and the audience so that the latter is compelled to experience something itself, be it a reawakening of the awareness of archetypal powers or a reorientation of the ego, or both" (qtd. in Esslin, *Theatre* 412-13).

The above mentioned generic features of the absurd drama are realized in the plays of the four protagonists of Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*. In the first edition the author assigned a separate chapter to Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), to Eugene Ionesco (1912-1994), to Jean Genet (1910-1986), and to Arthur Adamov (1908-1970). Esslin discusses these playwrights separately. I will focus on the common features of their life and art rather than repeating Esslin's statements.

Born between 1906 and 1912, these four playwrights belong to the same generation. They had started to write plays later called absurd dramas in the second part of the 1940s, when they were in their late thirties or early forties. Although all four of them were born in different countries and cultures, there are some common elements in their roots. Beckett was born in Ireland in a Protestant Irish middle class family. In 1937 he settled in Paris, and by 1945 he was writing both in English and in French. Ionesco was born in Rumania. Before World War II he spent several years both in his homeland and in France. He settled in the latter country in 1938. Adamov is of Armenian origin, he was born in the Caucasus, and was brought up in France where he lived since the mid 1920s. These three playwrights are representatives of an emigrant existence, all three of them having moved from the peripheries of the European continent to one of its cultural capitals, Paris. The fourth, Genet, is marginal in a social and sociological rather than a geographical or cultural sense. He was born in Paris in a maternity hospital and was abandoned by his mother. He was brought up by foster parents and became a criminal and homosexual, and as such was located on the margin of society.

A common feature in the fate of the four major representatives of the absurd drama is the fact that all four of them originate from the peripheries, they all lived an emigrant life in the sense of either an external or an internal emigration. From the beginning their position is contemplative, the place of an *outsider*, which location determines both their views and their ways of expression. Being in the outsider's position means having a view of what others cannot see. The special, isolated position raises the issue of personal identity as well (Wilson).

Major historical events following the birth of the four absurdist playwrights were cataclysms of twentieth century European history. The childhood of this generation was overshadowed by World War I; their adolescence and early adulthood were accompanied by the great economic crisis in the late 1920s; then in the next decade totalitarian dictatorships arose in Germany, in the Soviet Union, Italy, and Spain. In

their early thirties, in their "age of Christ," World War II took place from 1939 to 1945.

They wrote their first absurd plays in the late 1940s, nearly simultaneously. *Waiting for Godot (En Attendant Godot)* was written in French by Beckett from October 1948 to January 1949. It was first published in French in 1952; the following year it had its first production at Theatre de Babylone in Paris, on 5th January. The English translation was first published in 1954. Ionesco wrote his first play *The Bald Promadonna* (in the UK), *The Bold Soprano* (in the US) (*La Cantatrice Chauve*) in 1949, and it was first performed at the Theatre des Noctambules on 11th May, 1950. Genet's first absurdist play *The Maids (Les Bonnes)* was written and first produced at the Athenee on 17th April, 1947. Adamov's first play *The Parody (La Parodie)* was first published in 1950 in one volume with his second play *L'Invasion*, and his first theatre production was the performance of his third play the same year: *La Grande et la Petite Manoeuvre* was first presented at the Theatre des Noctambules, 11th November, 1950. The appearance of these four playwrights on the stage of the absurd took place at almost the same time and, as Esslin stresses, in the same place, Paris.

Aside from these similarities I regard the individual differences of the proponents of the absurd drama as much more important, but these differences are not the concern of this essay. In the forthcoming comparison of Central European playwrights to the absurd I will refer to special aspects of connections, i.e. with which playwright or with which drama of the absurd the relationship can be demonstrated. The restriction of the absurd to individual authors and to separate works is essential, for they have very different antecedents in dramaturgy and in the history of drama. Beckett's incapable heroes and his poesy of impotence go back to Chekhov's dramaturgy; Ionesco's plays make use of the techniques of French bourgeois comedy, the *piece bien faite* (well-made play.) Strindberg, psychological theatre, and erotic drama give the impetus to Genet's playwrighting.

To make restrictions in the use of the term absurd is significant as it is easy to expand the reference of the term to a wide range. In the final chapter of the third edition of his *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin derives many plays of the 1960s and 1970s from the absurd. This list includes Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, the plays of John Arden, Edward Bond, Tom Stoppard, Peter Handke, Wolfgang Bauer, and Thomas Bernhard. My aim here is the opposite of Esslin's, not to expand but to narrow the signification of the absurd. I will not include absurd philosophy, and I will further exclude minor playwrights identified as absurdist. Among the four major ones discussed by Esslin, Adamov and Genet had the least significant effect on Central European dramatists. So talking about the absurd will mean primarily the plays of Beckett and Ionesco written from the late 1940s to the early 1960s.

Restricting the absurd to these two playwrights does not mean that they are particularly similar to each other. Quite the opposite. For Ionesco,

absurdity is a raging, hilarious farce, while Beckett "is an Absurdist in the strict, appalled sense that Camus intended." . . . "Ionesco's dream world is unpredictable, irrational, and abrupt. Beckett's is the opposite : it is the world of chess, meticulous and utterly rational." . . . "Ionesco developed his special form of antitheater because. . . he was contemptuous of the stage. 'I started writing for the theater,' he once remarked, 'because I hated it.' Beckett's peculiar revolution seems rooted even deeper. . . He himself summed it up in a 1949 dialogue with George Duthuit, when he described the fate of the artist as being resigned to 'the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express'" (Alvarez 6, 7, 9-10).

Talking about Central European playwrights makes it inevitable to clarify the meaning of Central in the subtitle of this essay. When Esslin published the enlarged edition of his book, a chapter added was titled "The Theatre of the Absurd in Eastern Europe." Here he discussed Mrozek, Rozewicz, and Havel. If I wrote about the same dramatists it would be obvious to call the region the same, Eastern Europe. This problem is not merely a geographical question, but also a cultural, historical, and political one. The border of Eastern and Western Christianity runs along the Western frontier of Russia, Rumania, and Serbia. Historically Central Europe was the region located between the German and the Russian empires. The Central European countries—Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland—culturally and historically have never belonged to the East, yet neither were they equal members of the West European community. After World War II these countries fell under the influence of the Soviet Union. This interest and the descent of the iron curtain rendered them part of Eastern Europe.

The new period had two representative genres in this region, theatre and film. Despite authoritarian political control and censorship, these arts became aesthetically the most significant forms. The first genre to re-emerge with a brand new voice after the style of "socialist realism" was the drama. Representing this new grotesque, ironic, absurdist point of view have been the Polish Slawomir Mrozek, the Czech Vaclav Havel, and the Hungarian István Örkény. They would become the most significant playwrights of Central Europe in the period.

In this paragraph I will give only a brief survey of their activity. The first drama embodying this new voice and point of view in a socialist country was Mrozek's *The Police*, written in 1958, and first produced the same year. In the 1960s Mrozek wrote several one-act plays. His greatest success so far, *Tango* (1964) was written after he had emigrated from Poland. In the last two decades he wrote several principal plays, such as *Emigrants* (1974), *The Hunchback* (1975), *On Foot* (1980), and *Portrait* (1987). His sixtieth birthday was celebrated by a great festival in Cracow in 1990. Havel wrote three plays in the 1960s, *The Garden Party* (1963), *The Memorandum* (1965), and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (1968). From 1969 to 1989 he was prohibited from publishing and spent

several years in prison for his political views. In these two decades he wrote, among others, his Vanek-plays (in the 1970s), *Largo Desolato* (1984), *Temptation* (1985), and *Redevelopment* (1987). In 1989 he was elected president of Czechoslovakia, in 1992 president of the Czech Republic. For taking part in the 1956 revolution with his writings, István Örkény was not allowed to publish until 1963. His first grotesque play, *The Tot Family*, was first performed in 1967. Until his death in 1979 he wrote *Catsplay* (1969), *Pisti in the Bloodbath* (1969-1979), *The Silence of the Dead* (1973), *Blood-Relatives* (1974), *Keysearchers* (1975), and *Scenario* (1979).

The eldest of the three Central European playwrights is István Örkény (born 5th April, 1912, died 24th June, 1979), who belongs to the same generation as the major absurdist dramatists of the West, and who appeared beside Mrozek and Havel the latest with his grotesque plays from 1967. The reason for Örkény arriving so late lies in historical and biographical facts. From the late 1940s he followed the "stylistic" doctrine of socialist realism. For a radiospeech and a short article written during the 1956 revolution, he was silenced till 1963. The 200-word article was entitled *Supplication for Budapest (Fohász Budapestért)*, published in a revolutionary daily. The radiospeech began with the following statement: "For many years radio was a tool of lies. It carried out commands. It was lying at night, it was lying by day, it was lying on all wave-lengths" (Örkény 75, footnote). During the years of his prohibition he started to develop a new style, a new tone, a grotesque-ironic way of expression which characterized his last creative period. He also created a new genre, the "one-minute stories." The dominant genre of his last twelve years was drama: he wrote seven plays in this period. The new, grotesque style had preliminaries in Örkény's career, and he considered his literary change as a return to his early prose of the late 1930s. He was 55 when *The Tot Family* was first produced.

Slawomir Mrozek (born 29th June, 1930) says in his *Autobiography* (Mrozek) that his father was very poor, even homeless after the Polish-Bolshevik war, and when he got a job as a postmaster it meant a significant rise in social rank for him. He became part of the local intellectuals and became a "gentleman." Till the age of nine Slawomir Mrozek was brought up in a precise family order, but then came World War II which destroyed his sense of security. After the war communist ideology "infected" him. He studied architecture, painting, and Oriental art. Then he worked as a journalist in Cracow and wrote articles on agriculture, industry, and other socialist topics. This activity and view lasted till the mid 1950s when he started to detach himself from this communist belief. This time he published "numerous satirical and fantastic stories, sly parables about bureaucratic absurdity and its make-believe world" (Gerould 77). His first work for the stage was a scene, *The Professor*, written for the group Bim-Bom in 1956. His first play, *The Police*, was written in 1958, and was first produced the same year in Warsaw on 27th June. In 1963 he emigrated from Poland for political reasons and

since then has lived abroad. He discovered the expression of absurd in the second part of the 1950s, like Örkény. In his autobiography he wrote about the origin of his absurdist view that he saw two tendencies within himself, a search for order and a desire for anarchy. (Cf. the subtitle of *Tango*.) The first came from his childhood, the second from the experience of war. The communist period made a further twist in this view and gave the basis to Mrozek's absurdist playwrighting.

Vaclav Havel (5th October, 1936) was born in a wealthy upper middle-class family. After the communist take-over he was not allowed to go to highschool or to college because of his origin. His biography is well detailed in his *Distant Interview (Dalkovy vyslech)*, where he tells how he first experienced isolation and separation in his childhood for being a "young gentleman" among lower-class mates, and was mocked for his fatness. "Today I really think," says Havel, "that this experience, this observation, had an effect on my whole future life, including writing" (Havel 14). Havel never accepted communism, neither as an ideology nor as a political system. He could not get into the university as a fulltime student. Instead he started to work in Prague first at ABC Theatre, and then from 1960 in Divadlo na Zbradli for eight years. His first "real" play, *The Garden Party* was written in 1963, and was first performed at the Ballustrade Theatre in Prague in that December. Havel was then 27.

An anecdotal gem told by Antonin Liehm illustrates the total inconsistency and ridiculous absurdity of the political system.

Right after the premiere of *The Memorandum*, when Havel was already a well-known writer whose plays were being performed all over Europe, the theater arranged a public discussion with the author and invited me to serve as chairman. Just before the session began, Havel begged me to make his apologies to the audience, since in an hour, he said, he would have to leave 'for school.' He read the question in my eyes and replied, 'The Drama School.' 'Aha. What do you teach there?' 'I don't teach. I'm a student.' I understood nothing of this and Havel explained it all to me. Years ago he had applied to enter the school and had been turned down for his bourgeois origin, the fact that he had relatives abroad, and so on. He had appealed, but without result. Again he made an application. Again he was turned down. So it went on for years. And now that he was already a wellknown writer and the playwright of the leading avant-garde theater, a 'memorandum' had come informing him that his appeal had been granted and that he was accepted for registration. 'I didn't want them to get the impression that I was stuck up now that I've had a little bit of success. So I enrolled, I haven't missed a single class...' (Liehm 141-42)

Just as there were some common features in the fate and position of the dramatists of the absurd in the West, we can also notice some similarities in Örkény's, Mrozek's, and Havel's lot. At the time of their birth their families belonged to the middle class. After the communist take-over Örkény and Mrozek believed in the new political system for a few years, but by the mid 1950s they recognized its absurdity. All three playwrights had experienced the situation of being excommunicated and being pushed to the (social, political, cultural) margin; all three of them shared the experience of inner or outer emigration. There is a significant change in their fate when they became prohibited authors. This turn is caused by the political system. For all three of them the immediate source for their plays is socialist society, a political structure, which is reflected in these works. For the West European absurdist playwrights, the position of the outsider, the ontological existence on the margin, is a constant condition. This static state is a dominant feature of their plays, in which alienation appears through philosophy. The universal, ontological, and intellectual Western absurd is opposed to the Central European kind, which is primarily national, historical, and emotional. Within these post-Stalinist plays, in place of a constant condition there is a significant dramaturgical feature, a decisive change with a turning-point. The structure of the Western absurd is mostly either circular (*Godot*, *The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, etc.) or post-climactic (*Endgame*, *Happy Days*, *The Chairs*, etc.) The latter term means that the play takes place after human life and after the history of mankind. The structure of the Central European absurd is often climactic, and the plot is determined by a crucial change (*The Police*, *Tango*, *The Garden Party*, *The Memorandum*, *The Tot Family*, *Scenario*).

Beside some biographical similarities the Central European historical and political processes also relate Havel, Mrozek, and Örkény to each other. The immediate historical antecedent to Central European absurd drama appearing at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s was the first major crisis of the communist system in the middle of the 1950s. The cruel and rigid totalitarian dictatorships of the early fifties were succeeded after the crisis by a slightly softer oppression. The iron curtain, dropped in the late 1940s, was raised slightly. Central European absurd had two major external inspirations (beside the personal motives mentioned above), one was the limited opening towards the West, the other was the easing of oppression. The first meant the filtered and portioned admittance of bourgeois art and ideology into the socialist intellectual life, which was a real change and development compared with the previous total isolation. The opening meant for the area studies here the translation and publication of books, performance of plays, and availability of works published in the West. This change did not happen from one day to the next, but was a slow process, and did not become clearly perceptible until the middle of the 1960s, the "golden age" of the Western effect.

The second source of the change originated from those limited concessions which the communist power made in its cultural politics. By the time of the political crisis the official, autocratic aesthetical doctrine, "socialist realism" had become totally unauthentic for the public. After the fall of party literature (and art), and beside the official norm of realism, other forms of expression were endured by the authorities, like grotesque, satirical, and parabolical representations. A third, not yet mentioned source for the new drama was its national avant-garde tradition. In the ice-age of the fifties not only the present was frozen, but as preliminaries to the communist salvation history, the facts of the manipulatively created past as well. This created "revolutionary" past meant that the avant-garde tradition was superseded from national histories. This displaced, concealed avant-garde, surrealist, expressionist tradition became accessible by the 1960s. These three major constituents created the social and artistic conditions of that type of Central European drama which can be related to the absurd.

The flourishing period of the absurd in the West was in the 1950s; in Central Europe it took place a decade later. Both flourishing periods are concentrated roughly to a decade. Although the Western playwrights continued writing this type of drama after this period, they did not create new works which would beat their previous plays either in significance or in success. At best they merely repeated themselves in their newer works. The situation is similar in the case of the three Central European playwrights, as their most famous plays written in the sixties have not been excelled by their subsequent dramas.

István Örkény's three principal plays written in the 1960s, *The Tot Family*, *Catsplay*, and *Pisti in the Bloodbath*, are his best known and most frequently produced dramas. His new viewpoint and new dramaturgy developed in these works are not significantly improved in his plays written in the 1970s. He partly repeats his earlier works, and partly moves towards some Brechtian epic theatre solutions in *The Silence of the Dead*, *Blood-Relatives*, *Keysearchers*, and *Scenario*. The move or change in Mrozek's career can be connected to the 1974 *Emigrants*. His previous absurd view and logically based dramatic construction are replaced from this time by a more realistic and direct way of representation, and his art of writing has become classical and conservative (preserver of tradition).

From the time of the Soviet invasion and the communist restoration in 1969, Havel was an author prohibited. As playwright in his one-act plays his personal everyday experience became the basis for the material of his dramas. During the 1980s a further move or change took place in his art, when he turned towards more general and universal issues in his newer plays than in the previous ones. Among the West European playwrights of the absurd such a change can be observed only in the case of Arthur Adamov, who is the least significant of the four analyzed in separate chapters by Esslin. By the end of the 1950s Adamov breaks off with the absurd and starts a political playwrighting, in which

his dramas are to serve his ultra-left political views. After this turn Adamov did not produce any aesthetically relevant work. In Genet's case the turning-point means the cessation of his writing plays. After *The Screens* (1961) he did not write any more published drama. "Although *Les Paravents* was said to form part of a cycle of seven plays on which Genet was believed to be working, but none of these had seen the light of day" (Esslin, *Theatre* 230) by the early 1990s. In the career of Beckett and Ionesco no such change occurred.

Reception of the absurd was different in the West and in Central Europe. In the West after a few years of adverseness, absurd has become an appreciated and exalted trend in modern drama. An example is the reception of Beckett's *Godot* reviewed by Esslin.

On 30 December 1964 *Waiting for Godot* was revived at the Royal Court Theatre in London with Nicol Williamson as Vladimir. The production was extremely favorably received by the critics. As to the play the general verdict seemed to be that it was a modern classic now but had one great fault: its meaning and symbolism were a little too obvious. . . . When the same play made its first appearance in London in 1955 it had met with a wide measure of incomprehension. Indeed, the verdict of most critics was that it was completely obscure, a farrago of pointless chit-chat. (Esslin, *Theatre* 11)

In Central Europe the absurd, neither its Western nor its local version, has ever become an appreciated "movement." It has always remained a genre balancing between prohibition and admission. This awkward situation characterized both the fate of Havel, Mrozek, Örkény and their works. Havel was silenced for two decades not only in Czechoslovakia but throughout the Warsaw Pact (in the spirit of proletarian internationalism). His works were published partly by small Western publishing houses or in samizdat (illegal underground) editions. When Mrozek emigrated from Poland in June 1963 his books were still published and his plays were still performed in his homeland. But when he protested against the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he suddenly became an author prohibited. "Overnight my books disappeared from the bookshops in Poland, the police vans went from one bookshop to another and packed them in. My plays vanished from the theatres, not even *Out* remained of the usual Sold Out posted at the box office. At the same time the press was full of articles tearing the mask from my face at last" (Mrozek 28).

To his dying day, Örkény had to fight the authorities, the leaders of cultural politics for the performance of his plays. His *Pisti in the Blood-bath* had to wait ten years from 1969 before it was allowed to be performed. During this one decade the performance of the play was authorized several times, and was even rehearsed, but unexpectedly the authorization was withdrawn. Politically "competent" people decided that

his last play, *Scenario*, finished on his death-bed, could not be performed until 1982. Of these three Central European playwrights perhaps Örkény had shown the most readiness to make compromises with the power. His letters dictated on his death-bed to György Aczél, the all-power supervisor of Hungarian cultural life, were published recently (Örkény). In these letters he accepts Aczél's suggestions and he reports the changes he had made in the manuscript of *Scenario*, following political advice. To understand Örkény's behaviour one has to consider that Hungary was the most consolidated country among the socialist regimes, "the happiest barrack" — as it was called, and that Örkény had had the experience of having been silenced for five or six years after the 1956 revolution.

When Esslin turns towards Eastern Europe, he gives the following list in the late 1960s. "East European absurdist playwrights: Mrozek, Rozewicz, Brozkiewich, Grochowiak, Herbert in Poland; Havel, Smocek, Klima, Uhde, Karvas in Czechoslovakia; Örkény in Hungary" (Esslin, *Eastern* 13). Esslin starts the enumeration with Mrozek, but many scholars disagree with him. It is not negated that the Polish dramatist can be related to the Theatre of the Absurd, but it is questioned whether he is a representative of this group. In most cases the difference is stressed, beside the acknowledgement of similarities. Especially Polish scholars argue that Mrozek is not an absurdist in the strict sense.

In the Theatre of the Absurd human interaction becomes either mechanical (the language betrays the mechanization) or animalistic (Ionesco's 'rhinoceros-ism' is a splendid example.) For the Absurdist, the fate of the social human is the same as the fate of the individual human. . . . Mrozek's dramas are microsocieties . . . , here, human relationships become absolute. . . . Mrozek is not a mystic; he is a rationalist. Yet, rationalism leads to extremity, and even the forces of reason extended to final, absolute categories become absurd. This is Mrozek's technique and in this he is an Absurdist. But the quality of his absurdism is different." (Piwinska 20-21)

The absurd is static, Mrozek's theatre is dynamic. The Western dramatists reflect the world as absurd; for Mrozek, absurd is a way to see the world. Although the Polish playwright is usually compared with Beckett and Ionesco, his closer relationship with other Western dramatists seems to be at least as important as the previous influence. The structure of Mrozek's early plays, the logic and situation represented in them is closer to the parabolical dramas of Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Probably this feature of his plays made him more popular in the German-speaking countries than elsewhere. In the opinion of Halina Stephan,

Mrozek never became an adherent of the Theatre of the Absurd, but remained essentially a moralist whose plays resembled such essentially non-absurdist Western models as Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit* and Max Frisch's *Firebugs*, both which were very popular in Poland in the sixties. Like Dürrenmatt and Frisch, Mrozek also focused on the perversion of values, on the mechanism of self-deception which protect one's public identity. Like the dramas of Frisch and Dürrenmatt, Mrozek's own early plays were constructed as didactic exercises in logic. (Stephan 46-47)

The difference between the absurdity of Havel's and Beckett's plays is notable too. Beckett reflects on mankind, and Havel on the Czech society. Ernst Fischer argued in the 1960s that absurd is not something invented by the absurdist writer. It is rather a misunderstanding of the party critics that such a play as *The Garden Party* on socialism, or Beckett's *Endgame* on mankind is simply a negation. What they negate is the negation of mankind or the idea (Fischer 137). Havel's motivation as an author is different from the Theatre of the Absurd. While the latter takes notice of the absurd as an ontological, universal condition, Havel says about his *ars poetica* the following: "I write about alienation and dehumanization because these are elements in man's development that must be destroyed before they destroy man" (qtd. in Czerwinski 199). And to sum up the difference, plays of the Czech dramatist do not confront his audience "with existential categories such as time, death, and freedom on the same high level of abstraction as Western playwrights do" (Trensky 103).

Örkény seems to be the playwright furthest from the absurd, although he is usually considered as a full-time member of the "movement." When *The Tot Family* and *Catsplay* brought him an international reputation, and when for the first play he was awarded the Prize of Black Humour, he was put down as an East European absurdist. Two decades after *The Tot Family*, the Hungarian dramatist was characterized as an author who "demonstrated an innate ability to capture the absurdities of our lives. Thematically he was indebted to the Western literature of the Absurd, especially to Beckett, Ionesco and Dürrenmatt, but in essence, he had more in common with the East European absurdists, Mrozek and Havel, who had also maintained that there was always a way out. But the strongest influence had come from an earlier Czech, Franz Kafka, Örkény's acknowledged model" (Gyorgyey). In spite of its absurdist features, Örkény's work is determined by the general conditions of Hungarian drama which has always been the weakest literary genre in the country, lagging behind poetry and fiction. Hungarian drama developed far behind the major European trends, and the gap could not be bridged by Örkény himself. He could not leave the original dichotomy of Hungarian drama, the alternative of affirmation or negation. All his

dramatic oeuvre was determined by his prose fiction, and his effort to express a general world-order existing in the background of his works. The structure of his plays is not so arithmetically constructed as the works of Havel and Mrozek. *The Tot Family* has a simple, "classical" structure, a linear plot, based on one conflict which exists between the Major and Tot. This formal conservatism characterizes his *Keysearchers* too. Although it has to be acknowledged that in *Pisti in the Bloodbath* all the formal features of the absurd can be discovered. What makes this play different from the Theatre of the Absurd is its historical concreteness, and its social and political rootedness in the Hungarian context.

Like the Western drama of the absurd, its Eastern counterpart was born from the loss of certainties that faith provides; but while in the West the trauma is generally seen to be related to the decline of the religious world view, in the East it is linked more specifically to the decline of faith in the miraculous power of Marxist teaching. . . . Eastern authors were first of all preoccupied with the absurdities of the phenomenal world, portraying the dehumanizing mechanism of a totalitarian regime. (Trensky 101,102)

The Western absurd seems to reflect on the experience of total absurdity, as there is no future seen in these works. The Central/Eastern counterpart seems to express a partial absurdity which is built on word and action, program and praxis alienated from each other (Fischer 131).

In the Theatre of the Absurd the characters realize the absurdity of the world as a *condition humane*, and they do not make efforts to change either their situation, or the world. In Central Europe, absurdity is experienced in the political structure (which is not eternal, although it liked to believe it was, and it can be changed). In the latter plays the characters are often ready to act for the purpose of making a change in their condition. While the Western characters can be described by pseudo-activities, in Central Europe real dramatic actions take place. Tot rebels at the end, and kills the Major; Pisti finally becomes one person (himself) by accepting the advertised job; Barabas' speech of confession turns into an accusation against the regime. Artur is in constant search for an order and form in *Tango*. The three farmers are not simply waiting, but they are searching for the party. The two emigrants are struggling with their circumstances. Hugo makes a career; Gross tries to regain control on the processes in his office, Leopold makes constant efforts to survive the oppression coming from both his friends and political enemies. Acting in the Theatre of the Absurd is seen as something useless and unreasonable, passivity is compatible with the world-order. In Central Europe the characters are acting, many times unreasonably, many times in vain, but they try to do something at least.

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