

Academic Year	2024-2025	Semester	2
Course Coordinator	Asst. Professor Michelle Chiang		
Course Code	HL3038		
Course Title	Theatre of the Absurd		

Course Aims

Martin Esslin coined *Theatre of the Absurd* to group together a substantial number of post-World War II dramatic works that questioned realism and challenged the conventional dramatic form. There was no Absurdist movement, and most playwrights whom we consider Absurdist did not identify themselves as such. Nevertheless, the designation is useful to begin thinking about their shared concern for what it means to be human in a time of social and political upheaval. You will be provoked to consider this central question as you learn more about the playwrights' dramatizations of habit, time, humour and suffering.

The course will train you to close read Absurdist plays and develop an appreciation for their destabilising effects on actors and the audience member. By the end of the course, you are expected to be able to differentiate between the social, historical, philosophical factors that affect the writing and production of absurdist drama. The seminar format will facilitate discussions as you share your reading, viewing, and performance/staging experiences with the class.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO)

By the end of this course, you (as a student) will be able to:

1. Identify and interpret stylistic elements of Absurdist drama.
2. Explain the significance of a substantial number of absurdist works by describing the challenges of performing and interpreting these plays.
3. Differentiate between the social, historical, philosophical factors that affect the writing of Absurdist drama.
4. Build teamwork and find creative solutions through the performance and presentation of seemingly 'absurd' ideas.

Course Content

The discomfort and frustration evoked by the Theatre of the Absurd force character(s) and the audience to confront the question, "What does it mean to be human?" Each week, we will look closely at one play, and if a recording of a production is available, we will view snippets in class to give you an idea of how each play could be staged. You will also perform scenes from the play in class. The course will provoke you to consider what it means to be human as we look closely at absurdist portrayals of habit, time, humour and suffering.

AI-use policy in this course

AI generated essays may be grammatically sound and they may seem logical, but their arguments are often unsophisticated, general and/or wrong. It will evolve in time, but as of now, it is only helpful to a limited extent when it comes to developing students' critical thinking, close reading and writing skills. Therefore, I will permit the use of AI for the assignments but here's my policy:

1. Assignments entirely generated by AI will not receive a passing grade.
2. Assignments partially generated by AI must be accompanied by a separate 'Description of AI-use' form, which is available on the module's NTULearn 'Content' tab.
3. No more than 20% of the submitted assignments should be AI generated, i.e. no more than 600 words out of a 3000-word essay should be generated by AI.

Assessment

Essay (40%):

In your essay, you will engage critically with two plays. You will choose one of three questions to work on. Your essay must begin with a thesis statement, and all points must be structured coherently with clear topic sentences.

Performance/ Staging (20%):

Beginning from week five, at the end of lecture, your group of no larger than 5 members will be given approximately fifteen minutes to act out a scene from the play of the week. No prior acting experience is required. You will not be graded on how well you have acted. Instead your grade will be based on how well you have identified and creatively staged a character's absurd condition. At the end of the performance, you are expected to spend 10 minutes sharing with the class the experience of performing the scene and decisions you've made in its staging.

Presentation (20%)

As a group, you will do a short presentation and facilitate class discussions on what you have come to understand about the play, not covered in the lecture. At the end of this, all students will complete a peer evaluation for each of the presenters. Presenters will be evaluated based on content, organization, and delivery.

Weekly Response (20%)

Come to class each week with the first half of your one-page response paper. At the end of each seminar you will have thirty minutes to complete the second half. The purpose of this two-part format is to allow you to measure your learning and reflect on aspects of the play that you might not have considered when you were reading it for the first time.

Formative feedback

Feedback from peers generated during in-class discussions will be helpful to check your understanding of the plays. Written feedback will also be given when I return your response folders to you and when you receive your final grade.

Learning and Teaching approach

Approach	How does this approach support students in achieving the learning outcomes?
Lecture	The 1 to 1.5 hour lecture will introduce to you the play and playwright of the week. It will provide you with the social, historical and philosophical contexts from which to build your interpretations of the play.
Performance/Staging	The staging of one scene from the play of the week will open you up to the experience of performing and viewing an Absurdist play, which is almost always physically demanding on the actors and psychologically draining on the audience. Through this, you are expected to gain an appreciation for Absurdism as a reflection of lived experiences.
Presentation	You are expected to contribute to class discussion at the end of each presentation. You can do so by asking and responding to questions, as well as giving constructive feedback to one another. Such discussions are also opportunities to formulate and test out potential ideas for the research essay.
Response Paper	The response papers will allow you and me to check your progress, specifically your understanding of the plays as well as the prescribed readings.

Reading and References

Primary Texts: (Certain plays [*] are available in your Norton Anthology, please check before purchasing. Pdf copies of selected plays will be posted on Blackboard)

1. Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi* (1869), Dover Thrift Editions, 2003.
2. Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (1915) [Pdf]
3. Jean Genet, *The Balcony* (1966), Grove Press, 1994
4. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (1957) in *Norton Anthology: World Literature Volume F, 2012
5. Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story* (1958) in *At Home at the Zoo*, The Overlook Press, 2011
6. Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros* (1959) in *Rhinoceros, The Chairs, The Lesson*, Penguin Modern Classics, 2008
7. Tom Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound* (1961-2) in *Norton Anthology, Vol. 2
8. Václav Havel, *The Garden Party* (1963) and Other Plays, Grove Press 1993
9. Harold Pinter, *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) [Pdf]
10. Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (2000), Nick Hern Books, 2003

Secondary Readings: (Pdf copies of selected papers and chapters will be posted on Blackboard)

1. Albert Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus, and other essays* (NY: Vintage, 1955) translated by Justin O'Brien

2. Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double: essays* (London: Calder, 1970), translated by Victor Corti
3. Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd* (NY: Vintage, 2004) (Selected Chapters)
4. Michael Y. Bennett's *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter* (NY: Palgrave, 2011) (Selected Chapters; E-book is available in the Library)
5. --- *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015)

Course Policies and Student Responsibilities

(1) General

You are expected to complete all assigned pre-class readings and response papers. You will attend all seminar classes punctually. If you must miss a seminar session, you are responsible for following up with course notes, assignments and course related announcements. Since Engagement is one of the assessment components, you are expected to participate actively in all seminar discussions and activities.

(2) Absenteeism

Attendance will be taken each week. Absence from class without a valid reason will affect your course grade significantly. Valid reasons include falling sick supported by a medical certificate and participation in NTU's approved activities supported by an excuse letter from the relevant bodies.

If you must miss a seminar, you must inform me (the course instructor) via email prior to the start of the class.

Academic Integrity

Good academic work depends on honesty and ethical behaviour. The quality of your work relies on adhering to the principles of academic integrity and to the NTU Honour Code, a set of values shared by the whole university community. Truth, Trust and Justice are at the core of NTU's shared values.

You must recognise your responsibilities in understanding and applying the principles of academic integrity in all the work you do at NTU. Not knowing what is involved in maintaining academic integrity does not excuse academic dishonesty. One needs to actively equip oneself with strategies to avoid all forms of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, academic fraud, collusion and cheating. If you are uncertain of the definitions of any of these terms, you should go to the [academic integrity website](#) for more information. You could also consult me if you need any clarification about the requirements of academic integrity in the course.

Course Instructors

Instructor	Office Location	Phone	Email
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Michelle Chiang	SoH 03-69	-	michellechiang@ntu.edu.sg
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Planned Weekly Schedule

Week	Topic	Course LO	Readings/ Activities
1 15/1	Introduction What is the Absurd?	3	Esslin's <i>Theatre of the Absurd</i> ; Camus' 'cycle de l'absurd' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Caligula</i> • <i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i> • <i>The Stranger</i>
2 22/1	The Beginning	2, 3	Alfred Jarry's <i>Ubu Roi</i> (1896) and Albert Camus' <i>Caligula</i> (1944)
3 29/1	Public holiday	2, 3	Public holiday
4 5/2	The Beginning	2, 3	Franz Kafka's novella, <i>The Metamorphosis</i> (1915) and Camus's 'Appendix on Kafka' (1942)
5 12/2	Upheaval	1, 2, 3, 4	Jean Genet <i>The Balcony</i> (1956, 60, 62)
6 19/2	Play	1, 2, 3, 4	Samuel Beckett <i>Endgame</i> (1957)
7 26/2	Loneliness and Abjection	1, 2, 3, 4	[Response Folder due this week] Edward Albee <i>The Zoo Story</i> (1958)
Recess (3 – 7 Mar)			
8 12/3	Dehumanization	1, 2, 3, 4	Eugene Ionesco <i>Rhinoceros</i> (1959)
9 19/3	Blurred Boundaries	1, 2, 3, 4	Tom Stoppard <i>The Real Inspector Hound</i> (1961-2)
10 26/3	A Question of Identity	1, 2, 3, 4	Václav Havel <i>The Garden Party</i> (1963)
11 2/4	Time and Memory	1, 2, 3, 4	Harold Pinter <i>Ashes to Ashes</i> (1996)
12 9/4	A World at War	1, 2, 3, 4	Caryl Churchill <i>Far Away</i> (2000)
13 16/4	Conclusion	1, 2, 3, 4	Essay and 10 Responses are due this week.