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"The Uses and Inadequacy of  
Language in the Theatre of  
Genet, Beckett and Ionesco."

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This study is an attempt to show the changing role of language in the theatre as exemplified in the works of Genet, Ionesco and Beckett. The introductory section deals with the topic of language itself, both in the theatre and in everyday life. Language in the theatre can be considered from two aspects: firstly, visual communication which includes the decor, the gestures of the actors, mime and facial expressions; and secondly, aural communication which includes the dialogue, silence for a purpose, and music. Because of the impact of such media as television and cinema, the importance of the word is diminished and this is reflected in modern drama.

Genet is dissatisfied with the tradition of Western theatre and he has tried to arouse a feeling of awe in his audiences. His plays are all based around rituals, not of a religious kind, but rituals which glorify evil and end in death. His language therefore is at once exalted and incantatory, and he relies on the visual impact of his plays to a large extent. Lighting, decor and makeup are important. Because many of Genet's characters are acting in plays within plays to create a conflict between illusion and reality, the language used by one character may vary greatly.

In the works of Ionesco, language becomes a theatrical object of mockery. To him, everyday language is often an inadequate means of communication and he symbolises this by ending most of his plays with an illustration of the defeat of language. This is done by showing rational arguments failing to convince, or by the complete breakdown of language into sounds or meaningless syllables. In Ionesco's plays, language is often overcome by the

proliferation of matter on stage - mushrooms, chairs, cups and furniture multiply and stifle. He mocks empty social chatter by twisting common platitudes or by using well-known expressions out of context.

In contrast to Ionesco, Beckett's stage is almost empty, but, like him, he distrusts language as a vehicle of communication. His characters are all afraid of the implications of silence and therefore talk to keep their thoughts at bay. The talking is rarely an attempt to impart information, or even to communicate. Even when two characters are present on stage, the conversation resembles two parallel monologues. With each successive play, Beckett has shown an increasing pre-occupation with the monologue, and several of his characters are placed in situations which make monologues possible. Beckett's plays are becoming shorter and shorter and his last pieces are conducted in silence. Beckett finally relies entirely on the visual element to communicate with his audience.

Thus we have three men, with three very different solutions to the problem of language. This thesis explores the different methods used by these dramatists to communicate with the audience. In most cases, language alone is not adequate.

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Because of an increasing need to communicate with his fellows, man developed a sophisticated form of passing on information-language. This allowed for greater co-operation among men and enabled learning to be transmitted. Man thus became progressive by drawing on experiences other than his own. The arts are an extension of this communication and give us an ever-widening insight into other people's visions of people, problems and events. Of theatrical importance are ear language and eye language which together should successfully impart the dramatist's views to the audience.

Eye language is visual communication with or without the accompaniment of words. In the Western theatre it is customary for programmes to be sold before the performance of a play, and these may provide the first knowledge of a piece to the audience. Most programmes include an explanation of the play, a note on the author, and a list of characters with the corresponding list of actors. According to what is in the programme the audience move into the theatre with certain expectations and presumptions which may or may not be justified by the play. When the curtain rises the audience is confronted by the decor around which the action will take place. The playwright usually gives instructions as to the type of decor he prefers for his play. It may be elaborate and realistic as used in the Restoration comedies. In these cases, the audience enjoyed seeing slightly exaggerated views of their everyday life and habits. On the other hand, some writers ask that the stage be practically bare, either for symbolic purposes or to increase the impact

of the dialogue. Beckett's stage settings are often symbolic, such as the claustrophobic feeling induced by Fin de Partie. Genet uses symbols in a different way in Les Paravents in which the actors draw on the scenery at different times.

Closely associated with the decor is the lighting which can communicate visually to the audience. Beckett has used lighting in Comedie as an indication that a character is going to speak. Genet uses very bright lighting in Haute Surveillance to heighten the unreality of the events taking place on the stage. The lighting can fade into complete darkness to indicate nightfall such as in Oh Les Beaux Jours and En Attendant Godot. Of the greatest importance visually are the gestures and facial expressions of the actors. These can be understood by everyone, no matter what language the play is in. By using various gestures and expressions, an individual can communicate physical needs, emotions, and even opinions by a nod or a shake of the head, provided that these gestures are meaningful to others. Certain non-verbal codes such as Morse, Braille and rail-road signals have developed as an extension of gestures, but all these symbols have to be learned to be meaningful. Some gestures, such as raising the glass in a toast, or standing for royalty, have become almost international. Gesture has then passed the instinctive stage to a level of communication that is closer to speech.

In most plays the dialogue or ear language is still the most effective means of communicating the author's purpose. From the dialogue we can deduce the background to the play and what has caused the events that are

taking place on the stage. A character and his personality is most clearly revealed by what he says and what others say about him. The dialogue produces the overall tone of a play, whether it be serious and didactic, humorous or light and frothy.

The value of silence is now being realised in art forms such as music and drama, so that it has become an important part of the dialogue. Pianists may thus produce moments of silence in their pieces. This silence prepares listeners for ensuing action and holds their attention as they wait in anticipation. In the text of most plays, silence is indicated by the word 'pause'. Beckett makes significant use of this device in En Attendant Godot. Vladimir and Estragon are afraid of silence and attempt to fill it with words and games.

Pozzo: Debout! Porc! (Bruit de Lucky qui se lève.)

En avant! (Pozzo sort. Bruit de fouet.) En avant! Adieu! Plus vite! Porc! Hue! Adieu!

Silence.

Vladimir: Ça a fait passer le temps.

Estragon: Il serait passé sans ça.

Vladimir: Oui, mais moins vite.

Un temps.

Estragon: Qu'est qu'on fait maintenant? (1)

Today the study of this type of silence is made under the form of non-verbal communication. Often it is easier to communicate emotions or information without words. Both a slap on the back in congratulation and a frown of disapproval are eloquent in meaning. However, it is not only in drama that people fear the implications

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(1) En Attendant Godot, p.80.

of silence. In society, silence is often regarded as an enemy, a refusal to participate, rather than as a part of language. This can be seen in such advertisements as "Are you shy, quiet, unable to converse confidently? You can soon train yourself in a fascinating American technique of knowing what to say in any company, and how to say it well." (2)

On a different level of communication from the language and its attendant silences, is mood music. Played before the drama begins, music can be as effective as the message on the programme in suggesting the tone of the play. In films, in the cinema and on television, music has become the accepted method of building up suspense, communicating joy, or merely to indicate the end of a section of the action. With the music, sounds such as the bird song in the radio programme "Open Country" may be produced. In this case the listener is supposed to be reminded of rural surroundings. Other sounds, such as ominous creakings and screams may be used to inspire fear. Almost any emotion may be aroused in the audience by the judicious use of sounds.

Language can be used in many different ways to communicate messages with different effects. It may impart straight information such as that given in a speech by a scientist or by a treasurer of a club in his financial report. The communication may be symbolic and indirect such as in the language used by a poet. For example, Hone Tuwhare refers to the atom bomb as a monstrous sun in his poem "No Ordinary Sun". (3) The poet prefers to imply rather than state. As well as

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(2) N.Z.Listener, Nov.23,1970. p.19.

(3) From the collection "No Ordinary Sun", H.Tuwhare.

the informing roles, language can also be used in a ritual sense, such as when two people meet and begin discussing a neutral topic such as the weather - noise for noise's sake, as Hayakawa terms it. (4) These conversations hardly ever have any informative value but we talk because it would be impolite not to do so. The togetherness of talking is more important than the information imparted. It is this type of conversation that Ionesco mocks in such plays as La Cantatrice Chauve. Occasionally in a social situation, a quarrel will occur. A quarrel in its final stages illustrates the death of this function of language. Words lose their true meanings because generally we are not talking to the other person but are saying things that give satisfaction to ourselves.

The feeling of togetherness engendered by social group conversation is similar to that aroused by the various ritual activities present in our society, such as conventions, political gatherings, rallies and even church services. The ceremonial gatherings show that all groups - religious, political and occupational - like to gather to share a common activity, display flags and march in processions. At nearly all these functions there are traditional speeches or formal ones specially composed for the occasion. These speeches do not give us any new information but serve to reaffirm our social cohesion. Jean Genet realises the value and importance ritual has in the life of an individual and makes use of it in his plays. He wants theatre to be more like a religious ceremony and he has succeeded in

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(4) S.I.Hayakawa, Language in Thought and Action, p.71.

doing this in his works, even if the religious aspect is reversed, so that it is the glorification of evil.

The limitations of language are such that we all have some difficulty in saying what we mean and all have difficulty in being certain that we understand what the other person means. This is further complicated by the fact that language is often used not to communicate but to deceive. Political speeches and writings may deceive by what is left unsaid and by placing a certain bias on the facts. The language of deception is practised today in the high-powered field of commercial advertising. Advertising is not now a source of information but the creating of automatic reactions, or else the creation of a desire in the individual by appealing to fear, sex, class and snobbishness. With increasing technological advances in photography and cinema, even words are being eliminated from some advertisements and being replaced by such things as a beautifully filmed series of the jet-set, all smoking a certain brand of cigarette wherever they go.

Language, both written and spoken, has unquestioningly been accepted as the superior form of communication. Certainly most of our thinking is bound up with words, but it is an exaggeration to claim that there can be no thought without language. When we perceive the significance of traffic lights we can do without the more leisurely processes of verbal reasoning. Over the last twenty years or so, artists of every medium have been questioning the validity of this faith in language. Because of the onslaught of television, radio and cinema, the written word has lost some of its influence. Modern youth, distrusting what they consider are meaningless platitudes

of an older generation, seems to have turned to the international language of music and to people of their own age for leaders. It has been said that the Woodstock and the Isle of Wight rock festivals attracted so many young people because many of the young arrived in the hope of finding the "answer".

The gradual decrease in the importance of language and the search for other modes of expression can be seen in the French theatre of the Absurd where language becomes a theatrical object of mockery, particularly in the works of Ionesco. The playwrights are aware of the dangers of words becoming divorced from their basic meanings. Vague words such as "terrific" become fashionable and impede clarity. Language in the theatre has nearly always reflected the main style and preoccupation of the time. During mediaeval times drama was usually religious and therefore didactic. Later in the classical age, plays were directed at a much narrower audience, as they were witty, poetical and intellectual. With the Romantic era, the plays became more emotive and colourful. The appeal was again to a wider audience. The twentieth century Naturalistic plays are personal and direct. The situations described are experiences known to the audience. The present experiments in drama make it difficult to predict any general trend. Likewise, this is probably a reflection of our age in which every tradition and convention is being questioned.

Such diverse writers as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Adamov and Arrabal are often grouped by critics under the title of playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd. This term was coined by Martin Esslin because he saw in them a similarity of attitudes. Many people are, perhaps, unconsciously searching for a way in which they can adjust to a universe deprived of what was once its centre, God; a world which has become disjointed, purposeless, absurd. The Theatre of the Absurd is one of the expressions of this search. It faces up to the fact that for those for whom the world has lost its central explanation and meaning, art forms still based on the continuation of concepts have lost their validity and are no longer attractive or indeed acceptable.

In expressing the sense of loss at the disappearance of certainties, the Theatre of the Absurd by a strange paradox is also a symptom of what probably comes nearest to expressing a genuine religious quest in our age; an effort to find, not necessarily God, whose name seems to have lost its meaning, but at least a search for something beyond man. These dramatists of the absurd try to show the realities of man's condition and to shock him out of an existence which has become mechanical and deprived of dignity. Formerly, the masses kept in contact through the living ritual of their religion. When it is no longer possible to accept a closed system of values and belief, life must be faced in its stark reality. That is why the Theatre of the Absurd shows man stripped of social position or historical context. He is then confronted with the basic choices or problems of existence: man filling in time between birth and death in Beckett's plays, man rebelling against death and then accepting it

in Ionesco's Tueur Sans Gages, man hiding from reality behind illusions in Genet's plays, man forever lonely and unable to make contact with his fellows. Concerned as it is with these basic realities of life and death, isolation and communication, the Absurd theatre, however, frivolous, and irreverent it may appear, represents a return to the original religious function of theatre; the confrontation of man with myth and religious reality. Like ancient Greek tragedy and mediaeval mystery plays, it tries to make its audience aware of man's precarious position in the universe.

The central difference is that in the earlier forms of drama the realities concerned were known and universally accepted, while the Absurd theatre tries to show the absence of any such values. Thus these dramatists do not attempt to explain the ways of God to men or man's place in a God-created world but instead present in anxiety or with derision man in confrontation with daily realities as he experiences them. The plays are the writers' personal conception of the world and this personal vision is the subject matter of the play, which determines its form. It is a theatre of situation rather than a sequence of events, and therefore its language differs from argument and discursive speech as we know it. Because of these differences, the plays elicit a new response from audiences and demand a new method of interpretation. They have to be seen as poetic wholes rather than as a traditionally structured art form which has a plot, characters, themes and a recognisable setting. Often there is no development at all, or the movement of the play may be circular, precisely because life is a series of cycles, finally ending in oblivion, the state before the beginning.