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**To my grandmother, the queen of fervent argument.**



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## 1. Introduction

My most memorable visit to theatre happened in spring 1999. It was a production of *Endgame* at Vienna's Akademietheater, with Gert Voss and Ignaz Kirchner playing Hamm and Clov, which was on that night. Being used to school performances by Vienna's English Theatre in which a bunch of actors were performing realistic family crisis plays in easily-transportable naturalistic sets in front of several hundreds of puberty-stricken teenagers, this night at the theatre took me by surprise: the stage was completely empty except for two odd looking guys on two chairs. The two got themselves tangled up in fruitless conversational patterns which were accompanied and reflected by circular patterns of movement and pointless activity, until there was nothing left but two people, lost in time, space and words. I left the Akademietheater in a strange state of shock, fascination but also euphoria, feeling that I had witnessed something depressing and strangely uplifting at the same time.

Several years passed before another play provided a similarly impressive experience. This time, it was a performance of the 2002/03 season at the Schauspielhaus Hamburg. The stage, which wasn't actually a stage but, rather, a large hall, was – yet again - bare, except for a casually dressed young woman. The woman seemed to be acting several different characters – a doctor, a psychotic patient and, maybe, the patient's lover. Most of the time, she seemed to be only articulating the patient's immediate thoughts, which she traced, physically, by moving back, forth and sideways through the room. It was as if each sentence had a certain spatial movement as its equivalent, and the woman was actually walking through a labyrinth of words and thoughts, finally getting lost. Watching her, the audience itself seemed to get dragged into this labyrinth. Again, I left the theatre utterly fascinated and inspired. Later, I learned that the play was called *4.48 Psychosis* and had been written by a young English author called Sarah Kane.

Whatever the differences between *Endgame*, premiered in 1957, and *4.48 Psychosis*, premiered in 2000, may be: both productions provided a very strong emotional and sensual experience, something I had never felt watching a theatrical performance before. Through the essentially anti-naturalistic mode which both productions displayed, theatre suddenly seemed to make sense to me. This singular intensity which I had never encountered with any other kind of drama and which, for me, was somehow related to a rejection of theatrical realism was what first made me think that

there was a link between in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre. The following thesis is an attempt to investigate this link by analysing the similarities in both kinds of theatre in a systematic way.

The two points of departure for my analysis are Martin Esslin's book on the theatre of the absurd<sup>1</sup> and Aleks Sierz' book on *in-*yer-face* theatre*<sup>2</sup>. The two accounts, of course, must be regarded with a critical eye: each of them, as Aleks Sierz has remarked, could be said to have actually created the phenomenon it claimed to be discovering (*Re: In-*yer-face* vs. abs. th.*). Thus, both he and Esslin are providing a label under which a number of highly individual authors who did not think of themselves as a coherent group were summarised and interpreted. However, the wide currency and acceptance which the two terms still have in the scholarly and practical theatrical landscape today make them a central point of reference for this comparison. Nevertheless, there was a need to re-evaluate, summarise and expand some of the ideas expressed in both Esslin's and Sierz' book in order to arrive at a number of comparative categories which would make the analysis efficient: while most of Esslin's basic concepts and analyses, for example, are still valid, it is certainly necessary, some 50 years after their first publication, to re-think and re-adjust the focus, especially when comparing absurdist theatre to an essentially postmodern theatrical practice. Each chapter, therefore, contains a more or less extensive analysis of the respective aspect in absurdist theatre before I go into analysing the same aspect in in-*yer-face* plays.

The thorough re-consideration of particular aspects in absurdist plays also makes sense when one takes into account the diversity and originality which is to be found within the absurdist tradition. To just rely on a number of prefigured characteristics of absurdist theatre, roughly derived from previous accounts such as Esslin's, would not do justice to the variety of forms and approaches developed by the individual authors. The same is true of in-*yer-face* theatre: although in-*yer-face* plays share certain tendencies, the individual authors' approaches are highly diverse. This is why, in the following chapters, I will mostly analyse the presence of certain absurdist tendencies in each in-*yer-face* play individually before coming to a conclusion about an overall influence of absurdist on in-*yer-face* theatre.

For the comparison, I have chosen representative works from absurdist theatre and five in-*yer-face* plays. Concerning absurdist theatre, I chose four out of five authors to

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<sup>1</sup>Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Methuen, 2001.

<sup>2</sup>Sierz, Alex. *In-Yer-Face Theatre. British Drama Today*. London: Faber & Faber, 2000.

which Esslin dedicates an extra chapter in his book – Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter – and focussed on plays written in the 1950s, thus arriving at a core list including Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Ionesco's *The Bald Primadonna*, *The Chairs* and *The Lesson*, Genet's *The Balcony* and Pinter's *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*. With regard to in-er-face theatre, I have tried to give an overview over the whole decade of the 1990s in the choice of plays. Also, I have taken the opportunity of introducing plays which have not been as widely discussed as, say, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* or Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* but which clearly deserve critical attention for their originality and artistic integrity. The in-er-face plays chosen for comparison, then, include Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991), Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* (1992), Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* (1995), Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (1998) and Nick Grosso's *Kosher Harry* (2002). These plays will be introduced in more detail in chapter three below.

## 2. Comparing absurdist theatre and in-er-face theatre

At first sight, the idea of comparing in-er-face theatre to the theatre of the absurd might seem like a hopeless business. On the one hand, there is the energetic, ferocious drama produced by wild and angry girls and boys in their twenties, like Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill, famously including explicit depictions of sex and violence on stage, dirty language, and all of this presented in a form of either postmodern montage or unbearable realism. On the other hand, we find a theatre of resigned men over the age of forty<sup>3</sup>, like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, who produce abstract but expressive images of existential absurdity and stagnation, often presented with a dash of dry humour. In order to determine on what levels a comparison of the two kinds of theatre might make sense, it seems necessary to return to the origins of the concepts of in-er-face and absurdist theatre.

Both the concept of in-er-face theatre and that of absurdist theatre go back to a polemical account by a theatre scholar that, later, became recognised as a major reference work on the respective topic. As I have already mentioned, the concept of the theatre of the absurd was famously established by Martin Esslin's study of the same title, first published in 1961. He introduces (and discusses at length) Samuel

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<sup>3</sup> J. L. Styan notes that 'Beckett and company' could not be regarded as 'wild young rebels, since in 1952 only Arrabal was under the age of forty (125).

Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter as main representatives of a theatre that is, fundamentally, concerned with expressing ‘the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief had deprived man of certainties’ (Esslin, *Th. o. Abs.* 401). A major defining feature of the theatre of the absurd, according to Esslin, is the fact that

the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought [...] The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images. (*Th. o. Abs.* 24/25)

Considering landmark works such as Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and *Endgame* (1957), Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano* (1950), Genet’s *The Balcony* (World premiere in London in 1957) or Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* (1957) and *The Caretaker* (1959) at the heart of this theatrical mode, it can be said that the heydays of absurdist theatre mainly stretched over the decade of the 1950s.

Like the concept of absurdist theatre, the current idea of in-yer-face theatre goes back to an account by a theatre critic. *In-Yer-Face Theatre – British Drama Today* by Aleks Sierz was published in 2000. According to Sierz,

in-yer-face theatre is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves, provoking alarm [...] Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative. (*In-Yer-Face* 4)

Furthermore, Sierz claims that “this kind of theatre should always have an unusual power to trouble the audience emotionally, to contain material that questions our ideas about who we are” (6). The main representatives of in-yer-face theatre, for him, are: first of all, Sarah Kane, whose first play *Blasted* (which premiered in 1995) sparked off a highly emotional debate among English theatre critics due to formal innovations and a number of atrocities (like, for, example, a man eating a dead baby) shown on stage; secondly, Mark Ravenhill, whose *Shopping and Fucking* (opening at the Royal Court theatre in 1996) became notorious for its title and a scene of anal sex on stage; and, finally, Anthony Neilson, who captures the mood of the 1990s in *Penetrator* (premiered at the Traverse theatre in 1993, at the Royal Court theatre in 1994), a claustrophobic play set in one room with the constant threat of impending

violence hovering above the characters' heads. However, in an extensive section divided up according to predominant themes in the plays, Sierz also discusses plays by writers such as Philip Ridley, Phyllis Nagy, Jez Butterworth, Nick Grosso, Patrick Marber, Judy Upton and Martin McDonagh. The 'age' of in-er-face theatre roughly covers the period of the 1990s. For more specific orientation, Sierz suggests the premiere of Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* in 1991 as a pre-echo and Sarah Kane's death in 1999 as the end point of the movement (*Interview* 151).

While the definitions quoted above already highlight some basic differences – Sierz stresses an aggressive way of reaching out to the audience whereas Esslin evokes the idea that something is merely presented on stage without paying particular attention to the audience – they also indicate similarities. Thus, neither in-er-face nor absurdist theatre seem to be compatible with the idea of the well-made play that has shaped drama right into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is based on “plots which had a coherence and causality [...] and progressed through crises and complications to reach logical, plausible endings” (Lennard and Luckhurst 96). If a well made play relies on rational faculties like reason and logic (which are necessary to create and understand a plot that progresses towards a certain solution), the theatre of the absurd abandons these parameters: it relies on images instead of a plot, rejecting “discursive thought” and argument<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, in-er-face theatre does not allow the audience “to sit back and contemplate”<sup>5</sup> rationally a well-made plot presented to them. Rather, it tries to establish direct contact with the audience, going for an emotional response. In this sense, then, both absurdist and in-er-face theatre reject a theatrical approach that relies on rational thinking connected to a well-made plot.

This rejection of a traditional approach, however, does not only concern a coherent plot, as Aleks Sierz remarks, summarising some basic characteristics of in-er-face theatre:

if a well-made play has to have a good plot, much provocative drama prefers to have a strong sense of experiential confrontation; if a well-made play has to have complex characters, much new drama has types rather than individuals; if a well-made play has to have long theatrical speeches, nineties drama usually has curt televisual dialogue [...] (*In-Yer-Face* 243)

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<sup>4</sup> See quote from *Th. o. Abs.* on page 4.

<sup>5</sup> See quote from *In-Yer-Face* on page 4.

Interestingly, a very similar comparison<sup>6</sup> of the traditional and the new is to be found in Esslin, who claims that

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these [absurdist plays] have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; [...] if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. (*Th. o. Abs.* 22)

It seems, then, that not only do both in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre clearly rebel against a tradition in drama; also, the striking parallels between Sierz' and Esslin's descriptions indicate that they are opposing tradition in a similar way: in both kinds of theatre, traditional ideas of plot, characterization and dialogue are undermined. A comparison of in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre, then, should begin with these categories.

Of the aspects mentioned by Sierz and Esslin, the issue of dialogue and language seems particularly important as a parameter for comparison. Often without direction and sometimes incoherent to the point of fragmentation, dialogue, in both in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre, no longer has the function of advancing a plot. Instead, it draws attention to itself, to its own inadequacy or even breakdown. Thus, a meta-level is established on which language comments on itself and its lost function as a means of communication. Language, however, if it no longer furthers communication or an understanding of a situation, is reduced to sound. It is also at this non-literary, musical level that it acquires an additional function in some of the plays.

Another parallel between in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre can be spotted in the importance of the non-textual elements for the two kinds of drama in question. The setting for example, ceases to be the mere naturalistic background of the developing action; it becomes self-referential and assumes an expressivity of its own. There are, for example, numerous plays in both in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre which are set only in a single room: one could think of *Endgame* or Pinter's *The Caretaker*, or, on the side of in-*yer-face* theatre, of Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney*, where a pair of twins do not dare to leave their home. This insistent focus on a single room directs

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<sup>6</sup> Sierz himself points out that the respective passage in his book constitutes an intertextual reference to Esslin's account, admitting that *In-Yer-Face theatre: British Drama Today* as a whole was inspired by *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Sierz, *We all need stories* 29).

attention to the stage space itself and, as we shall see, adds an additional layer of meaning to the plays. Also, the room or space shown on stage is often stylised, sometimes to the point of abstraction, sometimes only slightly: we encounter places like the suggested landscape in *Waiting for Godot* or the scenic hints of a university area in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*, where the setting remains rather vague and undefined, but there is also the more specific upstairs room at a Soho club from 1958 in Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* or the interior of a brothel in Jean Genet's *The Balcony*. However, spaces in both absurdist and in-yer-face theatre are essentially non-naturalistic, producing a dream-like atmosphere which pervades most of the plays.

In relation to more extravagant settings like a brothel or a 1950s Soho club, one might also notice the fascination of many absurdist and in-yer-face writers with dubious characters connected to these places. Thus, in-yer-face drama is full of so-called 'low-lifers' or, at least, outsiders: prostitutes, thieves, drug addicts, rapists, child abusers, tormentors, murderers and other psychologically malfunctioning or simply 'mad' characters feature prominently in the plays of Kane and her contemporaries. On the side of the absurdist, Jean Genet's partiality to criminal subjects is, of course, well known. But Beckett, too, shows a taste for outsiders in choosing tramps or severely disabled people like Hamm (who is blind) and Clov (who has difficulties walking) for his main characters. Even Ionesco, who has become famous for making fun of bourgeois communicational patterns, includes a murderous, crazy professor and a senile old couple in his plays. Comparing the bizarre and exceptional characters in in-yer-face and absurdist theatre, then, might produce interesting results.

Another element that demonstrates the importance of the non-textual level in both types of theatre is the treatment of the body on stage. In-yer-face plays are frequently accused of using violence as an end in itself (Schalk 111), and it is certainly true that violence, like rape or eye-gauging, is enacted very openly and explicitly, right in front of the audience, with these scenes often being drawn out beyond endurance. The elaborateness with which violent actions are portrayed, then, draws attention to the act itself and, consequently, to the bodies involved. Building upon the portrayal of violence, in-yer-face theatre is not imaginable without the presence of a body. In the theatre of the absurd, of course, open violence is less common. However, it relies heavily on the presence of the body for its production of comic effects, which often develop out of a person's interaction with objects as, for example in the hat-switching routine in *Waiting for Godot*, or the old couple's interacting with the chairs in

Ionesco's play of the same title. In addition, bodies in absurdist theatre sometimes even become part of the setting, as does Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days* or the growing corpse in Ionesco's *Amédée*. Finally, attention is drawn to the body itself in in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre by letting it undergo mutation – prominent examples being, of course, Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* or the gender-switching surgery in Kane's *Cleansed*. The body, then, seems to become an object of interest in itself and a comparison of its presentation and use in either kind of theatre might reveal some important underlying parallels.

Issues of characterization, plot and dialogue, but also the non-textual constituents of a play are, of course, embedded in the superordinate category of general dramaturgy, which provides yet another level on which a comparison might yield interesting result. Critics and scholars have always drawn attention to the enormous emotional appeal of both in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre. Thus, Esslin famously begins his account of the theatre of the absurd by describing what an impact a performance of *Waiting for Godot* made on an audience of prisoners of San Quentin penitentiary, San Francisco, in 1957. He quotes a newspaper reporter who remarked that all the prisoners stayed – in a state of fascination - until the end of the performance of the supposedly difficult play and that they were “all shook” when they finally left (Esslin, *Th. o. Abs.* 20).

Other critics, on the occasion of a performance of *Endgame* in London in 1958, for example, noted the hypnotic effect of Beckett's style. Thus, theatre critic Anthony Cookman noted how “audiences undoubtedly find a hypnotic fascination in the rhythm of his repetitions” (Cookman Nov 1958). Sierz, in another parallel to Esslin's account, also starts out by describing the audience's reaction on the opening night to a play called *Snatch*, involving body-switching, onstage rape and a cut-off penis. Like the San Francisco newspaper reporter, Sierz remarks how the audience ‘emerged shaken, talking, arguing, feeling’ from the theatre (*In-Yer-Face* 4). Some newspaper reporters have even directly demonstrated the emotional punch exerted by in-*yer-face* theatre in their response to certain plays. Paul Taylor from the *Independent*, for example, claimed that watching Sarah Kane's *Blasted* was like “having your face rammed into an overflowing ash tray [...] and then having your whole head held down in a bucket of offal” (Taylor 38, also qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 95).

Such evidence, along with my personal experiences described in the introduction, suggests that the combination of elements in in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre produces a similar kind of overall dramaturgy. In both cases, the dramaturgical focus



is, apparently, not on the effective telling of a story but on the production of an unsettling emotional experience. While in more conventional forms of theatre, where the dramaturgy focuses on storytelling, the play remains on the stage, self-contained, a story to be watched and analysed, in both absurdist and in-er-face theatre, the play seems to reach out to the audience, making them experience the things it is talking about. This, then, suggests a particular approach to drama and theatre that is taken by both in-er-face and absurdist theatre. Thus, a comparison will also have to consider whether these two theatrical styles can be related to a certain general tradition in 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre that puts experience before storytelling. Finally, in connection with this idea of an experiential dramaturgy, one might want to consider in how far the experiential quality which absurdist and in-er-face theatre apparently assume is related to a particular kind of human experience, a certain 'zeitgeist' or sensibility, and what this connection between a particular human sense of being and a certain kind of dramaturgy means for the idea of an influence on which this thesis is based.

### **3. Introducing the plays**

#### **3.1. The absurdist plays**

The absurdist plays which I will be using for comparison in this thesis are well known and extensively introduced in Esslin's book, which is why I will provide only a brief summary of each play here.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, of course, is one of the most popular plays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, featuring the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon who spend day after day idling away on a country road, waiting for a man called Godot who is supposed to give them a job or, at least, a hint at what else they could do with their lives.

Famously, however, Godot never comes, and the two tramps remain where they are, continuing their pointless daily routines. *Endgame* is a somewhat bleaker variation of the same theme: Hamm, a crippled, blind old man in a wheelchair, his servant Clov and Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, who live in two dustbins, are stuck together in a room, with the outside world in a state of apocalypse. In contrast to Vladimir and Estragon, however, the characters in *Endgame* are no longer waiting for anyone to come along and save them. While still performing their daily games and routines to pass the time, they are only waiting for the end, for death.

Ionesco's first play *The Bald Primadonna* is another classic of the genre of absurdist theatre. In the play, Ionesco has two typical English married couples meet at a typical English house to exchange textbook pleasantries and discuss many things of no consequence. Occasionally, the couples are joined by the maid and, later on in the play, by the captain of the fire brigade. Even though the conversation is, from the beginning, characterised by pointlessness and circularity, it becomes more and more incoherent in the course of the play until it completely dissolves into nonsensical blabbering at the very end. *The Lesson* also dissects language and logical reasoning, featuring a pupil who is unable to understand the basic principles of mathematics and a professor who, as a kind of punishment, gives the pupil an utterly nonsensical lecture in linguistics. During the course of this lecture, the pupil develops a heavy toothache, losing all ability to concentrate, and the professor talks himself into an uncontrollable rage. Ultimately, he stabs his pupil with an imaginary knife. In *The Chairs*, an old couple receives a large number of imaginary visitors in their home, a tower in the middle of a lake. In expectation of a speaker who will reveal to them the meaning of life as laid out by the old man, the two fill up the stage with chairs and conduct conversations with the invisible guests. When the orator finally arrives, the old man and woman, in a state of happy fulfilment, jump out of the window, leaving him alone with the imaginary guests. The orator, then, turns out to be unable to communicate anything, as he is deaf and dumb.

Genet's *The Balcony* is set in a brothel where prostitutes help customers to act out their fantasies of power and domination. When a revolutionary war destroys the supposedly real power structures in the world outside, the customers are forced to act out the roles of judge, bishop and general in the 'real' world, which does not make much of a difference. In the end, even Roger, the revolutionary leader, recognises the sole power of the image and role-playing: he goes into the brothel, acts out the scenario of the chief of the police and castrates himself. The chief of the police, satisfied that the image of his power has finally become engrained in people's minds, has himself entombed in a mausoleum which has been erected for him in the brothel. Pinter's early one act play *The Room* focuses on Rose, an elderly woman who spends a day alone in her room which she is afraid to leave. During breakfast with her husband Bert, Mr. Kidd, the housekeeper, visits. Rose asks anxious questions concerning the house and her room, but the housekeeper cannot even tell her how many floors or rooms there are in the house. After Bert and Mr. Kidd have left, Rose

meets two strangers at her doorstep who have come to inquire after a supposedly vacant room in the house – her room, as it turns out. Mr. Kidd visits again, telling Rose that there is a stranger downstairs who wants to meet her. Finally, a blind black man enters Rose's room and calls her by a strange name. When her husband returns in the evening, he violently beats the man and Rose goes blind.

*The Dumb Waiter*, another one of Pinter's early one-act plays, is invested with a similar sense of mystery and threat from the outside. The two contract killers Ben and Gus are waiting in a basement room to hear from their boss. They pass their time in repetitive and pointless conversation until the dumb waiter of the supposedly abandoned upstairs restaurant mysteriously starts delivering food orders. Trying unsuccessfully to fulfil these orders and struggling to make sense of what is going on, Gus and Ben become nervous. Finally, while Gus is in the bathroom, Ben receives a message saying that their next victim is approaching. Ben prepares himself, but as the door opens, it is his fellow hit man Gus who is facing him.

In *The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full-length play, a man called Stanley lives at a lonely seaside boarding house owned by an elderly couple, Meg and Petey. One day, two men called Goldberg and McCann turn up. They submit Stanley to a cross-examination of pointless and sometimes outright nonsensical questions and force him to attend a birthday party which they organise for him. Meg, the naïve owner of the house, does not understand what is going on and plays along in arranging and celebrating. During the party, Goldberg and McCann continue torturing Stanley. In the morning after the party, the two men take a silenced and obviously unwell Stanley away in their car without explanation.

### **3.2. The in-er-face plays**

#### **3.2.1. Jez Butterworth: *Mojo***

One of the most famous plays of the in-er-face movement was certainly Jez Butterworth's *Mojo*, of which one critic remarked that "[...] this is Beckett on speed, savagely funny, in fast forward, with no time to wait for Godot" (Kellaway 956). The play premiered in July 1995 at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs and was considerably hyped by the critics as it was the first time since Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* that the first play by a young author had been put on the main stage (Sierz, *In-er-Face* 161).

In *Mojo*, a group of small-time hoodlums – Sweets, Potts, Skinny and Baby - are assembled in the back rooms of a Soho club in the year of 1958 after their boss, Ezra, has been killed by a rivalling gang who have also stolen their most promising act, a performer called Silver Johnny. They have been ordered to stay there, maybe awaiting an attack, by Ezra's second hand Mickey, who now runs the club. In the course of the play, Baby, the late Ezra's son, starts a quarrel over the leadership of the club. When Mickey denies his request, Baby disappears for a while but returns with Silver Johnny, who he has rescued from the hands of Ezra's rivals. He uncovers Mickey's betrayal and shoots Skinny, Mickey's favourite. Having thus cemented his status as the new boss, Baby leaves Mickey lying on the floor alone.

### 3.2.2. Philip Ridley: *The Pitchfork Disney*

Philip Ridley's first play *The Pitchfork Disney*, which premiered at the London Bush Theatre in January 1991, has been described as "a weird little piece, concocted from early Pinter with a soupcon of added Beckett" (Osborne 12). It evolves around a pair of twins aged approximately twenty-eight and called Presley and Haley, who are stalled in their flat, scared to even go shopping ever since their parents have disappeared mysteriously years ago. When Haley goes to sleep on sleeping pills as every night, Presley lets in a stranger called Cosmo who earns his living by eating cockroaches and other animals in front of other people in bars. While waiting for his driver, Cosmo asks Presley questions, insults him and manipulates him into eating a cockroach himself. At some point, his assistant, Pitchfork, arrives and gives a grotesque performance of a song. Finally, Cosmo convinces Presley to leave him alone with his sleeping sister Haley and drive to the supermarket with Pitchfork to buy chocolate. Presley pretends to obey him and leaves but re-enters as Cosmo lets Haley suck his finger in her sleep. Presley breaks Cosmo's finger, chasing him away. Haley awakes and the two of them decide never to go out again.

### 3.2.3. Nick Grosso: *Kosher Harry*

With *Kosher Harry*, which premiered at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in April 2002, Nick Grosso follows in Eugene Ionesco's footsteps. In a play dominated by conversation that borders on the surreal, four characters meet by chance at a kosher restaurant while a storm is raging outside: a deaf old woman, a racist cabdriver, a sexually needy waitress and a mysterious man. They are waiting for their food. In

the meantime, they tell stories from their lives, argue and slowly get tangled up in their emotional mess. From time to time, the waitress goes off to get some drinks. The cabbie walks off, planning to seduce the Russian waitress who is much talked about but never actually seen on stage. The waitress sexually assaults the cab driver. The supposedly incapable old woman rises from her wheelchair to perform a dance. In the end, the character called 'man' is able to take all the other characters' valuables, and he exits the place unnoticed.

#### 3.2.4. Phyllis Nagy: *Weldon Rising*

Phyllis Nagy's play *Weldon Rising* premiered at the Liverpool Playhouse Studio in October 1992. On the occasion of the transfer of the production to the Royal Court Theatre, London, she was hailed as "a 1992 American female Genet" (Woddis 1490). In the play, the four main characters are caught up in a situation dominated by guilt feelings which they cannot escape. In the New York meat-packing district, a gay man called Jimmy has been murdered by a homophobe. Ever since, the temperature is inexplicably rising in the city. Jimmy's boyfriend Natty, who ran away in fear instead of coming to his aid, is doing penance sitting in the street and insulting passers-by. Next to him, Marcel, a drag queen, awaits customers and talks about himself in the third person. In a flat overlooking the street, Jaye and Tilly, two lesbians who have witnessed the murder are drinking beer and awaiting the apocalypse. When they go out to get more beer, they meet Natty and Marcel in the street and start talking. Natty's body is getting hotter by the minute. There are occasional flashbacks in which Jimmy's murder is re-staged. At some point, Marcel is picked up by a car which explodes in front of the others. Jaye and Tilly start making love. Finally, Jimmy enters and carries Natty away. The two girls disappear in a flash of white light.

#### 3.2.5. Sarah Kane: *Cleansed*

*Cleansed*, the third play of the 1990s enfant terrible, Sarah Kane, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in April 1998. It was described by one critic as "a weird attempt to combine *Waiting for Godot* with *The Duchess of Malfi*" (Morley 568), while Aleks Sierz claimed that "it's like Harold Pinter and Edward Bond for the chemical generation" (Sierz, *Review* 568). The play evolves around the occupants of a mysterious institution that is located in a kind of university area. In the beginning, a man called Graham is killed by a man called Tinker through a drug injection into the

eye. Graham's sister Grace arrives to ask for Graham's clothes and begs Tinker to let her stay in the institution. She meets Robin, a young man who cannot count, read or write and who falls in love with her. She also meets Graham who, mysteriously, is alive, and, eventually, makes love to her. Robin, who has been taught how to count, realises how long he will have to remain in the institution and commits suicide. In between these episodes, we witness Tinker repeatedly trying to establish contact with a prostitute who dances for him in a booth. Also, Tinker tortures Rod and Carl, a gay couple, at regular intervals, eventually killing Rod. At the end of the play, Grace awakes in a bed, realising that Tinker has cut off Carl's penis and sewed it onto her own genitals, thereby turning her into an exact copy of Graham.

#### **4. Structures of stagnation**

##### **4.1. Acts and Scenes**

The plot summaries given above are, of course, important with regard to giving the reader of this thesis an approximate idea of the content of the plays that I will be dealing with. However, these summaries also provide a useful introduction to a structural analysis, since they already hint at some basic features of these plays. Several plot summaries, for example, contain the word 'waiting' in some form or another, which indicates an inability to act on the side of the characters but also a sense of stagnation in the overall dramatic situation. Also, in most cases, no classical story with a developing conflict and a clear resolution in the end is being told. Rather, the plot summaries consist of random enumerations of the characters' activities and things that happen, an impression which is enhanced by the fact I have hardly felt the need to use words like 'because' or 'since' that indicate causal links. Some absurdist and in-er-face plays are concluded by a kind of climax, an outstanding event towards the end of the play which, since there is no development with causal links throughout the play, does not represent a resolution in the traditional sense. This is already reflected in the surface structure of the plays, their division into acts and scenes or, as Pfister calls it, the structural segmentation (230). Interestingly, as we shall see, in-er-face authors prefer to use the same alternative surface structures as the absurdist. What we regard as a classical play which includes development, conflict and a final catastrophe is usually structured according to the Freytag triangle. It has five acts, each of which corresponds to one of the following stages of the action: introduction,

rising movement, climax, fall/reversal and catastrophe. The five-act-structure with its uneven number of acts clearly lends itself to the depiction of a traditional play: there is room for a development, a central act in which the conflict might break out and the final two acts, in which the whole thing – in symmetry to the first two acts – can be resolved. The uneven number encourages symmetrical structure with a conflict right at the centre of the play, the conflict providing the possibility for development.

Most in-*yer-face* authors, just like the absurdists, generally seem to reject this five-act-pattern of development in favour of one-act plays, two-act plays or sequences of scenes. In this, of course, in-*yer-face* theatre is not an exception: five-act structures are rare in most of later 20<sup>th</sup> century drama. However, if one takes a closer look (as we shall do further below) at the actual patterns of plot and action which are packed into the alternative structural divisions in in-*yer-face* plays, one realises that the question of surface structure is not simply one of 20<sup>th</sup> century dramatic fashion. Rather, the choice of a different surface structure, as in absurdist theatre, must be considered as a conscious decision against a traditional structural pattern which is historically linked to a plot characterised by linear development.

Apart from a general rejection of the concept of linearity which lies behind five-act-structures, different alternative structures carry a number of more specific implications with regard to the development of action in plays. A one-act play, for example, does not only imply non-development because it lacks the other acts in which the action traditionally develops. It also automatically suggests sameness of character and place: the easiest way of systematically dividing up a play is with regard to characters entering or exiting the stage, and this criterion has historically determined the division of a play into scenes and acts (Pfister 236-238). In a play without divisions, then, the surface structure suggests stagnation due to the historically grown understanding of acts and scenes alone. This one-act structure is to be found in Ionesco's early one-act- plays *The Bald Primadonna*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs*, in Beckett's *Endgame* but also in Pinter's early one-act plays like *The Room* or *The Dumb Waiter*. Among the in-*yer-face* plays under discussion in this thesis, Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* and Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* are one-act plays. A two-act surface structure contrasts with the classical five acts of the Freytag triangle by providing an even number of acts, meaning that, formally, there is no room for the traditional development of a conflict at the centre of the play. Thus, a two-act surface structure is fundamentally opposed to the traditional concept of a

linear, symmetrical development of action: a conflict involving a climax introduced in a play with a two-act surface structure will necessarily create an impression of asymmetry, as the one act which contains the climax will necessarily seem more important for the overall development of action. In order to restore symmetry, the author might choose to introduce a similar combination of conflict and climax in the other act or entirely abandon the concept of conflict and climax. Both possibilities, however, will result in a repetitive pattern, indicating stagnation instead of a forward-moving, linear development of action. At the same time, the division into two different acts provides the formal possibility of a change in place, character or theme. This formal possibility, however, might be consciously rejected or ignored in order to produce patterns of stagnation and non-development, as Beckett does in *Happy Days* and *Waiting for Godot*, in which the second act becomes a repetition with variations of the first. Among the in-her-face plays more specifically referred to in this comparison, a two-act-structure is employed in *Mojo* and *Kosher Harry*, and it also seems to be generally favoured by Phyllis Nagy – she uses it in *Butterfly Kiss*, *Disappeared* and *The Strip*.

A sequence of scenes as a structuring method, too, defies the hierarchy of the five-act-structure which employs a forward-moving development of action: without a superimposed division into a prescribed number of acts, each scene is equally important, and none historically marked for the presentation of a conflict or any kind of rising and falling action. At the same time, the division into different scenes (like the division into acts in a two-act-structure) formally suggests changes in character and place, a convention which, again, can be embraced or denied to create a particular effect. In *The Balcony*, Genet, like Beckett, denies the conventions of the scene changes, reinforcing the idea of stagnation and circularity: the different sets presented on stage are only different rooms in Madame Irma's brothel. The implications of this surface structure ingeniously correspond to the content and action structure of the play<sup>7</sup>. Since the main characters remain within the context of the brothel and the role they are playing, no actual development is possible: they are only imitating social functions. By calling the nine scenes of the play 'tableaux', Genet not only draws attention to the conscious role-playing of the characters in order to fit the picture of a particular official function but also to the resulting general stagnation in the plays'

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<sup>7</sup> Genet describes a group of men who like to live out their power fantasies by dressing up as judge, bishop or military general in a brothel. When a revolution threatens the brothel, they decide to play their roles in front of the public in order to save themselves.



action, which becomes obvious if we consider the definition of tableau as “a representation of some scene by means of persons grouped in the proper manner, placed in appropriate postures, and remaining silent and motionless” (*Dictionary.net*). Of the in-*yer-face* authors, Sarah Kane employs sequences of scenes as a structuring method in her first three plays *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed*. The structure is also used by Mark Ravenhill in his famous *Shopping and Fucking*, which he divides up into fourteen scenes.

#### **4.2. The (non)-development of action**

What the surface structures used by the absurdist and in-*yer-face* authors and the plot summaries above suggest is that in-*yer-face* authors prefer to create plots that do not develop according to the traditional concept, into a particular direction or along causal links. Some plot summaries even seem to suggest a return to the initial state of things, which would indicate a circular movement of plot. Whichever way, it is certainly this condition of stasis, contingency or circularity that Sierz is referring to when he claims that in-*yer-face* plays rely on experiential confrontation instead of a “good plot” (*In-Yer-Face* 243). It is very likely also what Esslin has in mind when he writes that absurdist plays have “no plot or story to speak of” (*Th. o. Abs.* 22) – the theatre of the absurd, after all, is renowned for producing circular plot structures<sup>8</sup>. Of course, a play, by definition, must have a plot: it is always possible to describe approximately what is happening to the characters on the stage. However, as I have hinted at in the introductory chapter, there is a particular kind of plot which has come to be regarded as a norm. When we talk about plot, we usually expect a chain of events that are causally linked and characters whose motivations and relationships among each other are obvious. These expected conditions imply what theorists usually refer to as a “closed form”, which is, ideally, “based on a completely self-contained story” which obeys the Aristotelian demands for unity, especially of plot, meaning that there is only a single plot sequence, or, at least, a clearly defined main plot. In this plot,

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<sup>8</sup> Thus, Esslin mentions that “many of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd have a circular structure” (*Th. o. Abs.* 415). Also, talking about the form of Beckett’s plays, Hans Hoppe, for example, mentions a “Reihe einzelner sprachlicher und mimisch-gestischer Aktionen der Figuren [...] die sich kreisartig wiederholen” (Hoppe 125); Rabey refers to “the circular structure of the play” when talking about *Waiting for Godot* (Rabey 48) and Bradby claims that, with regard to action, “the dominant shape imposed on Godot is that of repetition, or circularity” (36). Finally, newspaper reviewer Llew Gardner, on the occasion of a performance of *Endgame* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1958, uses the phrase „Mummy, why do I keep running in circles?” as a title for his review (Gardner 7 Nov 1958).

[a] conflict between clearly defined antagonistic forces develops out of a transparent initial situation based on a finite and comprehensible set of facts. This conflict is then led towards an unambiguous solution at the end. (Pfister 241)

This definition of a closed form, of course, sounds very much like the normative definition of a well-made play that I have already mentioned<sup>9</sup>.

If this definition is taken as a norm, it becomes more obvious why both in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre have been charged with a complete lack of plot. The traditional plot of the closed form is characterised by linearity: it is always moving forward, through the conflict, towards the final resolution (241). This, then, implies that the situation we arrive at in the end is different from the situation from which the story departs. It also implies that the plot is moving into a particular direction and, therefore, what happens in the play, the characters' actions, must be causally linked. A static or circular plot structure, on the other hand, implies no change in the situation, no movement into any particular direction and, therefore, no plot in the traditional sense. The question is, now, how a play with a static or contingent plot structure might work. Defining and analysing the features of plot structures that defy linear development might establish further parallels between in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre.

#### 4.2.1. Action and event

On the level of the story, the aspect that mainly contributes to the linearity of the closed form, the straight movement from the beginning to the final resolution, is purposeful action. In dramatic theory, action has been defined as “intentionally chosen and not causally defined transition from one situation to the next” (Hübler qtd. in Pfister 199). If we postulate that the prerequisite for an action is an intention, this definition obviously demands a character with a will and ability to act. However, a plot may also develop without characters who decisively take action: it might consist of a series of “events”, activities that the characters perform and that can be shown and elaborated on stage at length but which do not, basically, change a situation (Pfister 200). Schechner prefers to call those events “explosions” (qtd. in Wallis and Shepherd 76), somewhat extending the idea of the event by including not only the characters' own activities but also certain things which happen to them in his definition. Later on in his study on drama theory, this more traditional understanding

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<sup>9</sup> See page 5.

of an event is also incorporated by Pfister as a complementary aspect of the characters' inability to act purposefully. Thus, he states that

[s]ince the story presented in plays with a closed dramatic structure is predominantly a causally-linked series of conflicting actions and counter-actions, one of the ways of negating it is to replace the deliberate action by an event that befalls the figures or by a numbing immutability that renders them incapable of action. (243)

#### 4.2.2. Action and event in *Waiting for Godot*

The absurdist writer who most cruelly denies his characters the will and possibility for meaningful action is certainly Samuel Beckett. One of his later plays, *Act Without Words I*, is probably the best example for a plot purely dominated by events, where the only character's every action is only a reaction to something that happens to him: he does not even make an entrance himself but is 'flung backwards on stage from right wing' (Beckett, *Complete* 203). In the course of the short play, several objects are lowered onto the stage from the flies, but they are all taken away in the end.

Without those impulses or events, the person on the stage remains inactive, looking at his hands (206) – the character has gone through a variety of activities and incidents, but his fundamental situation has not changed.

In this thesis, however, I will use Beckett's most famous play *Waiting for Godot* as a basic point of reference, since it is often regarded as a prototype for an absurdist play and the non-development in its plot has often been commented on. Thus, in 1959, a reviewer famously coined the compact formula of 'nothing happens twice' (*The Nation* qtd. in Innes, *Mod. Brit. Drama* 429) in order to describe the play, and even the characters themselves, as Esslin notes, comment on the static situation: „Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (qtd. in *Th. o. Abs.* 46), Estragon says. Also, both Pfister and Schechner use the play to illustrate the aspect that is of central importance to this chapter: for both critics, it is an example of a plot dominated by events rather than actions (Wallis and Shepherd 76, Pfister 201).

The basic plot of *Waiting for Godot* is well known: two tramps are waiting for a person called Godot - who never comes. While they are waiting, they are visited by two other characters, Pozzo and Lucky. Towards the end, they are visited by a boy who announces that Godot will come the following day. The same thing repeats itself, with variations, in act two. It seems then, that in this play, there is not only a lack of purposeful action but also a significant lack of event in the everyday meaning of the word. Still, the play fills about eighty pages and takes about two hours to perform on

stage, so something must be happening. A complete void would hardly keep the audience in their seats.

In order to describe what is going on in Beckett's most famous play, Pfister elaborates on his concept of an event. He claims that the verbal and mimetic activities of the main characters, which make up most of the play, cannot be regarded as actions, since they do not bring about any change in the basic situation. Instead, those activities must be regarded as a series of events that have taken on "the form of a cyclical, repetitive game that has become no more than an aimless end in itself" (Pfister 201). Similarly, Schechner refers to these activities as "explosions": something does happen, but it has no influence on the basic situation, the characters remain where they are, the story does not move towards a resolution because of them, it remains open (qtd. in Wallis and Shepherd 76).

Vladimir and Estragon, the main characters in *Waiting for Godot*, pass their and the audiences' time with a number of different activities. The most famous one is certainly the one involving hats, which starts at the beginning of the first act, where Vladimir, according to the stage directions, suddenly 'takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again' (Beckett, *Complete* 12) and repeats this activity several times, with variations. The hat business, then, culminates in the second act in an elaborate hat switching routine, the description of which takes up almost a full page (67). Other activities include recurring discussions about whether it would be better for the two tramps to part (17), whether they should hang themselves (18) or arguments about turnips and carrots (21). In the second act, activities like trying on Estragon's newly found boots (64), abusing each other (70) and exercising (71) are being added. However, none of these activities ever change the basic situation: that the two of them are waiting for Godot, who does not come.

The fact that these activities do not qualify as actions comparable to those in traditional drama is underlined by the way Vladimir and Estragon employ the verb 'to do' in their exchanges. Especially towards the end, as the two of them seem to get more and more desperate, Estragon exclaims several times "what'll we do, what'll we do" (78, 63) or asks "What do we do now?" (71), but those exchanges usually end like the following, with variations:

ESTRAGON. [*Calmer.*] I lost my head. Forgive me. It won't happen again.  
Tell me what to do.  
VLADIMIR: There's nothing to do. (69)

The characters' frequent use of the verb to do in questions, then, ironically draws attention to the fact they are constantly *doing* something, while the negation in the answer already suggests that *acting* in a focussed way that would effect a change is not possible, and so they end up – emotionally but also spatially – in exactly the same spot in which they started.

#### 4.2.3. Action and event in in-yer-face plays

There are, as I shall explain in the course of this thesis, a number of parallels between *Mojo* and Beckett's play(s), but I will limit myself at this point to similarities with regard to plot development. Judging from the plot summary given above, there is a lot more going on in *Mojo* than in *Waiting for Godot*. The reason the similarities are not immediately obvious here is that, so far, I have only summarised the turning points of the story, the changes in the situation. What one cannot put across in such a summary, for example, is that the characters who are onstage most of the time in *Mojo* are actually Sweets and Potts. That is, with regard to their relative amount of onstage time, Sweets and Potts should actually be regarded as the protagonists of *Mojo*. The simple reason that one does not get this impression from the summary given above is that the two of them are never involved in any situation-changing action. In *Mojo*, Sweets and Potts are the event-specialists, the modern versions of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon. While Baby, Skinny and Mickey spend a lot of time offstage, taking care of their own personal agendas, acting in order to change the situation, Sweets and Potts wait for something which is just as blurred and unsure as Godot. Mickey's command "Check the windows check the doors. [...] Don't go outside" (Butterworth 32) suggests that an assault by the rival gangsters is expected, but at this point, nobody but Mickey could actually have seen Ezra's corpse, and Mickey himself just talks about a phone call in which he was told to "look in the bins" behind the club in which the mortal remains of Ezra are supposed to rest (22). That Sweets and Potts are completely unsure what to expect and do not actually know what they are waiting for becomes even clearer in an exchange with Baby in act two. When Baby tries to convince Sweets and Potts to leave the club with him, the following dialogue ensues:

BABY. Come on. Who wants to go and see a Wild West?

POTTS. I personally would love to. But Mickey's decided it. We're all stopped here.

BABY. Who says?

POTTS. Mickey says.

BABY. Mickey says.  
*Pause.* (54)

This, however, is basically an echo of the famous bit of dialogue that is repeated several times in Beckett's play:

ESTRAGON. Let's go  
 VLADIMIR. We can't.  
 ESTRAGON. Why not?  
 VLADIMIR. We're waiting for Godot.  
 ESTRAGON. [*Despairingly.*] Ah! [...] (Beckett, *Complete* 15)

Both pairs of characters are stalled from meaningful action because they are waiting for a mysterious person to appear or for something unspecified to happen.

Like Vladimir and Estragon, Sweets and Potts spend most of their waiting time with discussions and quarrels, which, in Pfister's terms, become events, since they do nothing to enhance the story. In contrast to Vladimir and Estragon, Sweets and Potts, however, have the advantage of a constant to-ing and fro-ing in their vicinity in which they can passively participate as spectators and commentators. Thus, they spend the whole of Act One, Scene One commenting on and discussing a meeting that is going on behind closed doors. In the following scenes, they become witnesses of Baby torturing Skinny with a cutlass; they get to discuss the news of Ezra's death, witness Baby's quarrel with Mickey and Skinny's death towards the end. All those incidents, of course, provide valuable material for discussion and ensure that Sweets and Potts do not get bored. Actually, they are even given small errands by Mickey. He tells them, for example, to "bring the bins in" (Butterworth 32) or to "take some full beer-barrels from in there, push them up against the back door" (60), and we learn that the two of them have also managed to put the two remaining halves of Ezra on ice in the frigidaire (71).

Thus, while Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* are so alone that even the arrival of a couple as odd as Pozzo and Lucky elicits a cry of relief – "Reinforcements at last", Vladimir cries in the second act (Beckett, *Complete* 72) – Sweets and Potts at least get something to talk about and little things to do. They do not have to busy themselves in repetitive games and invented pseudo-activities. Still, since they do not understand anything about the agendas of their fellow hoodlums, they remain passive bystanders, excluded from the action. Nothing they say, discuss or do – although it makes up a huge part of the play's text - has any consequence or effect on the development of the plot. When Skinny comes back from an errand with a tiny

Derringer purse pistol<sup>10</sup>, the one weapon with which the whole gang is supposed to defend themselves against the expected onslaught of a rival gang, it becomes painfully obvious (at least to the audience) how pointless even the fulfilment of Mickey's orders is. In dramatic terms, the constant chatter – like that of Vladimir and Estragon – and their running of mini-errands qualify as nothing more than pointless activities (though entertaining ones) for the audience.

With Sweets and Potts being on stage most of the time, then, the plot of *Mojo* is very much dominated by activities instead of action, and it is because we experience the story from their perspective that it seems repetitive and circular. As soon as Baby enters the stage, there is real action and the plot moves on. After Baby has brought the valuable Silver Johnny back to the club, Potts himself, ironically, draws attention to his and Sweets' deficiency by emphatically pointing out Baby's ability to act:

POTTS. Makes you think doesn't it. We're all in here crouched down Baby goes out and does a day's work. Does what he can for us. And Skinny, it's not sweeping up and it's not fixing jukeboxes. It's saving our fucking everything. A real day's work. (Butterworth 73)

On the whole, then, Butterworth's plot cannot be regarded as circular or static: while indulging in the zero-development characteristic of Beckett with the characters of Sweets and Potts, Butterworth also demonstrates that action is possible in the character of Baby<sup>11</sup>. The impossibility of action, therefore, is relative – it is a matter of perspective in Butterworth, whereas it is an absolute in Beckett, who does not present any kind of meaningful action in his play. Butterworth, at least, allows Sweets and Potts to leave the stage at the end of the play. Vladimir and Estragon remain where they are.

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<sup>10</sup> SKINNY. Relax. Panic over. You sweat for nothing and suddenly it's okay. [...] (*He removes a Derringer purse-pistol.*) can you see that? Can you just make that out?

SWEETS. Christ.

SKINNY. A Derringer.

POTTS. Marvellous.

SKINNY. An antique...

[...]

SKINNY. A collector's item. A curiosity. (Butterworth 44)

<sup>11</sup> A similar arrangement can be found in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, where the two main characters also sit around while the actual story, the plot of Hamlet, where a number of people act decisively, is passing them by; however, the impression of the static situation can be kept up until the end, since everybody knows the action-laden plot of Hamlet that provides the background for the pointless lingering of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. A similarity to Stoppard's play has also been pointed out by Charles Spencer from the *Daily Telegraph* who states that "In a manner reminiscent of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, we get all our information for much of the first half from two small-time associates, popping pills and waiting nervously [...]" (Spencer 955).

In contrast to Vladimir and Estragon, the twins in *The Pitchfork Disney*, Presley and Haley, are not waiting for anything in particular. What keeps them in their place is fear, raised by the incident which killed their parents some 10 years ago and which is never specified. Whatever this incident might have been, they, like Beckett's characters, are trapped in their present situation. Thus, the play starts out with a lengthy interaction of Presley and Haley, whose activities, similar to those of Vladimir and Estragon, constitute nothing but a number of pointless, ritualised games: most importantly, they seem to be telling each other their dreams and the same made-up stories, over and over. The fact that the storytelling is a routine becomes obvious from exchanges like the following:

HALEY. Then will you describe it? Just once more. Then I'll take my tablet. I promise Presley. Cross my heart.

*Pause.*

*Presley goes to the window.*

PRESLEY. Where shall I begin?

HALEY. The sky.

PRESLEY. It's black. A sheet of dark cloud obscures everything. No heaven visible. No stars, no moon, no sun. Nothing.

HALEY. Is it snowing?

PRESLEY. Slightly. (Ridley 23)

Apart from telling each other stories and dreams, the twins eat large amounts of chocolate and quarrel over who has to do the next shopping trip to the supermarket. In a striking parallel to *Waiting for Godot*, where Vladimir and Estragon are visited by the odd pair of Lucky and Pozzo, the twins are being visited by Cosmo and Pitchfork. However, as in Beckett's play, the arrival of these characters and Presley's interaction with Cosmo does not effect any change in the situation. Instead, more pointless activism ensues: more stories, memories and dreams are being recounted, cockroaches are being eaten, and a song is being performed. However, none of this ever seems to lead the plot into a particular direction or change the basic situation of Presley and Haley being too scared to leave the house. When it finally seems that Cosmo has managed to manipulate Presley into going shopping, Presley changes his mind at the last moment and takes action: however, by breaking Cosmo's finger, he chases away the chance for a change in the situation (however scary a change effected by Cosmo might be). Thus, *The Pitchfork Disney* ends exactly as it began: with Haley and Presley sitting in their flat, too scared to go out. The final lines of the play very clearly demonstrate this return to stagnation in fear and existential helplessness:



HALEY. But it makes no sense, Presley.

PRESLEY. I know, I know.

HALEY. There's no meaning.

PRESLEY. I know.

HALEY. I'm scared.

PRESLEY. Me too.

HALEY. I'm scared.

PRESLEY. I'm scared.

*Fade to Blackout.* (Ridley 108)

Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, the characters in Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* are not waiting for anything in particular, but they are caught up in their situation by guilt feelings about a murder – an event - which they witnessed but decided not to do anything about. The lesbian couple, sitting in their flat, provide classical examples of stage events which do not lead to anything: they discuss and quarrel, as the following example shows:

JAYE. Sorry. No more beer. We're dry.

TILLY. Liar. You're hoarding it. Under the floorboards.

JAYE. Tough. No sex, no booze.

TILLY. I can't believe you're doing this to me. It's blackmail.

JAYE. Hey. These are the rules. I bite your neck, you get a beer. I rip off your clothes, you get another beer.

TILLY. Don't be such a boy.

JAYE. Listen to yourself. Since when did you decide to be celibate?

TILLY. Since it's gotten so hot I can't think straight. Jesus. I need a drink.

Please. (Nagy, *Plays* 6)

Down in the streets, the drag queen Marcel and the murdered Jimmy's ex-lover Natty do the same, besides engaging in monologues dealing with their own, separate obsessions, avoiding interaction:

MARCEL. So much traffic and so little time. Boys. BOYS. Take a breather.

It's hot and Marcel is sooooo cold. Marcel has a brilliant theory which Marcel will reveal in due course.

NATTY. Amsterdam. Now that's a city. The prince of cities. I could get lost there. I could. Lost among the blonds. Blondes love me. They don't take me for a coward.

MARCEL. Marcel's radiant theory is this: it's so hot that people are keeping to their cars. [...] But oh, all my children, let me tell you what will happen when those cars fizzle out.

NATTY. I'm sure I was braver in another life. I just don't know which one.

London. I stayed indoors and avoided the food. [...] I've got to take Jimmy's ashes to Westminster Abbey and hide them under the coronation chair. I mean, who will care? (Nagy, *Plays* 18)

When Tilly and Jaye eventually meet them in the streets, the beer drinking and discussing continues without any situation-changing outcome. Unlike Beckett's

characters, however, Nagy has hers delivered from their pointless misery: Marcel is eventually picked up by a car which explodes in the ever rising temperature and Jaye and Tilly disappear “in a glorious flash of white light” (45). Natty is carried off the stage by Jimmy in classical *deus ex machina*-style.

While in *Waiting for Godot* the absence of effective action is very well demonstrated by the introduction of pointless physical activities, Ionesco, in his first play *The Bald Primadonna*, goes even further, and famously so: the one major activity in this play is the constant talking, which requires only the smallest amount of physical activity. One could, of course, reasonably argue that it is possible for a conversation to qualify as an action. However, as Ionesco demonstrates, discussions, quarrels and other speech-related activities can be just as pointless as Vladimir’s and Estragon’s hat switching routine. Also, Ionesco’s play is really perfectly circular, which is certainly one of the reasons why he called it an “anti-play” (Ionesco 85). Thus, it ends with exactly the same monologue that it begins with, which is also explicitly specified by the author, who, in his stage directions, remarks: “*Repeat of start of first scene*” (119). A play from the in-*yer-face* tradition that mirrors this is Nick Grosso’s *Kosher Harry*, where talking is the major activity. As a matter of fact, Grosso openly acknowledges his tendency towards what Sierz terms “anti-dramatic” form, claiming: “it’s quite simple: if you want a plot, don’t come to my plays” (Grosso qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 186). In *Kosher Harry*, then, the waitress relates her story of unrequited love to her boss, the cab driver tells stories about his child, and the old woman and the man throw in their remarks. The problem is, however, that the old woman cannot (or pretends not to) hear what is being said and the rest keep interrupting each other, finishing each others’ sentences without ever really listening to each other, so that the conversation goes on forever but never actually constitutes or leads to meaningful action.

Other activities in the play include the waitress leaving to get drinks, the cabbie going off to flirt with a Russian waitress who is sometimes referred to but never actually appears on stage or the old woman surprisingly getting out of her wheelchair and dancing. All these activities, however, do not actually provide the food for which these people have come to the restaurant. Also, they do not provide any solutions with regard to the storm that rages outside the restaurant, which might be the reason why the characters cannot leave. Neither do these activities solve the characters’ personal

problems. Finally, only the man's action of taking away the other people's things really changes the situation. After he has taken away a number of valuables, he

*walks towards the door and steps out but rain falls on his head. He walks back towards the **Old Woman** and lifts her wig from her head [...] **Man** plonks the wig on his head and exits and closes the door behind him* (Grosso 122)

Thus, the man is the only one able to leave the restaurant, probably having made a considerable amount of money, while the others, unaware of what has happened and tangled up in their conversation, remain where they are.

With regard to the action-event dichotomy, Sarah Kane's play *Cleansed* is certainly the most ambiguous. In contrast to other plays discussed here which are often dominated by speech related activities, Kane's play contains a lot of violent incidents and physical activity. Thus, Graham is killed through a drug injection in the eye, Carl's tongue is cut out and his arms and legs cut off, Grace is beaten up, Robin is forced by Tinker to eat the chocolate he bought for Grace and to burn his books, Tinker kills Rod by slitting his throat, Graham makes love to Grace, Tinker makes love to the woman in the booth, Tinker cuts off Carl's genitals and operates them onto Grace's body. Here, it would seem that actions are performed: people are killed and Grace undergoes a sex change.

However, it is always Tinker who actually carries out the action – he seems to be governing everything that happens within the university area. At first, then, it seems that he alone has the ability and will to change the situation, but a closer look at the play's text reveals that Tinker only does what the other characters knowingly or unknowingly ask him to do. "As the 'doctor' [...] Tinker learns the secret desires of each person under his control and performs on them diabolically crafted treatments that enact their wishes but bring them even more pain" (Howe Kritzer 36). Thus, it is Grace who asks that she may stay in the institution and that Tinker may treat her as a patient, a request to which he only responds: "I'm not responsible, Grace" (Kane 114). Also, when Grace awakes after her sex-change surgery, Tinker repeatedly remarks "What you wanted" (145). Similarly, the torture Tinker inflicts on Carl is an indirect response to Carl's obsessive desire to prove his love to Rod with words and the exchange of a ring:

CARL. I want you to have my ring.  
 ROD. What for?  
 CARL. A sign.  
 ROD. Of what?

CARL. Commitment.

ROD. You've known me three months. It's suicide.

CARL. Please.

ROD. You'd die for me?

CARL. Yes. (109)

Tinker's violent intervention, then, gives Carl the chance to be true to his promise that he would die for Rod, but as Tinker threatens to push a pole through Carl's body he eventually pleads "Not me please not me don't kill me Rod not me don't kill me ROD NOT ME ROD NOT ME" (117).

On the one hand, then, Tinker's violence is not as gratuitous and pointless as it seems at first sight and might actually qualify as an action. On the other hand, he cannot be given responsibility for his violent activities, as they can always be linked to other characters' wishes. With regard to purpose, all the activities that are described remain in a vacuum: they develop from a mixture of Tinker's ability to act and the other characters' secret or open desires. However, since an action in the definition of Pfister requires a character with a specific intention<sup>12</sup>, Tinker's activities do not qualify as actions but must be regarded as events which, finally, do not effect any real change in the situation: the play ends as it begins, '*by the perimeter fence*' of a university. '*Grace now looks and sounds exactly like Graham*' (Kane 107/149), with whom the play starts.

The analysis of the action/event structure of in-*yer-face* plays given above shows that, like absurdist plays, they reject the linear plot development which is driven by purposeful action. Also, as in absurdist plays, this pattern of non-development on the level of action and event corresponds to alternative surface structures which support the depiction of static situations in which real action and development are not possible. On the whole, the young writers of the nineties, however, are less rigorous with regard to their rejection of meaningful action. Side by side with characters who are unable to act and prefer passive waiting, they present characters who are capable of acting purposefully. Thus, there are characters like Baby in *Mojo*, the Man in *Kosher Harry* or Cosmo in *The Pitchfork Disney* who actually have an agenda. This, then, or a spontaneous *deus ex machina* – ending as in Nagy's play, prevents most plots from being as perfectly circular or static as the plays by Beckett and Ionesco. However, since decisive action often occurs only towards the end, many in-*yer-face*

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<sup>12</sup> See page 18.

plays are still dominated by events and, therefore, a general lack of development and change in situation. Ultimately, then, it seems that action in in-yer-face theatre, as in absurdist theatre, “depicts an unending and seemingly unendurable present” (Howe Kritzer 30).

While characters and their actions/activities must be regarded as very important elements of a play, it is obvious that, since the play itself is an artistic construction, there are other elements, too, which contribute to the general impression that a play leaves in the readers’/audiences’ minds. The action structure of a play cannot be regarded as independent from other basic structural givens of place and the overall arrangement of the characters. Thus, if we want to determine how the sense of stagnation, circularity or contingency in the plot is produced, we must also take into account the structure of a play on levels other than development of action or division into acts and scenes.

#### **4.3. Character configuration**

One aspect that very much contributes to a sense of either stagnation or development is the basic arrangement and distribution of characters in a play, which Pfister refers to as character configuration (171). If, for example, the same character or group of characters remain on the stage throughout most of the play and ‘nobody comes and nobody goes’, a sense of stagnation is already conveyed by this particular structural pattern alone. With regard to the configuration of Winnie and Willie in Beckett’s *Happy Days*, who remain on the stage together throughout the play, Pfister remarks:

The extreme length of this configuration serves to make the uneventfulness of their existence obvious in scenic terms, and the fact that the ensemble-configuration [that is, any constellation in which all the characters of the play are on stage] remains constant throughout reflects their state of complete isolation from the outside world. (172)

Obviously, if we think of Beckett’s other plays and plays by Ionesco, the long duration of very few different character configurations (often an ensemble configuration) are characteristic of absurdist plays. In *Endgame*, Hamm, Clov and Hamm’s parents in the dustbins remain on stage throughout the play. The same is true of the professor and the pupil in Ionesco’s *The Lesson*, the old couple in *The Chairs* and the two killers in Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*. In *Waiting for Godot*, of course, there is no all-ensemble configuration, as the boy only appears towards the end of each act, but the two major configurations Vladimir-Estragon and Vladimir-Estragon-

Pozzo-Lucky take up all the rest of the play. Similarly, *The Bald Primadonna* only contains a limited number of configurations which, very slowly, build up to an ensemble configuration of long duration (it takes up about 40% of the play's text) towards the end.

Relatively long duration of particular character configurations is also a prominent feature of in-er-face plays. *Kosher Harry*, for example, is clearly dominated by an ensemble configuration: from page 26 (of all in all 123 pages) onwards, all the characters remain on stage, except for about five pages towards the end, when the man is alone with the old lady (Grosso 97-101). Similarly, all the main characters (except the murdered Jimmy and the boy, his murderer) are onstage throughout the whole second half of Nagy's *Weldon Rising*. Ridley's *Pitchfork Disney* is also dominated by one particular configuration: the Presley-Cosmo-Haley configuration, which lasts from page 35 to page 89 (of 108) and, thus, occupies about 50% of the whole play. *Mojo*, with regard to character configuration, is very much dominated by the constant presence of Sweets and Potts. Thus, Act One Scene One is a Sweets and Potts-only configuration, with Skinny appearing briefly at the very end (Butterworth 3-15). While configurations vary several times throughout the rest of the play and Sweets and Potts briefly leave the stage several times, they are still onstage together in about 85% of the scenes, which produces the static configuration characteristic of in-er-face plays.

The relative duration of certain character configurations must, of course, be looked at in relation to the overall number of characters that appear in a play. The use of a small ensemble reduces the number of possible variations in character configuration, meaning that the few possible configurations are bound to repeat themselves or dominate large sections of a play. Since there are only two characters in Beckett's *Happy Days*, many variations are not possible. Thus, the choice of how many characters appear in a play determines to a certain extent what kind of an overall impression is conveyed: large casts suggest openness towards an outside world, the possibility of interaction or confrontation with all kinds of characters, and, therefore, the potential of change, of new experiences. Small casts, on the other hand, suggest that the characters live in their own isolated worlds where change from outside is not possible.

Except for Jean Genet, who significantly differs from other absurdists in that he tends to use large ensembles<sup>13</sup>, the overall number of characters in classical absurdist plays varies between two and six characters. Beckett uses five characters in *Waiting for Godot*, four in *Endgame*, and two in *Happy Days*. Ionesco introduces six characters in *The Bald Primadonna* and three in each *The Chairs* and *The Lesson*. There are six characters in Pinter's early play *The Birthday Party*, three in *The Caretaker* and two in *The Dumb Waiter*.

While absurdist playwrights rely on minimal casts of two or three characters, the number of characters in in-er-face plays is usually a bit higher. In the plays analysed in this thesis, it ranges from four characters in *Kosher Harry* and *the Pitchfork Disney* to seven characters in *Cleansed*, with *Mojo* and *Weldon Rising* employing six characters each. The slightly higher number of characters employed in in-er-face theatre seems to correspond to the discernible contrast between figures that are capable of action and those that are not which I have already referred to<sup>14</sup>. While absurdist plays seem to focus more exclusively on stagnation and characters stuck in it, in-er-face dramatists often present an alternative to the passivity of waiting by introducing additional characters.

However, it should also be mentioned that other key plays from the in-er-face tradition employ minimal casts. Thus, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* has a cast of three as has Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator*, and Rebecca Prichard's *Yard Gal* employs only two characters. Also, in-er-face plays that employ a slightly larger number of characters seem to favour two-character configurations. Thus, *Cleansed* is clearly dominated by two-character interactions and *The Pitchfork Disney*, *Mojo* and *Kosher Harry* start out with two-character-scenes. This frequent use of two-character configurations, then, recreates the impression of isolation that is produced by minimal casts, although the general number of characters is generally higher in in-er-face plays than it is in many plays of the absurdists.

#### **4.4. Structures of space**

The overall structuring of space, too, may contribute to an atmosphere of stagnation: almost every absurdist play features only a single place of action. Thus, Beckett's one-act play *Endgame* (in accordance with the formal implication of a one-act play)

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<sup>13</sup> While in *The Maids*, there are only three characters, *The Balcony* employs a cast of twenty-one, *The Negroes* a cast of thirteen, and *The Screens* a cast of more than forty people (Genet, *Alle Dramen*).

<sup>14</sup> See page 28 above.

but also his two-act-plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days* (rejecting the formal implication of the surface structure) all begin and end in the same place, without a change of locale in between. The same is true of Ionesco's early one-act plays *The Bald Primadonna*, *The Chairs* and *The Lesson* and of Pinter's *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*. Even Genet, in his nine tableaux of *The Balcony*, maintains the unity of place by having the different scenes set in different rooms, all of which are located within Madame Irma's brothel<sup>15</sup>. Genet draws particular attention to this fact by specifying in his stage directions that "hanging from the ceiling [is] a chandelier, which will remain present for each tableau" (Genet 83)<sup>16</sup>.

This, then, means that absurdist plays employ closed structures of place (often in combination with closed time structures), which is interesting, since, as I have already shown, the development of action in absurdist plays usually defies the final resolution which is characteristic of the corresponding closed plot structures (Pfister 252). Instead, the use of closed space structures, in absurdist theatre, serves to support the condition of stasis or circularity, as Pfister notes:

The permanence of the locale [...] creates the impression of a suffocating narrowness and hopelessness [...] the figures are all locked into a milieu that does not permit any kind of change and holds them prisoner in a state of numbing *stasis*. (253)

Even though Pfister, in this section, refers to a particular interior, it becomes clear that the sense of stasis also results from the fact that this place of action never changes.

In in-er-face plays, the basic structuring of space is very similar to absurdist plays. Thus, the place of action never changes in *Kosher Harry*, *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Weldon Rising* or other famous in-er-face plays like Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator*. *Cleansed* does employ six different places of action, but they are all part of the same university area, as Sarah Kane particularly specifies. Stage directions like '*Just inside the perimeter fence of a university*', '*The Black Room – the showers in the university sports hall converted into peep-show booths*' (Kane 107/121) also produce the impression of the closed space of an institution. *Mojo*, too, has different places of action: there is "upstairs at Ezra's Atlantic" and

<sup>15</sup> Only the sixth tableau takes place outside of Madame Irma's brothel, The Great Balcony, but even in this scene, the facade of the building is visible in the background (Genet 129).

<sup>16</sup> Since I could not get hold of an English publication of Genet's dramatic works, I am using a German edition for reference. The translations are taken from an unpublished English rehearsal script of *The Balcony*.



“downstairs in the club” (Butterworth 2), but the sense of stasis remains, since both spaces are located within the same building which the characters are not supposed to leave.

## 5. Characters and character conception – discontinuities

### 5.1. “Sort it out for yourselves”

On the occasion of the run of *Waiting for Godot* at the London Arts Theatre in August 1955 theatre critic W. A. Darlington made the following remark about a certain group of dramatists “who all love obscurity”:

Their method is to raise the curtain on a confused first act, and in effect to say to the audience: “Here are some people for you”. Their relations with each other and the world are rather odd and I hope you’ll find them amusing. Sort them out for yourselves”. (Darlington, “The Story’s the thing”)

He then goes on complaining at length to his readers about the way in which certain dramatists do not accept the supposed fact that most audiences simply want to be told “a story”, a demand that he sees as being deliberately rejected by the “sort-it-out-for yourselves school” due to a dictate of contemporary fashion. Interestingly, similar complaints were voiced at the premiere of Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* which is supposed to have started off the wave of in-yer-face plays in the 1990s. In this case, Jane Edwardes from *Time Out* reaches the conclusion that

[i]t would have helped to know how the characters are related to each other, where reality starts and fantasy begins, what war is being waged and why, and if we are really in Leeds. All we do know is that a flabby, dying hack brings a young girl with infantile tendencies who he appears to have been fucking since she was a child, to a hotel room. (Edwardes 38)

The similarity in the critical responses to absurdist theatre and Kane’s plays has already been mentioned in Graham Saunders’ first book on Sarah Kane<sup>17</sup>. With regard to the heavy criticism she received for *Blasted*, he claims that “Kane could at least take succour from the fact that in this respect she was in good company. The initial critical reception to plays like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* (1958) was a similar mixture of bafflement, irritation and dismissal when first performed” (Saunders 10).

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<sup>17</sup> Saunders, Graham. *Love me or kill me: Sarah Kane and the theatre of extremes*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2002.

However, while Sarah Kane's play *Blasted* was certainly at the centre of critical attention and received the most aggressive reviews, it has to be mentioned that other in-her-face plays got reviews that struck a similar chord. Thus, a critic talking about *The Pitchfork Disney* states that "there is no obligation on a dramatist to explain his characters' behaviour. [...] But it is still hard not to wonder what their mummies and daddies did to create the twins and did not do to cause Cosmo. Maybe Ridley will be more specific in his next play" (Nightingale 13). Another reviewer found fault with Ridley's refusal to evoke a specific setting: "Something, however, that a stage play needs to make full effect, is missing here: a persuasive sense of place" (Macaulay 13). A critic reviewing Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* maintained that there were "plenty of holes in the plot" and asked for more background information: "where are the police all this time? What happens to Mr Ross's many friends?) [...]" (Hanks 957). The horrific acts of violence depicted in Kane's *Cleansed* were perceived by a reviewer as "arbitrary and pathological, or pseudo-pathological" since they lacked "either social context or human depth" (Gross 567). Similarly, Nagy's way of storytelling in *Weldon Rising* did not particularly please a critic who complained that the production and Nagy's script were not very clear on the matter of distinguishing fantasy from objective fact and that "probably they are not meant to be. A kind of imaginative wildness verging on craziness rules" (*The Times*, Rev. of *Weldon Rising*).

These complaints about holes in the information-structure of the play clearly recall comments of several critics who reviewed *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame* when these were first performed in London. I have already quoted Darlington, who charges the absurdist with general affinity to obscurity, above. However, another critic also remarked that Beckett "inherits the master's [Joyce's] talent for obscurity if nothing else" (Wilson, Rev. of *Godot*). Even at the end of a basically supportive review, one critic still comments that "there are passages when no one could carry the thought along" (Lewin, Rev. of *Godot*), and a rather far-sighted reviewer rightly claimed: "If you need, to feel at home with a work of art, a framework of everyday life, you will at best be ill at ease, at worst hopelessly at a loss when immersed in his [Beckett's] world" (Lambert, Rev. of *Endgame*).

What all these reviews expose, then, is a concern about the lack of coherence within the respective play, often linked to a lack of background information on central aspects like characters, place and time. The interdependence between clearly pointing out the characters' motivation, the resulting coherence of the plot and the reviewers'

support for a theatrical concept that relies on this coherence becomes very obvious from the following statement, in which a critic hails Tracy Letts' play *Killer Joe* because it "grips you with its narrative every step of the way and its shocks and horrors spring legitimately from the characters, their background and their motivation," in contrast to Kane's *Blasted* in which she "offers her audience scarcely a clue as to why her characters should behave as they do" (Tinker qtd. in Saunders 11).

Judging from these reviews, it seems that in-er-face theatre is quite similar to absurdist theatre in its presentation of character motivation and information about their background, the setting, the time etc. This similarity of character conception in absurdist and in-er-face theatre has also been commented on by Piribauer, for whom the most "symptomatic aspects" of character conception in in-er-face theatre are "the lack of realistic, well-rounded characters, the lack of background information, and the blurred distinctions between the victims and perpetrators of violence" (Piribauer 141/142). She, then, links these features to absurdist theatre where, as she claims "a character's presence in a given situation is simply not accounted for" (144) and which "depicts fragmented personalities and people who change identities quickly" but which is also "characterised by a lack of background clues" (145). Starting from these features (which Piribauer only applies to two in-er-face plays in her analysis), I will now suggest a kind of character conception which includes the features mentioned by Piribauer and which might provide a general framework for a more extensive and systematic analysis of parallels between absurdist and in-er-face theatre in this area.

## **5.2. Character conception**

### **5.2.1. Character conception in absurdist plays – open characters**

A concept which seems useful in this respect and which actually sums up the features defined by Piribauer is Pfister's idea of the "open figure" which involves a "fundamentally irreducible ambiguity":

From the receiver's perspective the figure becomes enigmatic either because relevant pieces of information – explaining the reasons for a figure's actions, for example, are simply omitted, the information defining the figure is perceived by the receiver as being incomplete, because the information contains a number of unsolvable contradictions or because these two factors (incompletion and contradiction) function together. (Pfister 181)

This concept of an open character, then, depends on basic discontinuities in the information structure, these discontinuities consisting in a lack of information on the one and contradictory information or contradictions in the characters' behaviour on the other hand.

Thus, the 'obscurity' which critics of absurdist theatre have often complained about is, first of all, a consequence of the incompleteness of information: in absurdist theatre, pieces of information which establish a character's psychology and motivation, such as those concerning a character's age, family status, social status, historical and cultural context, and, most importantly perhaps, the character's past, are often incomplete or simply missing. We do not know, for example, where Vladimir and Estragon come from, how old they are, or how long they have been together. There are hints at their age, their present state and their past activities in some statements, but they remain vague, as the following excerpt shows:

VLADIMIR. When I think of it ... all these years ... but for me ... where would you be ...? [*Decisively.*] You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it.

ESTRAGON. And what of it?

VLADIMIR. [*Gloomily.*] It's too much for one man. [*Pause. Cheerfully.*] On the other hand what's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties.

[...]

Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were presentable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up. (Beckett, *Complete* 12)

This reference to a past together in the 'nineties' and the claim that the two of them were 'presentable' back then is about as much information as we get about Vladimir's and Estragon's former life, and the fragmented nature of background information is not only typical of *Waiting for Godot*. In *Endgame*, too, it remains unclear how old exactly Hamm and Clov are and how long they have been together. While the approximate age for Winnie and Willie is specified in the cast list— "*a woman of about fifty, a man of about sixty*" (137) - it still remains a mystery how Winnie has come to be buried in the mound of earth or for how long this has been going on. The lack of basic information about the characters is also a prominent feature of other absurdist plays. Another example is provided by Pinter's early play *The Birthday Party*, where a man whose past is unknown is accused by two mysterious agents (the famous Goldberg and McCann) of an unspecified crime and, ultimately, led away by them, into an unknown future. The fact that "virtually nothing is revealed about the

characters' past" is actually seen by Susan Blattès as one of the prominent features of character in Pinter's work (71). In Ionesco's plays, too, very little is known about the characters that would explain their behaviour or motivations even though he often provides the characters' age or information about their present situation in life through a description of the setting. Thus, Mr. and Mrs. Smith are, apparently, a middle-aged English couple with children, but the purpose of the Martin's visit and their relationship with the Smiths remains in the dark. Although the old woman in *The Chairs* demands that the old man tell her "*the story*" from their past life (Ionesco 42), his memories are fragmented, and we never really learn how they came to live in the tower and why the man has not succeeded in life or, so far, managed to deliver his message.

In line with Pfister's concept of an open character, another aspect which contributes to the 'obscurity' of the characters of absurdist drama is that involving contradictions in the information provided through dialogue and the characters' behaviour. An obvious example for such a contradiction is the famous exchange between Vladimir and Estragon at the end of each act in *Waiting for Godot* when Estragon asks "Well, shall we go?" and Vladimir answers "Yes, let's go" but the stage directions specify that "*they do not move*" (Beckett, *Complete* 52/88). At another point in the play, Vladimir recalls picking grapes in the "Macon country", but Estragon does not remember a thing (57) and this contradiction in the memories of the two makes it impossible to decide whether this episode qualifies as a valuable piece of background information.

Particularly striking contradictions and ambiguities occur in Beckett's master-servant relationships. Both Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* and Hamm in *Endgame* inexplicably change their behaviour from tyrannical ordering around to almost child-like dependence on their servant-counterparts Lucky and Clov. Thus, when Pozzo appears in the first act, he seems very superior: he has control over Lucky, who kicks Estragon (Beckett, *Complete* 32), and behaves condescendingly towards the two tramps who, he suggests, stink (45). At his appearance in the second act, however, Pozzo has gone blind and is, therefore, dependent on Lucky. Most of his text consists of cries for help, and this time, it is Vladimir and Estragon who realize that Pozzo has farted (76) and who kick him and Lucky (77/82). In *Endgame*, Hamm's behaviour also shifts from one extremity to another. On the one hand, he can be a sadistic tyrant,

as the following example shows in which he wants Clov to put his wheelchair into the right place:

HAMM. I feel a little too far to the left. [CLOV *moves chair slightly*.] Now I feel a little too far to the right. . [CLOV *moves chair slightly*.] I feel a little too far forward. . [CLOV *moves chair slightly*.] Now I feel a little too far back. [CLOV *moves chair slightly*.] Don't stay there [*i.e. behind the chair*], you give me the shivers.  
[CLOV *returns to his place beside the chair*.] (105)

On the other hand, Hamm shows strong dependence in other sections of the play:

HAMM. Give me a rug, I'm freezing.  
CLOV. There are no more rugs.  
[*Pause*.]  
HAMM. Kiss me. [*Pause*.] Will you not kiss me?  
CLOV. No.  
HAMM. On the forehead.  
CLOV. I won't kiss you anywhere.  
HAMM. [*Holding out his hand*.] Give me your hand at least. [*Pause*.] Will you not give me your hand?  
CLOV. I won't touch you. (125)

Due to these contradictory behavioural patterns, it is difficult (if not impossible) for the audience to get a solid idea of the characters' psychology and motivations.

### 5.2.2. Character conception in in-er-face plays

Although Piribauer only talks about "open characters" in the sense that these "allow the actor to add to them and the audience to project onto them" (143), the other individual features she mentions with regard to character conception in in-er-face theatre<sup>18</sup> already imply that many of the respective authors, like the absurdists, embrace the whole concept of the open character as defined by Pfister. An obvious example is provided by the characters in *The Pitchfork Disney*. Here, Ridley specifies the age and looks of the twins in the cast list (Ridley 11), but the past of the twins remains blurred, even though there are several passages in which Presley recounts childhood memories. The central question of why the twins are stalled in their flat and reluctant even to go shopping is never answered. One guesses that it must have to do with something that has happened to their parents, but even though Cosmo asks Presley about it several times, he is never given a satisfying answer:

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<sup>18</sup> See page 35 above.

COSMO. Have you always been ... like this?  
 PRESLEY. Course not. Don't be stupid. When Mum and Dad were here we got up at eight o'clock in the morning. We'd have breakfast. Do the housework. Get the shopping. Watch television. Talk. Have cups of tea. Do all kinds of things. We'd go to bed at midnight.  
 COSMO. So when did you start being ... like this?  
 PRESLEY. After Mum and Dad lost us.  
 COSMO. Lost us?  
 PRESLEY. No, left us.  
 COSMO. You said 'lost us'.  
 PRESLEY. Didn't.  
 COSMO. Did. You said, 'After Mum and Dad lost us.'  
 PRESLEY. I couldn't have said 'lost us'. That makes no sense. How could they lose us? They died.  
 COSMO. Ten years ago.  
 PRESLEY. That's right.  
 COSMO. They died the same year?  
 PRESLEY. On the same day.  
 COSMO. The same day!  
 PRESLEY. That's right. One day they went out and never came back. We waited for a very long time.  
*Slight pause.*  
 They died instantly.  
 COSMO. Instantly! Must have been a car crash.  
 PRESLEY. It wasn't I told you.  
 COSMO. A sheet of glass fell from a tall building and hit them?  
 PRESLEY. No. Nothing like that. It ... it wasn't an accident. (Ridley 62)

This example illustrates that we are not simply denied a satisfactory answer to the question of how the parents died. There is not only a lack of information but, as Piribauer has noted, Presley's account is also imprecise and full of contradictions (147).

Even more striking are the contradictions in Presley's behaviour. Thus, he seems stuck in a kind of childish adoration of his parents. This image of the nice boy, however, is shattered when he tells the story of how he once fried a snake in a pan and ate it (27) and when he violently forces Haley to take her medicine (33). Also, he has a terrible, recurring dream about a killer called 'Pitchfork Disney' yet still allows Cosmo (whose last name is Disney) to stay at his place. Though reluctantly, he even lets Cosmo's assistant Pitchfork into the flat (90). The most surprising incident occurs at the end of the play, when Presley, who has seemed weak and easily manipulated,

breaks Cosmo's finger (105). It is at this point that one begins to wonder whether Presley might not actually have killed his own parents<sup>19</sup>.

Similarly, the characters in Sarah Kane's play *Cleansed* remain elusive and enigmatic. The cast list and stage directions specify neither age nor looks and it is only the university setting which remotely hints that the characters' age is something between twenty and thirty. As in *Waiting for Godot*, there is hardly any information about the characters' past, and we do not know to what purpose the characters are kept in this institution or whether they are actually 'kept' there at all. While Robin claims that he is here because he wanted to kill himself (Kane 115) and Grace is looking for her brother Graham and refuses to leave (114), the motivations of Rod, Carl, Graham and Tinker are unclear – like Vladimir and Estragon, they are simply there, and, in contrast to Beckett's figures, they are not even waiting for someone in particular. Tinker is an especially ambiguous figure, a fact which has also been noted by Saunders, who refers to Tinker's "chameleon-like presence" in the play and draws attention to his "mercurial identity" and his "fluidity of identity, ranging from torturer to redeemer" (Saunders 96, also qtd. in Piribauer 142). Not only is Tinker's past and motivation for torturing the other characters completely unknown - he also acts in very contradictory ways. On the one hand, he inflicts horrible pain without blinking an eye, killing Graham with an injection into his eye (108), cutting off Carl's tongue (118), hands (129) and feet (136) and forcing Robin to eat a whole box of chocolates he has bought for Grace (139), to name but a few examples. On the other hand, he seems very insecure and almost desperate in his attempts to establish contact with the woman in the booth, as the following example shows:

TINKER. Can we be friends?  
 WOMAN. I don't think so.  
 TINKER. No, but -  
 WOMAN. No.  
 TINKER. I'll be anything you need.  
 WOMAN. Can't.  
 TINKER. Yes.  
 WOMAN. Too late.  
 TINKER. Let me try.  
 WOMAN. No.  
 TINKER. Please. I won't let you down.  
 WOMAN. (*Laughs.*) (Kane 122)

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<sup>19</sup> This possibility is also suggested by Piribauer, who regards Haley's otherwise inexplicable fear of the police ("the police will come and ask questions") as an indication that the twins have something to do with their parents' death (Piribauer 147).



The imploring tone of this dialogue clearly recalls the exchange between Hamm and Clov quoted above which stands in contrast to Hamm's tyrannical behaviour in other parts of the play. In *Cleansed*, too, the discontinuity in Tinker's behaviour makes it impossible to clearly pin down his motivations and psychology<sup>20</sup>.

With regard to character conception, Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* is different. Here, unusually accurate character descriptions including aspects of personality are already given in the cast list. Also, an important piece of background information is provided by shifting timescales in the play: the murder of Natty's lover Jimmy, which occupies all the characters, is shown twice, from different perspectives (Nagy, *Plays* 15, 26). Furthermore, the nature of Natty and Jimmy's relationship in the past is recounted by Natty bit by bit throughout the play so that one gets a very precise idea of Natty and his cowardice. The conversations between Tilly and Jaye also reveal that the two feel guilty: Tilly has been "at that window for weeks" (7) and asks Jaye: "Why didn't we help him?" (8). On the surface, then, the characterisation seems to be rather precise and the story quite simple, which is reflected in various reviews that have reduced the text to a play about "queer-bashing" (De Jongh 1490) and come up with the following formula: "The four feel guilty. Gays don't constitute a society of saints. And that's it" (Rees 1489).

These reviewers, however, seem to have missed an enigmatic quality in the other characters of the play. First of all, there is also Marcel, the young transvestite, who refers to himself only in the third person and about whom we have no background information except that he was born in Queens to a practical nurse and a newsstand owner (35). His statements and utterances are embroidered with images, highly elliptical and sometimes even contradictory, so that it is difficult to determine how much he has actually seen and heard about the murder:

MARCEL. [...] Marcel saw everything and in the end, all Marcel saw was that cool steel blade. And Marcel realized. MARCEL KNEW THAT ...I ... knew that. I was wearing a dress and some bad falsies and every ounce of self-preservation kicked in and and and ... there was me and my dress and ... I could cut myself no slack. I sank. I went way way down that night. DON'T THEY THINK I KNOW THAT? Oh. My speedy traveller. Shut off your engine and ignite my transmission. Teach me to DRIVE. Take it all away. Take me HOME. (Nagy, *Plays* 35)

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<sup>20</sup>Piribauer actually regards Tinker's constant role-changing as a sign of a basic crisis in masculinity which leaves a man "completely confused about his identity and uncertain about which role to play in society" (98).

Also, there is the boy who stabs Jimmy. All we know about him is that he is extremely handsome. That is, there is no accurate psychological explanation for his murdering another man. In a speech towards the end of the play, the boy himself draws attention to this mystery:

BOY. Makes no difference to me *who* I kill. I could tell you that it was a *personal* thing. I could tell you about how goddamned pretty the blade is at night. [...] But I'm not *going* to talk about *those* things. I'm gonna let you put me on the news and I'm gonna nod my head at a lot of stupid people talking about misunderstanding and compassion and bad upbringings and I'm gonna fucking laugh out loud. What? Who said something about bias crimes? What the fuck is BIAS? This is about HATE. [...] (37)

Hate, of course, seems like a plausible motif, but it is also a very general concept. It remains a mystery where this hate comes from. Similarly, there is no way of finding out why Marcel refers to himself in the third person. Also, we don't know why Tilly and Jaye are unable to face their lives and spend their days drinking, stealing and bickering, or how Natty has come to be so passive and cowardly. Jimmy's murder, then, becomes the turning point at which the more existential problems of the characters surface. On this deeper level, the characters remain enigmatic, as possible explanations by means of social background or personal history are not provided. While central characters in Kane and Ridley are conceived as open in Pfister's definition, other in-*yer-face* authors under discussion here tend to be more specific. Butterworth's *Mojo*, for example, only starts out with enigmatic characters. The cast list specifies the age of the characters, but other background information is rare. Sweets and Potts are expecting some kind of deal to come off, but the specifics remain unclear and they themselves prefer not to even mention them. Instead, they resort to the phrase 'fish are jumping' to summarise the whole idea (Butterworth 11). In the next scene, Skinny is being tortured by Baby for no obvious reason, and contradictions in the characters' behaviour generally dominate the action: the gang's boss has been cut in half, but instead of running, they all stay where they are. Potts and Sweets suck up to who ever they are dealing with at any particular moment, supporting Skinny in the first act (14) and denouncing him in the second (53). Hearing the news of his father's death, Baby shows no particular reaction but, calmly, starts talking about a Buick he has seen parked outside (31). However, the impression of the characters' enigmatic meandering vanishes in the last scene, where the motivations of the characters become clear. Thus, Baby's

monologue describing the emotional abuse he has undergone through his father Ezra (67) establishes a psychological background for his excessive behaviour while his return to the club with Silver Johnny finally reveals his knowledge of Mickey's betrayal and his claim to the leadership of the gang. Mickey admits to having betrayed Ezra so that he could own the club himself (80) and Sweets and Potts seem to have supported Mickey only as long as there was reason to believe that he would help them earn a fortune. When they see him defeated, they leave:

POTTS. Let's get out of here.

SWEETS. Mickey. I thought you loved us. I thought you were my friend.

*Exit SWEETS and POTTS.* (80)

In the last scene, then, the contradictions that have accumulated during the first three scenes of the play are resolved and some of the missing pieces of information provided. As Sierz puts it, *Mojo* "starts as a gangster thriller and ends as a study of absent fathers" (*In-Yer-Face* 166).

With regard to character conception, *Kosher Harry* is a similar case. Fragmented pieces of background information are revealed gradually. The waitress suffers from the fact that her lover has cheated on her with the Russian waitress, the cabbie is racist and worries about his children and the old woman is nostalgic for the past with her husband, but this is all one gathers from the chaotic conversation. Things become more complicated due to a number of contradictions in the characters' behaviour and statements. Thus, they all are in a restaurant but none of them really seems to care whether the food they have ordered actually arrives. The old woman pretends to be deaf and sits in a wheelchair but sometimes throws in surprisingly appropriate remarks and eventually gets up to dance (Grosso 107). The cabbie turns out to be racist when talking about his son's classmate, a "paki" (49), but, manipulated by the man, goes to make a pass on the Russian waitress (97). The waitress acts tough towards the man at first but desperately seeks his attention in the second act (61). While these contradictory behaviour patterns at least serve to partly characterise the old woman, the cabbie and the waitress, the man-character remains a mystery until the end of the play. Why does he stay there with those crazy people? He makes small-talk, comments, manipulates and provokes the other characters but never reveals anything about himself. Only when he steals the belongings of the other characters at the very end of the play does his motivation finally become clear.

On the whole, then, it can be said that in-*yer-face* authors like to work with the concept of an open figure as defined by Pfister, leaving holes in the information structure and establishing contradictory behaviour patterns. Still, the amount of information provided on the characters' backgrounds and motivations is generally larger in in-*yer-face* theatre than in Beckett and other absurdist, most prominently so when the motivation of certain characters is revealed at the end of the play. This difference in the relative amount of information provided is also indicated by the different evaluations concerning character conception given by Esslin, who claims that absurdist theatre presents its characters as "almost mechanical puppets", and Sierz, who sees in-*yer-face* theatre as employing "types rather than individuals"<sup>21</sup>. The difference is one of degree: while the image of a mechanical puppet implies no information on any kind of motivation at all, a type suggests at least a small amount of information so as to establish "a whole set of qualities" (Pfister 179).

I would like to suggest at this point that Sierz' use of the concept of "type" to describe character conception in in-*yer-face* theatre is problematic, although it is an appropriate term in so far as it refers to the limited amount of information that is provided on the characters. However, the concept of a 'type' in dramatic theory also suggests a fixed sociological and/or psychological complex of features (Pfister 179) that is usually associated with certain stock characters, and the behaviour of such stock characters is usually predictable rather than enigmatic. It is certainly true that many of the in-*yer-face* characters seem to be conceived as types at first sight, but their contradictory behaviour (examples of which have been mentioned above), suggest that they go beyond the classical concept of a 'type'. Thus, Merle Tönnies has observed that while the *dramatis personae* in in-*yer-face* plays often resemble "the highly scripted types of melodrama more than individual human beings", their identity seems, at the same time, "very fluid", a feature which she relates back to early Pinter plays (63). Piribauer, too, has noted that a central feature of those characters is their unpredictability (142) and that, in the course of the plays, additional aspects of personality are revealed which do not fit in with the 'type' as which they might have been perceived in the beginning. A cruel despot like Tinker, making gentle love to a stripper; an old, nostalgic woman, bound to a wheelchair, turning out to be a liar and cruel in her remarks directed towards other people; an insecure, slightly paranoid young man breaking the finger of a confident, powerful

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<sup>21</sup> See quotes from Sierz and Esslin on pages 5 and 6.

intruder; a pair of selfish lesbians with relationship problems eventually making love to each other in the streets, for everyone to see. Such turning points in the presentation of characters clearly seem to bust the concept of a type. Taking this into consideration, then, it seems necessary to think of in-yer-face characters not in terms of types but as open characters which might embody stereotypes and clichés to a certain degree but which are, ultimately, determined by fundamental discontinuities. As a matter of fact, reviewers and critics of both in-yer-face and absurdist theatre often failed to recognise the central importance of the concept of open characterisation and its further implications for both kinds of theatre. Far from being simply a fashionable device or the result of lack of talent or respect towards dramatic tradition, the discontinuities which create open characters pervade the plays in significant ways, producing more comparable patterns in absurdist and in-yer-face theatre.

### **5.3. Discontinuity within characters**

While Pfister's concept of the open character is clearly receiver-oriented, which makes the concept of an open character an issue of form and narrative technique rather than content, it turns out that many of the characters in absurdist and in-yer-face theatre actually remain a mystery not only to the audience but to themselves. Characters in absurdist plays tend to openly express their lack of knowledge about their own motivation and background. Thus, Esslin quotes Clov in *Endgame* saying "Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?" (*Th. o. Abs.* 63). The following comment is a variation of this statement: "There's one thing I'll never understand", Clov says to Hamm "[...] Why I always obey you. Can you explain that to me?" (Beckett, *Complete* 129). While Clov is puzzled by his reluctance to leave the tyrant in the wheelchair, Hamm himself is unsure about his past:

HAMM. I was never there.

CLOV. Lucky for you.

[*He looks out of window.*]

HAMM. Absent, always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened. [*Pause.*] Do you know what's happened? [*Pause.*] Clov! (128)

In another context, Hamm's and Clov's utterances might work as rhetorical questions. However, since clear answers are provided nowhere in the play and there is no way of finding out, they have to be taken as serious questions. It is almost as if the characters were demanding answers from the author himself.

Another prominent example of characters being unsure about their own motivation and background is provided by the Mr. and Mrs. Martin in Ionesco's *The Bald Primadonna*. Here, the two characters begin a conversation in the course of which they gradually discover that they are actually married to each other – a fact which they have somehow forgotten (Ionesco, *Plays I* 96). While this encounter is rather surreal, the situation of the two characters in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* is more concrete. We gather from the conversation that the two are killers, waiting for instructions in a room to which they have been ordered by their boss, a man called Wilson (Pinter, *Plays One* 145). Although the men do not wonder about their past and motivation in the existential way Beckett's characters do, they, like the audience, are unsure about their circumstances. At one point, for example, Gus asks: "Who clears up after we've gone? I'm curious about that. Who does the clearing up? Maybe they don't clear up. Maybe they just leave them there, eh? What do you think? How many jobs have we done? Blimey, I can't count them" (147). While Gus' colleague Ben is able to provide an answer to that question, he, too, is taken by surprise as an envelope slides under the door (138) and even more so as a food order is delivered from upstairs via the dumb waiter. At this point, it turns out that neither of them has an actual idea about the place they are in or who is delivering these orders:

GUS. What do you think of that?

BEN. Well –

*The box goes up. BEN levels his revolver.*

GUS. [...] That's a bit – that's a bit funny, isn't it?

BEN. (*quickly*). No. It's not funny. It probably used to be a café here, that's all. Upstairs. These places change hands very quickly.

GUS. A café?

BEN. Yes.

[...]

GUS. You mean the people who ran this place didn't find it a going concern and moved out?

BEN. Sure.

GUS. WELL, WHO'S GOT IT NOW?

*Silence.*

BEN. What do you mean, who's got it now?

GUS. Who's got it now? If they moved out, who moved in?

BEN. Well, that all depends –

*The box descends with a clatter and bang. BEN levels his revolver. GUS goes to the box and brings out a piece of paper.*

GUS. (*reading*). Soup of the day. Liver and onions. Jam tart. (148)

While these statements of amazement and confusion are at least related to a specific situation, it is, once again, Beckett who goes to extremes in demonstrating his

characters' personal disorientation. Hoppe, for example, quotes the following two lines from the beginning of *Waiting for Godot* to show how Beckett's characters are not even sure about their own identity:

VLADIMIR. So there you are again.  
ESTRAGON. Am I? (qtd. in Hoppe 113)

However, whether the characters' acknowledgements of confusion refer specifically to their identity or their current role in the scheme of things, it is the mere fact that they are themselves aware of it which matters here. This self-awareness makes discontinuity an aspect not only of character conception but of character, not only of narrative technique but of content.

Among in-her-face authors, it is Ridley's characters in particular who are unsure about several aspects of their identity. Thus, Presley thinks that it "feels ... odd" saying his own name out loud (Ridley 48) and does not remember how old he is - he only manages to figure out his approximate age with Cosmo's help (49). Cosmo does not even bother to try and establish a continuous identity starting from a personal history. He claims that he was "hatched from an egg": "One day I was shitting my nappy, the next I was earning money. I had no childhood", he says (74).

In Nagy's *Weldon Rising*, it is especially Natty who is very outspoken about his perception of his own fragmented identity: "I'm in so many pieces I don't remember what it's like to be whole", he says (Nagy, *Plays* 34). In the same play, Tilly comments on the instability of her own emotions and intentions with regard to her lover Jaye: "I could lose her the way I met her. In an instant. [...] I mean, isn't that always true? One minute you know somebody, the next minute you don't. One day you're in love, the next day you're not" (29). The insecurity and confusion about one's own identity, however, becomes most obvious in the character of Marcel, who is involved in the following pieces of dialogue:

JAYE. Why do you refer to yourself in the third person, Marcel?  
MARCEL. Marcel IS the third person.  
[...]  
JAYE. Looks to me like Marcel hasn't had any business in a long time. Tilly.  
Look. He's got cobwebs sprouting from his underarms. Lack of use.  
[...]  
MARCEL (to Jaye). I AM NOT HE. I AM ... MARCEL. (29)

Nagy specifically refers to Marcel's fragmented sense of identity when asked about the issue of alienation in her plays:

He is what many of us are becoming. He's less than the sum of his parts. That's exactly what's happening to everybody, not only alienation on that personal level, but in relationship to one's own society. There's no correlation between what Marcel sees himself as and what the rest of the world will see. And there's no attempt to even bridge that gap, or to understand that the gap exists. (Nagy, *Interview* 25)

In Kane's *Cleansed*, the insecurity about one's own identity is dealt with quite excessively on the physical level, by having Grace turned into a double of Graham in the course of the play. The way in which the characters remain a mystery to themselves, however, is also expressed verbally. At his first meeting with Grace after his supposed death, for example, Graham's remarks include sentences like "more like me than I ever was" or "I never knew myself, Grace" (Kane 119). Similar to Tilly in *Weldon Rising*, Rod insists that he can make a declaration of love only for the present moment – only here and now can he have certainty about the emotions and motivations that form his identity:

ROD. I love you *now*.  
 I'm with you *now*.  
 I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you.  
 Now.  
 That's it. No more. Don't make me lie to you. (111)

While the insecurities in the examples from in-er-face theatre quoted so far reach down to very fundamental levels of personality, the discontinuities found within the characters of *Mojo* do not so much concern individual identity and motivation but the characters present position in life. At the beginning of the play, Sweets and Potts are very sure of their superior role in the game, so sure that Potts actually asks Sweets to "go upstairs see if there's an angel pissing down the chimney" (Butterworth 11). In the course of the play, however, they are forced to realise how little they understand about what is actually going on. This is hilariously expressed in the accumulation of emphatic questions and affirmations of confusion. Statements like "I don't understand", "I'm lost", "I don't get it [...]" (72), "what the fuck is going on" (73), "what's happened, Mickey" (21) or "what the fuck does that mean" (24) characterise the major turning points of the play. Sweets and Potts, like Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, spend a considerable amount of time in uncertainty about their position in the scheme of things. The only difference is that in *Mojo*, the riddle is finally solved. It seems, then, that in both in-er-face and absurdist theatre, the concept of an open, enigmatic character with its holes in the background information and the



discontinuous behaviour of the characters works not only on the level of narrative technique, by withholding information from the receivers so as to make them sort things out for themselves. The discontinuity also reaches down to the level of content, affecting the characters themselves, who feel incomplete or, at least, insecure about their position and motivation and openly refer to or demonstrate this problem. This inner fragmentation can be related to other phenomena which, once again, turn out to be similar in in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre.

### 5.3.1. “Pseudocouples”

As I have already mentioned in chapter 4.3., both in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre favour two-character-configurations which they use as a structural device indicating isolation and stagnation. What I have not mentioned so far is that it is usually the same two characters which appear again and again in such configurations. Well-known couples from absurdist theatre are, for example, Hamm and Clov, Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Winnie and Willie in Beckett; the professor and the pupil, the old woman and the old man, Mr. and Mrs. Smith and Mr. and Mrs. Martin in Ionesco; Goldberg and McCann and the two killers Gus and Ben in Pinter. Similar couples can be established for the in-*yer-face* plays under discussion here. The most prominent couple is, of course, Sweets and Potts from *Mojo*, but there are also the couples Cosmo Disney/Pitchfork and Presley/Haley in *The Pitchfork Disney*, Grace/Graham and Carl/Rod in *Cleansed* or Jaye/Tilly in *Weldon Rising*.

One of the reasons these couples are so inseparable is that, due to the significant lack of background information and motivation, the one thing that defines them as individual dramatic characters is their interaction and relationship with the another character. On their own, they only constitute fragmented pieces of a character, but talking to each other gives them at least a temporary existence in the present, while they speak. In the Faber companion, Beckett’s couples are referred to as “pseudocouples”, since they do not consist of two fully explained individuals but of two fragments that complement each other. Beckett, for example, has described his famous couples as “tied to each other as two arms to a single human trunk” (Ackerley and Gontarski 92). David Bradby goes even further, claiming that “it is best to approach each of the pairs of characters as two halves of a single theatrical dynamic. We do not get to know them through building up an understanding of their histories, but through the pure theatrical categories [...]: their movements, gestures and

physical and vocal rhythms” (Bradby 29). Thus, the characters which constitute a couple are dependent on each other. They have “the need to be perceived, to be witnessed” (Ackerley and Gontarski 465), they need a partner for dialogue or other kinds of theatrical interaction to become relevant dramatic entities.

The discontinuities in character conception and within the characters’ personalities, then, make their incessant talking necessary. The spectator or reader endures the never ending pointless conversations and interactions between the characters in in-yer-face and absurdist plays because these are the only bits of information we get about the characters. With regard to the characters, dialogue is the only thing that keeps them real, and since they have no motivations or agendas, there is nothing else to do than blend into the conversation and interaction with another character, complementing and supporting them:

**Graham** dances – a dance of love for **Grace**.

**Grace** dances opposite him, copying his movements. [...]

GRAHAM. You’re good at this.

GRACE. Good at this.

GRAHAM. Very good.

GRACE. Very good.

GRAHAM. So/very very good.

GRACE. Very very good. (Kane 119)

The pattern of this dialogue from *Cleansed*, where Graham and Grace both repeat and complement the utterances of each other, seems to recall some typical exchanges between the Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon, probably his most famous pair of complementary characters:

ESTRAGON. What do we do now?

VLADIMIR. While waiting.

ESTRAGON. While waiting.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR. We could do our exercises.

ESTRAGON. Our movements.

VLADIMIR. Our elevations.

ESTRAGON. Our relaxations.

VLADIMIR. Our elongations.

ESTRAGON. Our relaxations.

VLADIMIR. To warm us up.

ESTRAGON. To calm us down.

VLADIMIR. Off we go. (Beckett, *Complete* 71)

A phenomenon, then, which is closely related to the fragmented characters which we regularly find in both in-yer-face and absurdist theatre seems to be the pseudocouple:

two separate entities of fragmented character information unite to become a new dramatic entity which, as the dialogue quoted above shows, speaks almost with a single voice. The nature of this relationship of mutual dependence between two discontinuous, fragmented characters is perhaps best described in Nagy's *Weldon Rising*, in a statement that Tilly makes about her lover Jaye. "Mostly, though, I'm afraid I'll lose Jaye. And then I would just crumple up and blow away. Like a panic napkin. We insult each other a lot, but we like it that way" (Nagy, *Plays* 29).

### 5.3.2. The loss of self-hood and the action of objects

Another peculiarity which can be related to discontinuity in characters is what Hans Hoppe has referred to as the "action of objects" in absurdist theatre<sup>22</sup>. In his view, the comments of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* and Beckett's other plays suggest not only that these characters are unsure about their past, identity and motivation but that they are, actually, no longer identical with themselves. Their minds are separated from their bodies, since "without memory and recognition, the subject experiences itself only as a pendant of its body, from pain to pain, and as a pendant of its own cognition only from uncertainty to uncertainty [...]" (Hoppe 113). Such a subject can only be a "passive observer of its situation" and can easily be treated, by other characters, as an object, which is the case with Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. However, even the inanimate environment often betrays a certain resistance and arbitrariness towards discontinuous subjects in absurdist plays: Hoppe uses Estragon's struggle with his boots and Vladimir's business with the hat as examples (112). It seems, then, that the loss of a stable identity in discontinuous characters (which implies a loss of ability to relate to and control the own body and the environment) finds a scenic counterpart in the way in which inanimate objects or the natural environment take on a will and life of their own, becoming active forces in the play which contrast with the fragmented characters who have become passive bystanders.

Thus, in absurdist plays, where characters regularly betray fundamental insecurities about their identity and position in life, objects often seem to act autonomously, forcing the characters to react, determining the characters' actions. In *The Dumb Waiter*, as we have seen, the serving hatch of a supposedly abandoned café starts delivering food orders to Ben and Gus<sup>23</sup>. In Ionesco's *The Bald Primadonna*, the clock strikes deliberately, whenever it wants and in a completely irrational way - we

<sup>22</sup>The following translations of quotations of Hoppe are my own.

<sup>23</sup> See quote on page 46 above.

encounter stage directions such as “*The clock strikes seven times. Silence. The clock strikes three times. Silence. The clock strikes no times*” (Ionesco, *Plays 1* 88). Thus, the clock determines the timelessness and infinity of the play which, according to another stage direction (119), may endlessly repeat itself. In Ionesco’s *Amédée*, a corpse is mysteriously growing in a back room, disturbing the life of Amédée and his wife Madeleine (Ionesco, *Plays 2* 180/181) and towards the end of *The New Tenant*, pieces of furniture seem to slide on to the stage of their own accord (260). Beckett’s *Act Without Words I* which has already been discussed in chapter 4.2.2. is, of course, an extreme case. In contrast to *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, where the inanimate and natural environment only shows a kind of resistance to human attempts to control it, here, the inanimate objects are the major active forces in the play, determining every action of the passive human subject. The beginning of this development of an autonomously acting environment in Beckett’s plays can be witnessed in *Happy Days*, where the mound of earth around Winnie seems to rise steadily and almost purposefully, which forces the woman into her famous display of desperate cheerfulness in the face of a terrible fate.

In in-yer-face theatre, one cannot witness the action of objects in as literal a sense as in Beckett’s late plays. However, there are some examples where the natural, inanimate environment seems to act purposefully on the characters, forcing them to act and, thus, demonstrating how the characters no longer have it in themselves to determine their own fate. In *Weldon Rising*, for example, it is the weather which has taken over. During the play, the temperature in New York is rising constantly and quickly to an improbable two hundred degrees (Nagy, *Plays* 41). Usually, as one of the characters remarks, “weather doesn’t happen that way” (15). Here, the connection between the viciously rising temperatures and the characters’ uncertainty about themselves and their lives is quite obvious, even to themselves: it has gotten hotter ever since the night Natty’s lover was murdered (15), the one night that has sent them all into an identity crisis, wondering how they have come to be so passive as to watch another human being die right in front of their eyes without doing something about it. Thus, the apocalyptic temperatures in *Weldon Rising* can be regarded as a scenic response to the characters’ inherent uncertainties, forcing them to do what they can no longer bring themselves to do: to finally confront their confusion and cowardice. In *Kosher Harry*, it is a storm which, throughout the play, rages outside the restaurant where the scene is set. Parallel to the increasing confusion within the characters

themselves, “the storm grows fiercer outside”, as the stage directions suggest. Of course, the steadily rising storm could be seen as a poetic image, visualizing the characters’ emotional state. However, to establish this image, it would have been sufficient to specify in the stage directions at the beginning of the play that there is a storm outside which grows fiercer in the course of the play. Instead, the phrase “the storm grows fiercer outside” occurs nine times, at regular intervals, throughout the play. This stubborn repetition of the one simple phrase makes the weather seem like a malign force that actively intervenes in the characters’ lives just as the stage direction constantly intervenes in the dialogue. To a certain degree, then, it seems to be the storm which keeps the characters sort of locked up together in the restaurant.

In Kane’s *Cleansed*, too, where the identity of the characters is presented as extremely fluid and uncertain, bodies are moved and manipulated by unseen environmental forces. Stage directions specify, for example, how “*an electric current is switched on. Grace’s body is thrown into rigid shock as bits of her brain are burnt out*” (Kane 135) or how “*Carl’s trousers are pulled down and a pole is pushed a few inches up his anus*”. Later, “*the pole is removed*” and “*Rod falls from a great height and lands next to Carl*” (117). While the executors of these actions are not specified here, there are also instances in the play where Carl and Grace are said to be “*beaten by an unseen group of men*” and, in Grace’s case, even the voices of the men can be heard. (116/130). However, although the stage directions specify that voices can be heard in one case (130), the dominant impression remains that the force we are witnessing is non-human. This is partly due to the fact that, throughout the beating-up scenes, we never actually see anyone handing out the blows. Also, the text given to the voices which torture Grace is rather non-realistic, full of repetitions and highly fragmented so that these voices might as well represent an inner voice, as they often do in Kane’s later play *4.48 Psychosis*. Most importantly, however, Tinker is often present while his prisoners are being tortured, but Kane, by using passive constructions, distinguishes very clearly between torture inflicted by Tinker and torture inflicted by unseen forces, thereby drawing special attention to the power of the unseen torturers.

Apart from unseen forces acting upon bodies, Kane also includes “the abrupt changes of season and of the weather in *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, which aimed at emotional (or symbolical) rather than meteorological accuracy” (Tönnies 63). Finally, the idea of the environment acting autonomously in Kane’s play is enhanced by moments in

which daffodils (Kane 133) or sunflowers (120) spontaneously grow out of the stage floor.

Even though in more complex ways than absurdist plays, then, some in-yer-face plays embrace the dichotomy of discontinuous characters and the action of objects. It is by presenting the characters as victims of an autonomously acting inanimate environment that both absurdist and some in-yer-face playwrights expose the inability to act which is a major characteristic of discontinuous characters. Here, again, we can see how the idea of discontinuity - which produces open characters - shapes absurdist and in-yer-face plays as a whole: the mysterious intervention of the environment certainly accounts, among other things, for the dream-like atmosphere that both kinds of theatre have been said to create.

### 5.3.3. Embodying discontinuity – the ‘abnormal’ individual

So far, I have concentrated in my analysis of discontinuities on the characters’ personal insecurities and experience of fragmentation, their inner discontinuities. However, discontinuity is also an important element of these characters on an outer level, when we consider their position in the world, in society. The main characters in absurdist theatre, for example, are often moving along the edges of society. Thus, Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon are tramps, apparently without a home; Hamm and Clov from *Endgame* have a roof over their head but both are physically disabled and Hamm is dependent on his medicine; his parents living in the dustbins are old and appear to be slightly senile. Ionesco’s plays feature a psychotic murdering professor in *The Lesson* and another senile old couple in *The Chairs*. Pinter presents two killers in *The Dumb Waiter*, agents who are torturers and rapists and a psychotic young man in *The Birthday Party* and another tramp living with a character who has psychological problems in *The Caretaker*. Finally, of course, Genet’s plays are set almost exclusively in the parallel world of society’s outcasts: we meet prostitutes, punters wallowing in fantasies of power and a suicidal chief of the police in *The Balcony*; also, there are the psychotic, murdering sisters in *The Maids*.

The situation in in-yer-face theatre is similar. In fact, this might be an instance where in-yer-face theatre is more radical than absurdist theatre. Newspaper critic Benedict Nightingale, for example, draws particular attention to how in-yer-face writers “relish the oddball, the misfit, the bizarre” (qtd. in Saunders 6), and Howe Kritzer, too, remarks that in-yer-face authors focus on “marginalized groups”, fostering

identification “with violent, self-destructive, and non-productive individuals” (63). A closer look taken at the characters in the plays considered here supports these claims: there are drug addicts, incestuous transgender individuals, torturers and suicidal people in *Cleansed*; there are a number of petty criminals and a father-murdering psychopath, all of them addicted to pills, in *Mojo*; there is an insect-eating nightclub performer, his monstrously misshapen assistant and a pair of psychotic medicine-addicted twins in *The Pitchfork Disney*; there is a transvestite, a murderer and a pair of drinking, thieving lesbians in *Weldon Rising*; there is a thief and a bunch of impostors including a seemingly senile old woman in *Kosher Harry*.

Both absurdist and in-er-face authors, then, display a certain fascination with individuals outside society’s norms. Interestingly, it seems that it is not the specific way in which the characters deviate from the rest but this very basic fact of being outside of the norm which seems crucial: as we have seen in the above analysis, neither in-er-face nor absurdist theatre make entirely stringent attempts at explaining their individual characters’ motivations psychologically, refusing to turn them into fully developed individuals. Also, there are hardly any ‘normal’ people in the plays in relation to which the madness or abnormality of the main characters could be analysed or measured. All of this indicates that the state of these characters as abnormal individuals, discontinuous with regard to the desired norm, has significance in itself: especially with in-er-face plays it should be noted that it is not merely an aspect of a social realist critique of specific precarious living conditions, as some scholars imply<sup>24</sup>, but part of the characters’ existential definition.

This approach taken by absurdist and in-er-face theatre is similar to that of a major 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher: Michel Foucault attributed particular importance to society’s misfits, the ‘abnormal’ individual (a concept which society has developed over the centuries and which he adopts<sup>25</sup>), claiming that the infamous, unhappy,

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<sup>24</sup> Howe Kritzer, for example, talks at length about the social and political conditions in which in-er-face theatre developed and draws attention to specific economic problems like „the widening gap between rich and poor, a central trend in post-Thatcher Britain”, to how “an underclass is becoming entrenched” and to “the high level of economic insecurity” which affects even the middle classes. Furthermore, she mentions “the [in-er-face] plays’ roots in social realism” (30). Ultimately, however, Howe Kritzer also acknowledges that in-er-face authors “identify concrete social problems along with a generational crisis of meaning” (64).

<sup>25</sup> In his studies on the treatment of the mad over the centuries, Foucault has demonstrated that our society, starting from the idea of ‘madness’, seems to have developed the concept of an ‘abnormal’ individual which exists outside of ‘normal’ society. This concept has come to include all kinds of people who, for some reason, will or can not participate in the process of production: from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the old, the sick, the unemployed, those unwilling to work and prostitutes were locked up in special institutions along with the pathologically mad (Foucault 163).

obscure people whose lives are characterised by madness, death and excess constitute a separate entity, the only social entity which is located outside of the norm and from whose point of view the power relationships at work in so-called “normal” society can be analysed and understood (Sarasin 145/146). In the context of absurdist and in-*yer-face* drama, too, ‘abnormal’ individuals enable us to take a look at ourselves and the society we live in. Thus, in the same way in which these bizarre characters are alienated from normal society, we are alienated from ourselves, our existence, as the analysis of the characters’ internal insecurities and discontinuities has shown. The outer state of alienation from the norm, then, reflects an existential, inner state of alienation.

The abnormal individual which becomes the norm, then, can be regarded as a metaphor of human existence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: addiction, madness, poverty, death – these outer conditions mirror discontinuities and existential confusion within the characters. In absurdist theatre, the significance of the characters’ outsider status on a metaphorical level is rather obvious. Absurdist playwrights make no attempts at social realism and most of their characters are entirely “stripped of the accidental circumstances of social position or historical context” (Esslin, *Th. o. Abs.* 401). Thus, we have no choice but consider these individuals which are in some way or another outside the desired norm as metaphors of human existence with a universal validity. With in-*yer-face* theatre, this is not so easily possible, as playwrights from the 1990s like to provide more details, introducing aspects of social realism to their characterisation. Still, the desired metaphorical function of socially discontinuous characters is explicitly referred to by Mark Ravenhill, who claims that the drug-abusing and sex-addicted characters in his *Shopping and Fucking*, one of the most famous in-*yer-face* plays of the 1990s, were deliberately designed as extremes so that they may become metaphors with a more universal validity (Ravenhill qtd. in Piribauer 143). Also, for Aleks Sierz, it is obvious that the in-*yer-face* authors’ “imaginary Britain was a far darker place than experienced on a daily basis by most of its audiences” (*In-Yer-Face* 238), which suggests that, along with the general depiction of places and situations, characterisation in in-*yer-face* plays deliberately goes beyond mere (social) realism. Ravenhill, at this point, does not specify what exactly his characters should be metaphors of, but as in other in-*yer-face* plays, their status as extremist, abnormal individuals outside the desired norm mirrors the



discontinuity and existential confusion within: most of Ravenhill's characters are "lost, somewhat clueless, prone to psychological collapse" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 129).

Discontinuity might have seemed too general a concept to deal with character and character conception in the beginning, but the above analysis has shown that it is very useful when trying to understand the complex connection between form and content that we face when it comes to dramatic characters in both absurdist and in-*yer-face* theatre. Thus, on a formal level, character conception is shaped by discontinuities, the result being so-called 'open characters'. On a level of content, the characters are experiencing their own personalities as discontinuous, with the result that they no longer have control over their natural environment and have to form couples to become whole. Ultimately, inner discontinuities are mirrored on the outside by the characters' status as abnormal, discontinuous individuals. These abnormal individuals, in turn, can be regarded as metaphors of the fragmented individual of the modern/postmodern world.

Discontinuity, then, seems to be a central formal and thematic element in both absurdist and in-*yer-face* theatre. In in-*yer-face* plays, however, the idea of discontinuity is realised less radically on some levels: authors tend to reveal more about the characters' background and motivations than absurdist do, and, as a consequence, the identity problem never becomes as fundamental and existential for these characters as it does for Beckett's or Ionesco's. But while the absurdist are more extreme in presenting the discontinuity within, in-*yer-face* writers, by being more specific on certain details, put a heavier emphasis on the depiction of social discontinuity— their characters tend to be more bizarre on the external level and are, therefore, more radically outside the norm. In spite of being more specific than absurdist theatre on all levels concerning discontinuity, I would still argue that the difference between in-*yer-face* and absurdist authors is one of degree: although it tends to provide more details, in-*yer-face* theatre never explains its outsiders in a way that would make their motivations fully understandable. In this respect, in-*yer-face* theatre marks a clear break with regard to the well-made play with its psychological and social realism which dominated British theatre in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>26</sup>. Like

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<sup>26</sup> Ken Urban, for example, draws attention to this break with realism on different levels, claiming that in-*yer-face* authors tend „towards formal experimentation, shying away from critical realism, the mainstay of British drama since 1950s naturalism was married to 1960s political theatre during the 1970s and 1980s“ (39).

absurdist playwrights, then, in-her-face writers seem to opt for characters who – partly, at least – take on a metaphorical and universal quality: enigmatic characters whose essential discontinuities and uncertainties painfully remind us of our own position in the world – which we always have to sort out for ourselves.

## **6. Spaces – heightened realities**

If one takes a look at the complaints by critics quoted in chapter 5.1., one realises that the fact of ‘obscurity’ or, rather, ‘discontinuity’, as I have tried to re-label it, is not only relevant for issues of character and character conception but also for the question of the space in which these characters move. Space, of course, can provide valuable information about the characters’ background and present situation in life – especially with regard to the concrete social and historical context. Absurdist playwrights, however, often refuse to provide such information by means of the space in which the play is set – one only has to think about the most famous of stage spaces, the empty road in the middle of nowhere in *Waiting for Godot*. In postmodern British theatre, too, “time and space, which theoretically could help us to fix character, are sometimes used to achieve the opposite effect” as Susan Blattès has noted (72).

### **6.1. Between stylization and realization – setting in absurdist plays**

Basically, the space conceptions we encounter in absurdist theatre vary from the abstract minimalism in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* to the almost naturalistic concreteness in Harold Pinter’s *The Caretaker*. Despite huge differences in the aesthetics of the different authors, however, there is a central feature which spaces in absurdist theatre share: they are never fully explained or entirely defined and, therefore, always evade full-blown naturalism. Each space, no matter how naturalistic it might seem at first sight, has an element of mystery and uncertainty to it, something which divides it from what we perceive as realism on stage and which contributes to the dreamlike quality which many reviewers have attributed to absurdist plays. This evasion of naturalism depends on a lack of specific information on historical and social context. With regard to space, its coordinates in the world (or even the universe), that is, the local context, also become an important parameter. Such information can be provided (or not) on two main levels.

One level on which space is constituted in drama is, of course, the visible onstage space, the setting of the play as it is defined by the author. With regard to general conceptions of onstage space, Pfister suggests a broad spectrum ranging from neutrality over stylisation to realisation, with neutrality suggesting a bare stage and realisation a setting full of naturalistic detail (262). That is, a setting's position within this suggested spectrum largely depends on the amount of information which is provided on the historical, social and local context via the respective space. Of course, the difference between the three stages is one of degree. Claiming that modern theatre generally tends to reject realisation in favour of more neutral conceptions of space, Pfister, for example, only mentions "the sense of unreality in the use of space in 'absurd' plays such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*" (264). Later on, he uses the same play as an example of a conception of space that is "neutral and indefinite" and then goes on to mention the "more or less stylised tree" that was to be found in productions that Beckett himself directed (266). While Pfister seems to position Beckett's early stage settings somewhere in between neutrality and stylisation, Ruby Cohn extends the spectrum by pointing out how Beckett tried to avoid sentimentality with regard to *Krapp's Last Tape* through stylization but, according to his Director's Notebook, was very careful not to overdo it so that ultimately, "the production might look realistic to the imperceptive eye" (Cohn 24). We might, then, regard Beckett's approach to space as stylised in the sense that he provides some recognizable objects from reality which, however, are not provided with enough realistic detail so that their exact relationship with reality could be determined. This hovering between realism and stylization, then, could be said to generate a kind of heightened realism which transcends the specificity of a concrete social and historical context to become a generalized background for an examination of basic human issues without turning into an entirely subjective expressionism. Although I would argue that this kind of heightened realism can be found in most absurdist authors, the degree of stylization - stylization being understood here mainly in the sense of a reduction of information on local, social and historical context - used to achieve this effect, of course, varies from one author to another.

Beckett's settings, then, are the most obviously stylised, as he indulges in extreme minimalism: the famous stage directions at the beginning of *Godot* only state "a country road. A tree. Evening", laconically moving designers (and readers) away, as Katharine Worth has noted (27), from any kind of naturalistic imagination which

might inspire them to become more specific in the creation of the actual stage design. The obviously desired lack of scenic detail makes it impossible to situate the play in any specific social or historical context – the little information we do get is provided in the dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon. Considering the setting alone, however, this space could be anywhere in the world, at any given moment in time, a fact which is also referred to, in meta-dramatic irony, by Estragon after Vladimir has implored him (in vain) to recognize the locale: “Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I’ve crawled in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery” (Beckett qtd. in Cohn 21). *Endgame*, then, is set in a ‘bare interior’, but this interior is about as unspecific and empty as is the landscape in *Waiting for Godot*. As Martin Meisel points out, Beckett produces “a kind of concrete abstraction” by stripping away “the limiting specificity that inheres in place and time, leaving the bare bones” (76): there are two small windows with the curtains drawn, one door, a picture with its face to the wall, two ashbins covered by an old sheet and Hamm’s armchair standing in the middle of the room (Beckett, *Complete* 92). In spite of all this minimalism, however, it is also obvious that Beckett, in his early plays, always includes some concrete markers of reality in his settings, thus avoiding a kind of pure expressionism<sup>27</sup>.

While Beckett is more extreme in stylizing the setting with his minimalism, Genet is moving closer towards realism, producing more detailed stage directions in *The Balcony*, for example. Still, the scenic change from one room to another within the brothel is only supposed to be hinted at by the use of differently coloured screens. Madame Irma’s room is described in more detail as “elegant” and containing guipure lace hangings, three chairs, one large window, an apparatus for observing the other rooms near this window, two doors and a dresser (103/104), but this amount of scenic information in itself still does not define a concrete social or historical context. Also, Genet specifies right at the beginning that the chandelier seen in the first tableaux should remain the same throughout all the other tableaux, which, right from the beginning, indicates that his setting is not meant to be wholly realistic. More importantly, maybe, Genet famously became very cross with Peter Zadek, who directed the world premiere of *The Balcony* in London: Zadek had obviously mistaken Genet’s demand that his “tarts must look like the worst prostitutes in the

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<sup>27</sup> Ruby Cohn has also noted this difference in the degree of stylization of Beckett’s settings, claiming that while *Godot* and *Endgame* “convert stage terrain into a generalized human setting”, Beckett tended to produce a “soulcape” in later plays (Cohn 24).

world” and the play should be “vulgar, violent and in bad taste” as a request for a purely realistic setting and had produced “just an ordinary brothel”. Genet, however, also felt “that the scenes in the brothel should be presented with the solemnity of a Mass in a most beautiful cathedral” (*Picture Post* and *News Chronicle* qtd. in Esslin, *Th. o. Abs.* 215/216), leading Esslin to remark on the impossibility of living up to Genet’s demands (216) which he apparently regarded as contradictory. Seen against the background of Beckett’s approach to setting, however, it is obvious that Genet, too, in his requests for some kind of extreme vulgarity, was simply demanding a kind of heightened reality. He is also aiming for a dreamscape close enough to reality but slightly removed via exaggeration (implying stylization).

Ionesco also aims at a kind of space slightly removed from concrete reality but still recognisable. In his stage directions at the beginning of *The Bald Primadonna*, he demands, for example,

A typical middle-class English interior. Comfortable armchairs. Typical English evening at home. Typical English MR SMITH, in his favourite armchair, wearing English slippers, smoking an English pipe, reading an English newspaper, beside an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles, has a small grey English moustache. [...] A long English silence. An English clock chimes English three English chimes. (*Plays I* 85)

The constant repetition of the adjective “English” clearly suggests a kind of simplification and stylisation here – after all, there are many different kinds of Englishness and the cliché of the “English” refers to attributes which might change over time and even from one person to another, which is why this is not a socially and historically realistic description. Still, in *The Bald Primadonna*, local, social and historical context are vaguely hinted at, and the concrete elements of the setting can be related to some kind of reality even if it is slightly removed from actual reality through the exaggerated insistence on the ‘Englishness’. Ionesco, then, seems to produce his heightened realism through cliché, which uses realistic detail but generalises it through overuse.

## **6.2. Setting in in-ver-face plays**

With regard to setting in in-ver-face plays, Howe Kritzer remarks that these are “generally ordinary places with a sense of familiarity if not comfort, and a tension between confinement and freedom”, all of which she regards as “reflecting the plays’ roots in social realism” (30). This analysis is not entirely wrong, but, as we shall see, the approaches to setting which are to be found in the plays under discussion here

cover as broad a spectrum as in absurdist theatre. The conscious and effective use of stylization combined with elements of realism which we will discover in most of the plays might well point to roots of in-yer-face theatre which lie beyond social realism. The extreme end of the spectrum here is, once again, occupied by Sarah Kane, who, in *Cleansed*, excels in stylization. The setting, for example, bears obvious similarities to Beckett in its minimalism: Kane hardly mentions any real objects that would link her settings to concrete reality, except for a bed on which Grace lies when she is in the white room (Kane 113), a chair on which Robin stands to hang himself (144) or a booth in which the unknown woman dances for Tinker (121). As in Genet's *The Balcony*, which is also set in a closed off institution, the changing from one room to another is indicated mainly by change of colour, as Kane, especially in the later scenes of the play, refers to the different rooms only by mentioning their colour or shape, calling them the red, the white, the black, or the round room. Considering these aspects, it is understandable that Graham Saunders refers to the setting of *Cleansed* as an expressionist "dreamscape", linking it to Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* (94/95) due to Kane's apparent refusal to set the play in a specific location or time.<sup>28</sup> However, an analysis of Kane's setting merely in terms of expressionism and "dreamscapes" does not pay proper attention to the stage directions she gives when she first introduces the different rooms. From the beginning, she makes it clear that the play is set in a university, specifying that the first scene is set "just inside the perimeter fence of the university" (107). She then goes on to define each room via colour or shape and, interestingly, links each one to the idea of a realistic room with a concrete function within the university area. Thus, the White Room is "the university sanatorium" (112), the Red Room is "the university sports hall" (116), the Black Room represents "the showers in the university sports hall converted into peep-show booths" (121) and the Round Room is actually "the university library" (123)<sup>29</sup>. This juxtaposition of a stylized description via colour and a more realistic definition via the function of the room produces an interesting contrast: the specific function of each room introduces a strong impression of concrete, recognisable reality which,

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<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Katharine Worth also employs Strindberg's *Dream Play* to put Beckett's settings into a stylistic context (Worth 34).

<sup>29</sup> Additional reality is given to these university rooms by the fact that the activities performed within them reflect their original function – Grace teaches Robin how to read in the library, the beating of Carl and Grace, a strongly physical activity, occurs in the sports hall, the erotic dance of the woman takes place in the showers, where one is usually naked, and Grace is "treated" by Tinker in the sanatorium.

however, due to the lack of a more detailed description, does not completely rule out the expressionism of the colour<sup>30</sup>.

All this suggests that Kane, like the absurdists, was working the borderline between stylization and realization in her settings, producing a kind of heightened realism<sup>31</sup>, at least in her early plays. This can also be deduced from her overall attitude towards production style which Nils Tabert summarises by saying that “she didn’t want her instructions taken literally [...] she didn’t want the audience to see blow jobs and mutilation; she regarded them as images” (Tabert qtd. in Rubik 132). Kane, then, as Rubik remarks, seems to have been generally uncomfortable with “ultra-realistic” productions: apparently, she found Peter Zadek’s idea of using real rats in the first German production of *Cleansed*<sup>32</sup> rather ridiculous (Rubik 132). Like Genet, who - some forty years earlier and, interestingly, with the same director - felt that some stylization was necessary to enhance the vulgarity of his brothel, Kane seems to find a certain degree of stylization essential for enhancing the metaphorical, poetic quality of her basically concrete, brutal stage images. Apparently, both authors are very keen on getting the balance between real and stylized elements, which contributes to the dream-like atmosphere of their plays, right.

At first sight, a similar kind of balance is established Phyllis Nagy’s set for *Weldo Rising*. On the one hand, she is rather concrete with regard to the locale, which she specifies as: “Little West 12<sup>th</sup> Street, a cobbled back street in New York City’s meat-packing district. Factory buildings that may or may not be deserted” (Nagy, *Plays* 4). On the other hand, Nagy introduces a stylized, even abstract element into this realistic context, demanding that “one surface must be covered entirely by a detailed map of the meat-packing district”. Also, she requests that an area “preferably above street level, represents Tilly and Jaye’s apartment” and that this apartment “should not be represented naturalistically” (4). At the same time, Nagy has Natty sitting in the middle of the street before an “art deco vanity” with “open boxes scattered about” and “a portable steel clothing rack, full of men’s stuff” (5). What produces the dream-like atmosphere radiating from Nagy’s set – apart from the stylized, non-naturalistic

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<sup>30</sup> This discrepancy between realistic and expressionistic description of the setting has also been noted by Howe Kritzer, who claims that identifiers like the sanatorium and the university sports hall “prove unstable, as the locations expressionistically transform into a hospital, a torture chamber, and a peepshow booth” (36).

<sup>31</sup> Nils Tabert, who collaborated in the German translations of Kane’s plays, uses this very term to describe her general approach to playwrighting, claiming that her plays “do connect with society; they are even highly political but in a formally challenging, very complex and poetic way” (Tabert 137).

<sup>32</sup> Premiered on 12 December 1998, Hamburger Kammerspiele.

elements like the map and the room which is integrated into the New York backstreet - is the way in which these concrete objects which usually belong to a dressing room are positioned in the middle of the street, underneath the open sky: instead of just reducing the information available and producing a kind of heightened reality as absurdist tend to do, Nagy also builds contradictory information into the setting, thus taking non-realism to extremes rather in the way surrealists do when producing their characteristically chaotic dreamscapes. A similar, though more isolated, surrealist effect occurs in Kane's *Cleansed* where, in the White Room, "a sunflower bursts through the floor" (Kane 120).

While Kane takes stylization to extremes through minimalism and Nagy even introduces surrealist elements, the settings specified for the other in-*yer-face* plays under discussion here exhibit a more moderate kind of heightened realism. Like Ionesco's *The Bald Primadonna*, *Mojo* and *Kosher Harry* employ stylization along the lines of a cliché, thus providing a number of scenic markers which, however, are not numerous or specific enough to establish an entirely realistic backdrop. Thus, Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* is supposed to be set in a Club in Dean Street, Soho in the summer of 1958, but all he specifies for the Upstairs room is that there be the top of a steel staircase, a table with chairs and a tray with a pot and "three pretty cups" on it (Butterworth 3). A later stage direction suggests that there is also a jukebox (40). The downstairs area is somewhat more specific, including a staircase leading up to the office, an "enormous banner across the back" saying "Ezra's Atlantic Salutes Young People", a table and "sequins everywhere" (41). However, elements like the jukebox, the banner and the sequins can only be regarded as markers of the 50s setting and certainly do not suffice to establish an entirely realistic 50s backdrop- which might be one reason why critics have accused the author of "a lack of interest in fifties culture" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 163). A statement by Butterworth, even though it actually refers to the characters' slang, might be enlightening in this context, as it suggests that pure realism was definitely not what he was after: "The idea was to create something that had a poetic edge. I did some research, but after a while I thought: I'm going to make it all up. It makes it seem less like archaeology" (Butterworth qtd. in Sierz 164).

A similar approach to setting is found in *Kosher Harry*. Here, Grosso also specifies a certain locale, namely "North-west London" and a "Jewish diner". The only specific markers of locale mentioned, however, are "signed photographs of stars of a bygone age" adorning the walls and there is also, as one might deduce from further stage



directions, a door and a table with a few chairs (Grosso 5). Thus, while an inventive stage designer may certainly produce a realistic set from the author's hints, the stage directions alone, as in *Mojo*, do suggest a stylized, simplified setting with only a small number of specific objects hinting at a particular social, local or historical context. These markers, in their isolation, become clichés, reminders of reality but at the same time removed from it. In spite of the specific local reference in the stage directions and a number of concrete objects on stage, then, the sets of *Kosher Harry* and *Mojo* retain a concrete but still generalised quality removed from actual reality which is also to be found in Ionesco's 'English' set for *The Bald Primadonna*.

### **6.3. Surrounded by the 'vast unknown' – offstage spaces in absurdist plays**

Next to the setting itself, the other level on which an element of mystery and a dream-like quality is introduced to spaces in absurdist theatre is the level of the offstage space and its relationship to the onstage space. The way in which this invisible space is referred to and defined by the characters through dialogue and action can either help to locate the setting in a concrete social, historical and local context but it can also prevent or consciously counteract such specifications. The more specific the information about the offstage space, the more realistic the onstage setting will appear. In absurdist theatre, however, a lack of consistent information on the offstage space often enhances uncertainty about the local context. Pfister, for example, notes that the relationship between onstage and offstage space is a central concern in absurdist plays and claims that the offstage space remains so disturbingly vague in Beckett that the onstage space seems hermetically sealed off (259). And while Katherine Worth bases her analysis of Beckett's spaces on the minimalist settings themselves, it is, of course, also the uncertainty about the offstage space which contributes to the fact that in Beckett's spaces "we find ourselves [...] face to face with the vast unknown that surrounds us" (Worth 22). A similar hint concerning the offstage space is given by Esslin when he claims that in Pinter's plays, the room turns into a "small speck of warmth and light in the darkness" (*Th. o. Abs.* 236). All these comments point to a basic lack of knowledge about the offstage space which affects both audiences and characters of absurdist plays.

The precarious nature of the offstage is very obvious in Beckett's *Endgame*, where the observation of this space actually becomes a kind of ritual, with Clov climbing the ladder to look out the window with the telescope, only to produce poetic but not very

concrete remarks. He claims, for example, that everything outside is “corpsed”, “the light is sunk” (Beckett, *Complete* 106), the waves are like “lead” and that it is “light black. From pole to pole” (107). In *Waiting for Godot*, then, the uncertainty of the offstage space becomes manifest indirectly, through the significant lack of information that is available: all the characters seem to pop into the setting out of sheer nothingness – there is no information about where they have spent their time when they were not stage, except that Estragon has spent the night “in a ditch” where he has been beaten up by the someone (12) and that Pozzo has travelled for “six hours on end, and never a soul in sight” (25) before meeting Vladimir and Estragon in the first act.

While Beckett manages to leave the offstage space vague and undefined by providing only a very limited amount of information, Ionesco relies on contradictory information, undermining the audience’s expectations to invest his offstage space with mystery. In *The Bald Primadonna*, he confronts the Martins and Smiths with several rings at the door. The first three times, Mrs. Smith goes to open the door and can never see anyone, but Mr. Smith insists that there must be someone there after the fourth ring and, indeed, in steps the captain of the fire brigade who claims that he has been standing in front of the door for “about three quarters of an hour” (Ionesco, *Plays I* 104) but was not responsible for the first two rings and did not see anyone else in the vicinity either. This incident, then, suggests that the offstage space has a life of its own, that the goings-on in this space are quite unpredictable and that neither characters nor audience can be entirely certain of it.

If in Ionesco and Beckett, the uncertainty about the offstage mainly produces an impression of disorientation and mystery, it becomes positively frightening in Harold Pinter. In his plays, a room (that is, the part of Pinter’s world which is shown on stage) is presented as a place of escape that has to be defended against vague and anonymous threats from the outside (Pfister 259). Pinter builds heavily on this threat emanating from an unknown offstage area. As a matter of fact, it is this uncertainty and threat from the outside, the offstage, which is mainly responsible for producing an impression of mystery in his plays – Pinter’s settings themselves tend to be rather concrete and almost naturalistic. His stage directions concerning the room in *The Dumb Waiter*, for example, contain more realistic and specific detail than Beckett’s for *Endgame*. Thus, Pinter demands that there be two doors, one to a kitchen and lavatory and one to a passage, and he also adds the serving hatch as a specific feature.

Furthermore, he often specifies the larger local context: *The Birthday Party* is set in “the living-room of a house in a seaside town” (Pinter, *Plays One* 19), the room in *The Dumb Waiter* is “a basement room” (130) and the room in *The Room* is part of “a large house” (101). However, such realistic settings exist in a vacuum, since the nature of everything outside the room is unknown to the characters and the audience. Most obviously, the idea about the offstage space is kept vague and undefined in *The Dumb Waiter*, where Pinter relies on a combination of giving only very little but also contradictory information. At one point in the play, an envelope slides under the door, but when Gus opens the door to see who delivered it, no one is there. Interestingly, the envelope contains the matches they need to light the kettle (*Plays One* 140). Also, in spite of the fact that the place seems to be deserted, the serving hatch suddenly starts delivering food orders<sup>33</sup>. Ben assures Gus that they are in the city of Birmingham, but this assurance is immediately put into perspective by Gus, who remarks that Birmingham is still “the second biggest city in Great Britain” (137). The offstage space remains similarly mysterious in *The Room*. The number of floors in the house, for example, remains uncertain, as the landlord does not answer the main character’s respective question: “I don’t count them now”, he says (Pinter qtd. in Esslin, *Th. o. Abs.* 236). Also, somebody is living in the basement of the large house, but Rose, the main character, does not know who it is and whether the occupants have changed or are the same (Pinter, *Plays One* 102). The world outside the house is also described in terms which remind one of Beckett in their vagueness. From the dialogue, we only gather that “it’s very cold out” and that there isn’t “a soul about” (101). We also learn that “the district is quiet” (117) and that the roads are rather empty (126), but all these statements convey a certain mood rather than a concrete local context.

#### **6.4. Offstage spaces in in-ver-face plays**

In Kane’s *Cleansed*, the offstage space is about as vague as it is in *Waiting for Godot*. Although she set her play in different rooms, all these rooms are situated within the institution of the “university”. Even the outdoor scenes between Rod and Carl are always set by a “perimeter fence”, marking this area as belonging to the university. The only hint at the nature of the world outside occurs in a few stage directions. One of them specifies, for example, that there is “the sound of a cricket match in progress on the other side of the fence” (Kane 109); another stage direction specifies the same

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<sup>33</sup> See quote on page 46.

for a football match (129) and one outdoor scene has a child sing a Beatles song “on the other side of the fence” (136). Now, the cricket match might suggest an English context, and the fact that games like football and cricket - which require wide open spaces - are being played hints at a countryside setting (which would be typical of an English university). The child singing alone on these sports grounds, however, has something implausible and contradictory about it. While Beckett provides information about the offstage space via dialogue and remains vague on this level, Kane provides information on the offstage space through specific, recognisable background noise. However, as there are no other references to a world outside the university, the offstage space, defined only as a soundscape (and not very explicitly so, since specific sounds from the world outside only occur at three points in the play), remains vague, as would seem the world to a person who has suddenly gone blind and can now rely on sound only for orientation. Kane’s university, then, is situated within a blind soundscape, as vague and undefined a space as is the open country road in *Waiting for Godot*.

While Kane refuses to provide specific information about the space surrounding her setting on levels other than sound, the other in-her-face writers under discussion provide more information about the offstage space, specifying the approximate locale of their setting in the stage directions. Thus, the Jewish Diner in *Kosher Harry* is set in North-west London (Grosso 5), *Weldon Rising* in New York’s meat packing district, the club in *Mojo* in Dean Street, Soho (Butterworth 2), and the flat inhabited by the twins of *The Pitchfork Disney* in the East End of London (Ridley 11). This, however, is only what is specified in the stage directions at the beginning of each play. The apparent concreteness of locale context is, in most of these plays, later undermined in the dramatic realisation of the play: the characters’ actions, the dialogue and additional stage directions.

In Phyllis Nagy, for example, additional information about the offstage space is provided by occasional radio transmissions which present the picture of a town in the state of apocalypse. Thus, the radio features reports of “automobiles spontaneously combusting”, a Delta seven-forty-seven exploding on takeoff at Kennedy Airport and a Greyhound bus melting “within seconds of entering the Holland Tunnel” (Nagy, *Plays* 35). Later, the radio reports the collapse of Washington, Triborough, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Williamsburgh and Queensboro bridges (39) and Jones Beach having fallen into the Atlantic (41). Nagy, then, is quite specific with regard to the locale in

her stage directions, but she undermines this specificity by introducing a surreal, apocalyptic scenario: instead of providing too little information, as Beckett and Kane tend to do, she provides contradictory information with regard to the offstage space, as do Ionesco and Pinter in their ‘Knock-on-the-door-but-no-one-is-there’-scenes. Of course, Nagy employs contradictions on a larger scale. Using New York as a local background, a city which immediately evokes a particular set of images and ideas, she undermines the audience’s expectation by presenting this city in an almost unimaginable state of decline. The effect is similar to that achieved in Ionesco and Pinter: after our expectations and ideas have been fundamentally contradicted, there can be no more certainties about the nature of the offstage space. Nagy’s characters, therefore, are also surrounded by “the vast unknown”, the unexpected brought on by the apocalypse.

Ridley, in *The Pitchfork Disney*, also employs contradictions concerning the offstage space. While he specifies that the play is set in the East End of London and the setting itself is conceived quite realistically, the apparent certainty about the locale is soon undermined by reports about the world outside offered by the twins. On the one hand, numerous references to things like shopping tours (Ridley 14), people going to get parked cars (37) and trips to the zoo (63) suggest a realistic East-end London offstage space. On the other hand, Haley’s horror story about her last shopping trip, during which she was supposedly chased by hungry dogs and ended up climbing a crucifix in a church, suggests, once more, an offstage space on the brink of apocalypse. To be sure, colourful accounts of dreams and apocalyptic end-of-the-world scenarios occur several times in the course of the play<sup>34</sup> and Presley, at this particular point, explicitly encourages his sister to deliver a good story by saying “tell me again. Go on. If it’s good enough ... I’ll do all the shopping in the future” (17). While this context might suggest that Haley is only telling a fantasy story, Ridley’s stage directions at the beginning of the play specify that there should be “*sounds of dogs howling outside*”, which clearly enhances the likeliness that Haley’s story might be true. Ultimately, Ridley, in the manner of Pinter and Ionesco, refuses to resolve the contradictions established with regard to the nature of the offstage space. He allows the contradictory pieces of information – threatening apocalyptic outside vs. normal

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<sup>34</sup> There is, for example, Presley’s account in which the whole world is a black wasteland and the twins’ house is the only one standing (Ridley 25). More prominently, there is Presley’s central six-page narrative of his dream about the Pitchfork Disney “who vowed to kill all the children in the world” (82-87).

London East End neighbourhood - to exist side by side until the end of the play, thereby leaving the offstage space vague and mysterious.

Similar to Ridley's play, the offstage space in *Mojo*, the London Soho area, is invested with mystery through contradictory accounts and behaviour of the characters towards this space. On the one hand, an idea of the offstage space is established by Baby, who walks in and out of the club freely. Seen through his character, the offstage space seems 'normal' – he brings toffee apples for the crew and talks about a Buick that is parked outside in Dean Street (Butterworth 30/31). The behaviour and comments of the rest of the crew, however, define the offstage space as something threatening: there are numerous questions on whether the doors are locked, Skinny takes much longer than expected to return from an errand (41) and standing on the doorstep (according to a mysterious phone call) are the two bins which contain the remains of the club's former owner (23). In contrast to Ridley, Butterworth resolves the contradictions and, thereby, the mystery established with regard to the offstage space: when it turns out that it was Mickey who betrayed everyone, the fear of Sam Ross, who was supposed to be lurking offstage, somewhere outside the club, vanishes. Since, however, this resolution only occurs at the end, most of the play is dominated by an atmosphere of uncertainty with regard to what might await the characters outside of the visible setting.

All in all, then, there is a wide variety in conceptions of stage space in both absurdist and in-er-face theatre. The general tendency which can be observed is a rejection of full-blown realistic detail and a turn towards stylization, which produces different levels of heightened realism. Especially if one takes into consideration the offstage spaces, however, it becomes evident that the approach to setting in both kinds of drama is essentially non-naturalistic. The stylized settings surrounded by uncertain offstage spaces assume a dream-like quality: recognisably linked to concrete reality and, therefore, not expressionistic, but always slightly removed from it through stylization and uncertainty of locale. Apart from taking on a slightly 'unreal' quality, these 'underdefined', 'open' spaces leave room for the spectators to interpret and project onto them. While spaces in absurdist theatre tend to be more neutral and undefined in their non-naturalism, in-er-face plays provide more details on the locale or particular objects. Whether these details add more to the realistic aspect of the setting or contribute a surrealist touch ultimately depends on the nature of other

elements within the play, the overall production style and the realisation of author's ideas by the stage designer.

## 7. Staging the body – dysfunction, violence and routines

It lies, of course, in the nature of drama to rely on a concrete body on a stage. The attention dedicated to the moving body itself may vary from very little in naturalistic plays to increased attention in comedies - where movement and mimic often carry the action along - to outright symbolic configurations as they occur, for example, in Brecht (Meisel 68). When dealing with absurdist theatre, however, the body seems to take on an even greater significance. Here, the body and physical activity are sometimes foregrounded so specifically that they seem to exist for their own sake, in which case the visual representation clearly transcends mere symbolism and the body becomes the central means of expression. This is already suggested by Esslin. He draws particular attention to the importance of physical interaction in performances of the theatre of the absurd, claiming that an important influence on absurdist theatre is constituted by the tradition of “‘pure’ theatre”, this notion implying “abstract scenic effects as they are familiar in the circus or revue, in the work of jugglers, acrobats, bullfighters, or mimes” (*Th. o. Abs.* 328), that is, physical activities which are performed for their own sake and not necessarily determined by the logic of plot. Esslin finds such elements of pure theatre realised in “Genet’s use of ritual and pure, stylized action; in the proliferation of things in Ionesco” or “the music-hall routines with hats in *Waiting for Godot*” (328)<sup>35</sup>.

Of course, in-er-face theatre also features bodies very prominently – they are largely responsible for the “graphic quality” of these plays which was often highlighted in the reviews (Piribauer 16). This graphic quality, in turn, is mostly constituted by violent interactions for which in-er-face theatre is notorious. Piribauer, however, has already tried to put the physical violence in these plays into a larger context, mentioning

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<sup>35</sup> The importance of physical action *per se*, especially in Beckett, has also been noted by Innes, for example, who claims that Vladimir and Estragon “are also circus clowns, explicitly performing comic turns [...] and in the second half it becomes clear that all their activities, even including breathing, are simply ‘exercises’ to ‘pass the time’” (Innes, *Mod. Brit. Drama* 434). Rabey, too, mentions that “in considering Beckett’s theatricality, it is important not to lose sight of his affection and respect for traditions and routines of clowning, as manifested in cinema (Keaton, Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy) and the music hall and variety show” (Rabey 51). Bradby observes that certain scenic elements in Beckett become “self-conscious”, that is, they are being noted not only in context but for their own sake: while the constant handling of everyday objects may take on metaphysical significance, “they also speak on yet another level of the playful world of the great music-hall comics [...]” (35).

Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty as an influence. While the name suggests otherwise, Artaud's theatrical cruelty, "on a performing level, [...] has nothing to do with the cruelty we practice on one another, hacking at each other's bodies" (Artaud 60). Cruelty, in Artaud, rather refers to the emotional impact a performance is supposed to have on the audience on a metaphysical level, and this impact is to be achieved by a physical theatrical language which is "composed of everything filling the stage, everything that can be shown and materially expressed on stage" (27). Bodies, obviously, are a central element of this physical theatrical language, not only in the function of violated bodies but simply in their function as bodies on a stage. Following up on Artaud's concept of a theatre of cruelty, Piribauer points out that in-*yer-face* writers, too, "attribute great importance to the visual side of drama" (16) and that "scenes in which the human body becomes a central means of dramatic expression" can be found in several in-*yer-face* plays (17). In order for the body to become the central means of expression which it supposedly is in both absurdist and in-*yer-face* theatre, it has to be staged in certain ways so as to draw special attention to it. To put it differently: in order to be noticed in its bare physicality, the body has to be removed from its role of being only the carrier of a voice which speaks on the stage. The inclusion of a music-hall routine is one way of achieving this, the excessive use of violence another. In the following, I will try to integrate these different possibilities into a more comprehensive framework so that we might analyse similarities in both kinds of theatre in a more systematic way when it comes to staging bodies.

### **7.1. The dysfunctional body**

A very effective way of staging the body is by presenting it as dysfunctional. A physical disability will always draw attention to the body, since common everyday activities require a certain effort and more time under such circumstances. Also, a visible disability immediately draws our attention to the body, as it marks a discontinuity, a break with regard to our view of the body, which we normally accept as a given in its full functionality. Dysfunctionality becomes particularly effective if it remains unexplained. To present a dysfunctional body without comment, as a given, makes the presence of such a body all the more disturbing.

The dysfunctional body is central to Beckett's plays, with many of them featuring physically disabled characters. This is most obvious in *Endgame*: Hamm is blind,



bound to a wheelchair and dependent on painkillers, Clov has a “stiff, staggering walk” (Beckett, *Complete* 92) and cannot sit (97) and Hamm’s parents have lost their legs and have only stumps left (96). In *Godot*, the characters’ physical state seems less bleak at first. Thus, “Estragon suffers from painful swollen feet, while Vladimir has a painful prostrate condition” (Bradby 31). Lucky has a “running sore” on his neck (Beckett, *Complete* 26) and stoops or staggers around, but there seem to be no further physical inhibitions. However, when Pozzo re-enters in the second act, he is completely blind (71) and when he falls to the ground, he is unable to get up again. As if this spontaneous physical disability were contagious, Vladimir and Estragon, in an attempt to help Pozzo and Lucky, stumble and fall as well and can only crawl around on the floor for a while (77). Another prominent instance of physical disability occurs in Ionesco’s *The Chairs*, where the orator who appears at the end of the play turns out to be deaf and dumb, uttering indecipherable sounds like “He, Mme, mm, mm” (*Plays I* 83). Last but not least, a more surreal example of bodily dysfunction can be found in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*, where people mysteriously transform into specimen of this currently endangered species. What is central to most instances of disability and bodily dysfunction mentioned above is the way in which the origin of the ailment remains unexplained. However surreal and striking it may be, the dysfunction is never expressly picked up as a theme or negotiated in any rational way. What seems surreal and strange to the audience hardly seems to occupy the characters who are themselves affected. In *Godot*, for example, Pozzo resists Vladimir’s attempts to rationally understand his sudden blindness:

VLADIMIR. I’m asking you if it came on you all of a sudden.

POZZO. I woke up one fine day blind as Fortune. [*Pause.*] Sometimes I wonder if I’m not still asleep.

VLADIMIR. And when was that?

POZZO. I don’t know.

VLADIMIR. But no later than yesterday –

POZZO. [*Violently.*] Don’t question me! The blind have no notion of time. [...]

(Beckett, *Complete* 80)

Without explanation or anyhow being embedded into a “logical” dramatic context, the dysfunction of the body refers back to itself and becomes an expression in its own right, leaving the audience to wonder what it might signify in the larger context of the play.

The dysfunctional body also features prominently in some in-*yer-face* plays, even though instances of physical disability are more isolated. A striking example occurs

in *The Pitchfork Disney*, where Cosmo's assistant Pitchfork seems struck with some kind of physical impairment. Thus, he has severe problems getting onto a chair. When he finally manages,

*his hands [are] twitching. His mouth opens ... At first, no sound comes out. Pitchfork begins to shake. His mouth opens wider. He wobbles on the chair. His hands shake more violently ... Then ... A noise comes from between his lips: a terrible howl – half-human, half-animal.* (Ridley 95)

Standing on the chair, Pitchfork performs a song the words of which, however, cannot be understood. Apart from the impairments implied here, Cosmo's mysterious assistant is also said to have a "shuffling, awkward walk" (90), a stage direction which seems to recall Clov from *Endgame*. At the same time, the way in which Cosmo orders Pitchfork to give "a little show" (93) for Presley and the way he shows him off also establishes a strong parallel to Lucky in *Godot*, especially the episode where Pozzo tells Lucky to think in front of the two tramps. It is not a very long way from Pozzo's "Think, pig" (Beckett, *Complete* 41) to Cosmo's "Pitch! Up!" (Ridley 93), and it is not a very long way from Lucky's stumbling about to Pitchfork's physical disabilities either. Another parallel to Beckett, of course, is the way in which Ridley expects us to simply accept these disabilities as a given. The origin of Pitchforks' impairments – after all, he is supposed to have a severely misshapen face which he hides behind a mask (92) - is never explained, nor are any psychological or social implications (which such a condition must certainly have) even hinted at. This indifferent attitude of the author is reflected by Cosmo himself: while Presley is concerned when Pitchfork experiences difficulties with the chair, Cosmo does not react at all (93/94). Here, too, the dysfunctional body remains unexplained.

Physical impairment also plays an important role in *Kosher Harry*, where the old woman is in a wheelchair and, according to the cabbie, "deaf as a llama in pyjamas" (Grosso 26). The difference here is that these impairments are unstable. Thus, the old woman, at one point, gets up to do a jig, "*dances and sings merrily*" but "*gasps and faints into the wheelchair*" the next moment (Grosso 107). Also, her interventions in the conversation suggest that she can actually hear. In contrast to the woman, whose impairments temporarily disappear in the course of the play, the waitress' and the cabbie's bodies only seem to develop disabilities towards the end. Thus, the cabbie loses control over his bodily functions, wetting himself (117), and becomes deaf until, at the very end, "*he can't hear for toffee*" (123). The waitress, on the other hand, goes completely blind from one moment to the next. On the last pages of the play, she

suddenly “*takes off her spectacles and rubs her eyes and puts them back on again*” asking “here who turned off the lights”. She then “*stumbles around with her arms outstretched trying to get her bearings*” (121). While the wheelchair and the blindness might be traced back to Beckett, the more striking similarity between the plays lies in the way in which the impairments in *Kosher Harry* develop or disappear in a mysterious and unexplained way and are never commented on, just as the dysfunctional bodies in Beckett are never explained but simply accepted. Dysfunctional bodies are also featured at the end of Nagy’s *Weldon Rising*. Here, Natty’s body seems to boil up from the inside. “My skin is ... bubbling,” he observes, “The heat. THE HEAT. LOOK. I’M DEVELOPING BOILS”. His claim is verified when Jaye tries to touch him and burns herself (Nagy, *Plays* 32). Another example of bodily dysfunction is provided by Tilly, who cannot stop bleeding after she has accidentally cut herself - very slightly - with a shard of broken glass (41). In Nagy, dysfunction of the body is more surreal than in other in-her-face or absurdist plays unless, of course, we consider Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*. As in the other plays, the bodily dysfunctions are not dealt with in a psychologically realistic way nor are they explained rationally. Thus, the characters do react to their ailments, but they make no attempts to understand or even discuss the strange things which are happening to their bodies. Once again, then, we are left with the image of a dysfunctional body which assumes a meaning and significance of its own.

## **7.2. Violence**

Another way of focussing attention on the body itself, establishing it as a means of expression, is by showing it in the process of being destroyed or mangled through physical violence. Baudrillard’s ideas on violence as laid out in *Simulacra and simulation* are very useful in this context. Thus, he claims that only through violence, the reality of the body (and, therefore, our life) can be recovered out of the all-encompassing simulation that is now our reality. According to Baudrillard there is a

violence necessary to life – whether suffered or inflicted. The violence of ritual, the violence of work, the violence of knowledge, the violence of blood, the violence of power and of the political is good! It is clear, luminous, the relations of force, contradictions, exploitation, repression! (Baudrillard 156)

Only through violence and catastrophe, he believes, can we feel ourselves again. While he develops his ideas primarily with regard to ‘real’ life, I suggest that they can be transferred to the level of drama and theatre – it is certainly no coincidence that

Baudrillard himself refers to Artaud's theatre of cruelty, which he regards as "an attempt to create a dramaturgy of life, the last gasp of an ideality of the body, of blood, of violence in a system that was already taking it away toward a reabsorption of all the stakes without a trace of blood" (38/39). In a parallel, then, to the way in which violence rips the body out of simulation into reality again in actual life, the depiction of physical violence on stage could be said, for a few moments, to unhinge the body from the traditional, 'well-made' dramatic situation where it is only the carrier of a voice, a role; it can, suddenly, be perceived in its physicality and assumes a certain significance on this basic physical level.

As with the dysfunctional body, however, it is not enough to just include some kind of physical violence in the action. Practically, the effectiveness of establishing the body itself as a signifier depends on the way in which the violence is embedded into the dramatic context. The more gratuitous the violence seems, the more disturbing it will be, and the more attention will be directed to the body as an expressive entity. This sense of gratuitousness can be enhanced by holding back information so as to make the violent act psychologically implausible, but also through repetition or an accumulation of a number of violent acts. Another aspect which might determine in how far the body is perceived in its physicality is, of course, the way in which the violence itself is presented on stage. With regard to the actual realisation of physical violence, Rubik notes how the stylised violence in Kane's *Cleansed*, where Carl and Grace are beaten by unseen forces, achieves "an eerie alienation effect which, paradoxically, makes us acutely aware of the threat of physical violence" (133). This suggests, then, that stylization draws particular attention to the physical aspect of the violence, the body and this is easily imaginable: a body which moves in response to invisible forces is obviously detached from its role as a carrier of character in a traditional dramatic context. However, the degree of stylization is not always specified or implied by the dramatic text and can, therefore, often be determined only on the concrete level of production, by the director (Rubik 123).

Of course, physical violence in itself is not exactly a primary characteristic of absurdist theatre. However, we have already noted that this kind of drama is greatly determined by discontinuities in the information structure, meaning that any acts of violence which might occur are likely to remain unexplained and the act itself unmotivated. This is, for example, the case in *Waiting for Godot*, where Lucky suddenly "kicks [Estragon] violently in the shins" (*Complete* 32), although, so far, he

has neither shown signs of sympathy nor dislike for anyone. The circle of violence is kept going by Vladimir, who, in the second act, “*hits Lucky with sudden fury*” (82) and strikes Pozzo (77), who is already on the floor and completely helpless because he is blind. These acts of violence are surprising and not entirely understandable because the attitude of Vladimir and Estragon towards Pozzo and Lucky remains ambiguous – throughout the play, they waver between pity, fear, respect and anger. An even more striking outbreak of unmotivated violence occurs at the end of Pinter’s *The Room* when Rose’s husband Bert returns from his trip. While he does not even acknowledge the presence of the blind negro at first, he suddenly – and without explanation – “*strikes the NEGRO, knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times*”. As Bert simply walks away, the negro lies still and Rose, who seems to have suddenly gone blind, “*stands clutching her eyes*” (*Plays One* 126) – their violated, dysfunctional bodies constitute the final statement of the play.

The violence in Ionesco’s *The Lesson* is, perhaps, not as unexpected within the context of the play as it is in the examples mentioned above. But, in contrast to Beckett and Pinter, whose stage directions indicate a realistic depiction of violence, the major violent incident in the play is a stylised one. Thus, the professor threatens and ultimately kills the pupil with an imaginary knife. That the imaginary nature of this knife is meant to be clearly understood by the audience is indicated by stage directions such as “*he goes quickly to the drawer and finds a big imaginary knife; he takes hold of it and brandishes it exultantly*” (Ionesco, *Plays I* 31) or “*still brandishing his invisible knife*” (33). Of course, the imaginary nature of the weapon draws all the attention to the gestures and movement of the actors. As everyday logic has been displaced, the only way of knowing whether the weapon has had an effect is by observing the body’s reaction – which is quite expressive in Ionesco: after the first thrust of the knife, the pupil “*falls, crumpling into an immodest position on the chair [...] her legs apart and hanging on either side of it*” (33). A similarly expressive image of stylised violence occurs in Pinter’s *The Birthday party*, when, after a blackout, we see Stanley bent over Lulu, who is lying spread-eagled on the table (*Plays One* 75). Apart from being obviously stylised, this incident is also striking as it practically occurs out of the blue: Stanley has, so far, only been perceived as a victim threatened by Goldberg and McCann. The image of Stanley raping Lulu is preceded by what one might regard as another instance of stylised violence: just before the

blackout, the group are playing a game, blindfolding each other with a scarf. When it is Stanley's turn, McCann takes away his glasses and breaks them. With the scarf over his eyes, Stanley is now completely blind, and the others watch as he walks into his birthday present, the drum which McCann has put into his way on purpose (73). In the light of the police-like questioning and the threats which occur earlier in the play, the breaking of Stanley's glasses and the additional blindfolding amount almost to a stylised form of actual blinding. In addition to the stylization effect, the relatively long duration of the sequence enhances the focus on the body affected by the violence. It is the image of Stanley's violated and now dysfunctional body moving slowly across the stage which dominates this sequence.

As we have seen, two tendencies can be observed when it comes to physical violence in absurdist plays. First of all, particular attention tends to be drawn to the violent act itself, as the reasons and motivations remain unexplained – the only thing which remains is the fact of the violence. Secondly, there are instances in which the author demands that the violence be stylised, which draws particular attention to the bodies involved. On the whole, instances of physical violence appear to be rather isolated in absurdist plays - repetition and accumulation of violent acts hardly occur.

In in-er-face theatre, the situation is, obviously, different. From the very beginning, in-er-face plays have been notorious for their numerous and graphic depictions of physical violence. Designations which are directing the attention to this aspect of the new drama – like, for example, “Neo Jacobean”, “new brutalism” or “Blood and sperm generation” (Sierz, *Interview* 142/143) - have been flourishing, and so have comments by irritated and outraged reviewers. It can, of course, not be denied that stage violence plays an important role in in-er-face theatre. However, Aleks Sierz himself, whose account has done a lot to enhance the image of the 1990s British drama as a theatre dominated by violence, has reconsidered his own focus on this particular aspect. Thus, in an interview from July 2003 he acknowledges: “[...] perhaps I overstated the most superficial aspects of the new sensibility – bad language and explicit acts of sex and violence. [...] Nowadays, I talk more about sensibility and emotion than about sex and violence” (Sierz, *Interview* 144). Keeping this in mind, we may begin to consider staged physical violence not as the central (thematic and stylistic) concern of in-er-face theatre but on a more formal level, with regard to its implications for a staging of the body.

The most obvious play to begin with is certainly Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*. Famously, in this play, heroine is injected in a person's eye, arms and legs are being cut off, people are being beaten, breasts and a penis are being amputated and stitched onto other bodies and so on – the play's synopsis reads like a random enumeration of cruelties. Such an accumulation of violent acts, however, contributes to putting the body itself at the centre of attention, as can be deduced from a comment reviewer Sarah Hemming made on the occasion of the premiere of *Blasted* (which contains a catalogue of atrocities similar to that of *Cleansed*). In her review, she states that the "catalogue of horrors works against itself and finally becomes absurd" (qtd. in Piribauer 140). Whether one approves of this 'absurdity' or not, the use of the word 'absurd' clearly indicates that the accumulation of violence is disrupting any (traditional) meaning-producing dramatic framework in which the body might be embedded. Without this context, then, the body itself emerges as the meaning. It is, of course, also the lack of information about the characters and their motivation which contributes to focussing attention on the violence and the body itself. Thus, Rubik notes how Kane "concentrates on neither the victims nor the torturer and his motivation, but on the act of torture itself" - with the result that Carl, whose body Tinker dismembers bit by bit, for unknown reasons – "is turned into an absurd object, not a human being we feel for" (135). Here again, the word "absurd" seems to refer to the way in which, through unmotivated, unexplained violence, the body is dislocated from its traditional role in the drama to become a silent object which may only express itself in its physicality. While Kane could hardly have drawn the inspiration for the repetition and accumulation of violent acts from absurdist plays, the lack of motivation and explanation of the violence in her plays are reminiscent of Beckett and Pinter.

On one level, then, the body is effectively staged in *Cleansed* through the violence which is executed frequently and by a character whose motivations remain entirely in the dark. On another level, the body becomes a central means of expression because the violence exerted against it is presented in a stylised way, as in Ionesco or Pinter. Kane's stage directions, for example, require that bodies be moved by invisible forces, which automatically focuses attention on the physical aspect of the actor's body. This is the case in the scenes where Carl and Grace are being beaten by "an unseen group of men" (Kane 116/130) and both their bodies are supposed to react as if they were receiving blows. Other instances of bodies moved by invisible forces are Rod falling

from a great height, landing on the floor next to Carl (117) and the view of Grace's body during electro shock treatment. Here, "**Tinker drops Grace's hand. An electric current is switched on. Grace's body is thrown into rigid shock [...]**" (135). While the examples mentioned so far openly demand a stylised representation, the stylization of violence is rather implicit in other stage directions, namely the ones which are 'unperformable'. Thus, it is clearly impossible to stage the amputation of arms and legs, the cutting off of a tongue or rats carrying away severed body parts in a convincing way. Different directors have found different solutions for this problem<sup>36</sup>, but as in Ionesco's murder scene with the invisible knife, we ultimately depend on the body's reaction to understand what has happened.

Violence also seems very present in *The Pitchfork Disney*, but in contrast to Kane, Ridley prefers to have it narrated rather than performed on stage (Piribauer 136). As in absurdist theatre, then, the violence involving actual bodies on stage is reduced to an isolated incident which, in this case, occurs at the end of the play: Presley breaks Cosmo's finger after he has caught him gratifying himself by having Haley suck his finger in her sleep. While Presley's motivation in this case is obvious, the violence is striking because it is unexpected: similar to Stanley who is terrorised by Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*, Presley has been manipulated by Cosmo throughout the play and has come across as the timid and passive victim of an intruder. Right before he grabs his finger, Cosmo still makes fun of him and seems to dominate the situation. The sudden burst into action on Presley's part, then, draws particular attention to the act itself. An additional focus on the physical aspect of the situation is created through a – rather realistic – deference of the actual breaking of the finger:

COSMO. Let me go ... Don't touch ... Ah ... Don't ...

*Falls to his knees.*

PRESLEY. Oh, you're scared now, eh?

COSMO. No!

PRESLEY Tell me you're scared.

*Twists Cosmo's finger.*

COSMO. Ahh!

PRESLEY. Tell me you're scared.

COSMO. Ahh ...no.

PRESLEY. Say it ...! Say it ...! Say it ...!

*Pause.*

COSMO. I'm scared.

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<sup>36</sup> The Royal Court production of *Cleansed*, for example, used red ribbons to symbolise severed limbs (Rubik 133).



*Presley breaks Cosmo's finger. A sickening crack. Cosmo screams and stares at his hand. (Ridley 105)*

If the fact of Presley taking control of the situation is in itself surprising, it is even more irritating that in the end, he actually breaks Cosmo's finger although he finally admits that he is scared. Also, Presley's demand that Cosmo admit his fear is not directly related to his taking advantage of the sleeping Haley, which, ultimately, removes any direct motivation for the violence and reveals it to be gratuitous, irrational and, within the dramatic framework, self-referential.

The violated body also features prominently in Butterworth's *Mojo*. Here, the idea of a human body cut in two halves and stored in two dustbins hovers permanently over the action, if only by verbal reference. Two central incidents of onstage violence occur at the end of the play, act two scene two, where Baby has strung up Silver Johnny upside down in the middle of the room (Butterworth 66-76) and then shoots Skinny in the head (78). One aspect which makes the violence in these scenes so disturbing is, once again, its gratuitousness, the lack of motivation behind it<sup>37</sup>. Thus, we do not know why Silver Johnny is being tortured by Baby – he has, so far, seemed to be the victim of abduction by Mr. Ross, and his complicity in the scheme is only revealed as the scene advances. Also, Baby's reaction to the naïve and whiny verbal outbreak of the clueless Skinny seems grossly out of proportion:

SKINNY. [...] Shut your fucking mouth, Jew. You don't belong here. You've got no place here. None of us want you. You're nasty and you lie. We've all had enough. Take your lies somewhere else.

*BABY walks across the room with the Derringer, puts it to Skinny's head and fires once. (78)*

While the acts of violence in *Mojo* are presented realistically, an element which contributes to focussing our attention particularly on the bodies involved in the violence is the duration of both sequences. Silver Johnny, for example, spends ten long pages silently hanging upside down while other characters enter and, for some time, do not even realise he is there. It is certainly the grotesque length of his silent suffering which makes him, as Sierz puts it, look "less like a star than a piece of meat" (*In-Yer-Face* 163). Similarly, the grotesquely drawn out process of Skinny's

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<sup>37</sup> This aspect has been taken up by many critics on the occasion of the premiere of *Mojo* at the Royal Court Theatre. Shaun Usher from the *Daily Mail*, for example, talks about "violence springing from nowhere" (956) and others mention the inconsistency of Baby's behaviour, "one minute discoursing on the beauties of the countryside, the next minute shooting a man who irritates him" (Church 954) or his "unpredictable combination of suicidal foolhardiness and native cunning" (Shuttleworth 955).

dying – he continues talking for a whole page after he has been shot in the head – turns him into an absurd object. With Skinny commenting on the disintegration of his own body, and with the audience knowing that he is practically dead, we no longer perceive him as a character we feel for but, rather, as a talking body – something we can, ultimately, laugh at.

On the whole, then, the violence in in-*yer-face* plays certainly supports a staging of the body – mainly by appearing as gratuitous, unexpected and unexplained. However, frequent or repeated occurrence of violence in some of the plays, the variety of different, most bizarre acts of cruelty and their rather realistic depiction set them apart from the isolated and comparably ‘simple’ acts of violence in absurdist theatre. In in-*yer-face* plays, then, violence constitutes a central theme rather than a formal theatrical device for staging the body. Also, it assumes a provocative, sensationalist quality which is missing in absurdist plays. Of course, sensation created through exaggeration in realism and graphic depiction as it occurs in in-*yer-face* plays may contribute to freeing the body in its physicality from the context of the traditional theatrical situation, but this approach clearly differs from the more quiet one of absurdist, who rely on surprising, isolated incidents and stylization.

Another possibility of staging the body on the level of interacting bodies is the depiction of sexual interaction on stage. I am mentioning this aspect briefly here because such graphic depictions are quite common in in-*yer-face* plays. They do, however, not feature very prominently in the theatre of the absurd. In fact, they do not play any role in Beckett’s plays. In the early plays of Ionesco and Pinter, any kind of sexual interaction is hinted at only in a highly stylised way and, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, mostly connected to violence<sup>38</sup>. Sex is hinted at very directly, of course, in Genet’s *The Balcony*, but even in this play, set in a brothel, there is no actual simulation of a sexual act. As a matter of fact, in the intimate scenes at the beginning of the play there is hardly any physical contact between the prostitutes and the customers at all. Just like physical violence, however, the effectiveness of sexual interaction as a means of staging the body depends on its actual, graphic simulation on stage. As such open simulations occur only in in-*yer-face* plays, it would be redundant to consider them in this comparative analysis. A detailed consideration of in-*yer-face* plays with regard to onstage simulation of sex as a means of staging the body, however, might yield interesting results – especially if one were to further

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<sup>38</sup> See the descriptions of violence in *The Lesson* and *The Birthday Party* on pages 77/78 above.

apply Baudrillard's theories, in which he establishes a strong link between sex and the violated, destroyed body<sup>39</sup>.

### **7.3. Routines and Rituals**

A body might also be effectively staged through physical activities other than violence or sex. In order to be effective, such activities must have certain qualities, which, I suggest, are implied by the concepts of 'routine' and 'ritual'. Routine is generally defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as "a regular course or procedure, an unvarying performance of certain acts" or, more specifically, "a set sequence in a performance, esp. a dance, comedy act etc" (1051) and ritual as "a procedure regularly followed" (1040). One such required quality, then, is the repetition of a relatively fixed progression of movements or actions. An additional quality which is also implied by the concepts of routine and rituals is the lack of motivation behind the physical activity: routines and ritual are, by definition, self-sufficient: they are fixed in their progression, and do not depend on impulses or reasons provided by a larger (dramatic) context. If we take a look at the famous hat-switching routine in *Waiting for Godot*, it becomes obvious how the qualities implied by routine and ritual enhance the staging of the body: on the level of dramatic plot, Vladimir's activity makes no sense whatsoever. The pointless repetition of a sequence of actions - Vladimir taking off his hat, handing it over to Estragon, putting on Lucky's hat etc. (Beckett, *Complete* 67) - can only be understood visually, as a stage image constituted by a body handling an object.

Routines and ritualised physical activities, which are often inextricably linked to the handling of certain props, play an important role in the theatre of the absurd. As a matter of fact, they contribute greatly to the production of the haunting stage images which are characteristic of absurdist plays<sup>40</sup>. Apart from the famous hat-switching routine in *Waiting for Godot*, there is, for example, Clov's spectacular looking-out-of-the window routine in *Endgame*, which starts off the play and is repeated, with variations, two times later in the play (105/128). Here, the stage image involves

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<sup>39</sup> In his discussion of J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash*, for example, Baudrillard talks about the "semiurgy of contusions, scars, mutilations, wounds that are so many new sexual organs opened on the body"; to him, it is only the wounded body, wounded through either sex or violence, which - as a sign, at least - has a reality (114). If one transfers these thoughts to the theatre, the depiction of sexual activity on stage might be regarded as a further possibility for staging the body.

<sup>40</sup> Thus, Esslin mentions over and over the importance of the physical and visual aspects of performance in the theatre of the absurd, claiming that it tends "toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage" (*Th. o. Abs.* 26). Also, it is certainly no coincidence that Genet likes to call his scenes "tableaux".

Clov's body interacting with the two central objects of a step-ladder and a telescope. The explicit focus on the physical activity is (as in the hat-switching routine) already highlighted on the level of the play's text, where Beckett includes extensive stage directions which specify Clov's every move:

*[...] He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left. He goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes six steps [for example] towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over [...]* (92)

Other routines in Beckett involving particular objects include, for example, Hamm's constant fumbling with his handkerchief or the toy dog and the driving about the room in the wheelchair in *Endgame* but also Estragon's recurring struggle with his (or somebody else's) boots and the whole procedure of Pozzo and Lucky entering and leaving the stage –which is accurately laid out in extensive and accurate stage directions - in *Godot*.

While Beckett, once again, goes for extremes in producing purely physical routines, other absurdist authors, too, create memorable images by introducing ritualized activities. Thus, Ionesco's *The Chairs* is dominated by the objects referred to in the play's title – the dominant image of the play is that of the old man and woman carrying chairs unto the stage. The importance of this activity in the play's overall conception is, again, suggested by the way in which accurate stage directions concerning the fetching of the chairs permanently disrupt the dialogue in the dramatic text.

If Beckett and Ionesco focus on the repetition of certain activities, Genet, in *The Balcony* seems to focus on a larger context, producing rituals which not only include a fixed set of movements but a fixed set of actions. With rituals stretching over whole scenes, Genet is not as accurate and specific in defining particular movements, but the ritualised quality of the action becomes obvious bit by bit through the dialogue, when, for example, the general asks: "and spurs: will I have spurs? I asked for my boots to have spurs. [...]" (Genet 97). Also, the fourth tableau contains stage directions which are slightly more extensive than in the other scenes and clearly suggest that in each scene between a prostitute and a customer, a physical routine is to be performed which - where the stage directions are less accurate - must be developed by the director:

*The Girl has taken on an exaggeratedly haughty and cruel manner. She squeezes the wig onto his head roughly. The little Old Man takes a small bouquet of artificial flowers from his pocket. He holds it as if he were about to offer it to the Girl who lashes him and snatches it from him with a flick of the whip. [...]* (103)

Whatever the differences are between the routines and rituals presented in the absurdist plays, all of them command attention for the bodies involved. Clov repeatedly looking out of the window at a never-changing world outside; the old couple dragging chairs on to the stage for no one; the prostitutes acting out the ever same fantasies of their customers to turn them on – these activities are pointless and without dramatic motivation if we consider their actual (non)contribution to a logical, linear development of the plot. They remain self-referential and must, ultimately, be understood as images composed of objects and bodies.

At first sight, routines and rituals seem to be way less important in in-*yer-face* theatre. As in absurdist plays, however, certain props achieve higher-than-average prominence, and in-*yer-face* theatre, too, has been characterised as producing memorable stage images: Sierz, for example, states that in in-*yer-face* theatre, “unbearable pain was summed up in one unforgettable image” (*In-Yer-Face* 233) and that it “imprinted indelible images of human suffering” (239). Although he focuses on images of pain and suffering, the implied importance of visible stage images suggests that special attention is paid to the particular quality of physical activity on stage. I would like to suggest here that routines and rituals do occur in in-*yer-face* plays but, similar to the rituals featured in Genet’s *The Balcony*, are not necessarily referred to by extensive and detailed stage directions. They are, thus, harder to uncover on the level of the play’s text alone.

In *Mojo*, for example, there are no stage directions which specify explicitly a routine of swallowing pills. However, the fact that the pills are constantly mentioned throughout the first act and that Potts and Sweets try to excuse Baby’s aggressive behaviour (he is threatening Skinny with a cutlass) very casually by blaming it on the frequent consummation of pills – “Look, this sprung from, you know, from circumstances. Game of Cards. Few drinks. Few laughs. Few pills” (Butterworth 16) – implies a habit of drug-taking. In order to bring out what is contained in the dialogue, therefore, an actual staging of the play will have to come up with a visible,

physical routine that goes with swallowing the pills<sup>41</sup>. Similarly, the beer drinking routine of Jaye and Tilly in Nagy's *Weldon Rising* is mostly established through dialogue, where it is very frequently referred to via statements such as "Do we have any more beer? I drink too much beer" (Nagy, *Plays* 6) or "Hi. I'm Tilly. This is Jaye. And this is our beer [...]" (27). It is, however, also supported by short stage directions specifying, for example, that "empty beer bottles are scattered around them" (5). On the whole, *Weldon Rising* does not feature such extensive or accurate stage directions as they occur, for example, in Beckett, but the pointlessness and repeated occurrence of certain activities specified in short stage directions characterise these as routines anyway. Thus, Nagy has Natty sit in front of a washing stand and mirror in most of his scenes, where he is repeatedly occupied with dousing himself in cologne (5, 31) or handling postcards attached to the mirror (17, 26). Marcel on the other hand is "meticulously washing out a pair of pantyhose in a ceramic basin" (5) at the beginning of the play and continues this routine later on, taking "many pantyhose from his purse", washing them carefully (20). The ritualized, repetitive nature of these activities is later exposed in a scene where the characters switch their respective routines:

*Empty beer bottles and cans scattered everywhere. Natty has taken to cutting Marcel's pantyhose into tiny pieces. Marcel sits in the shopping cart. He drinks beer. Jaye spins him around in circles. Tilly sits among the remnants of the broken cologne bottles. She takes shards of glass and dabs them to her wrists, her neck, any pulse point she can find. (37)*

Nick Grosso's stage directions in *Kosher Harry* are also not very extensive and mostly distributed in tiny bits all over the text, focussing on small details such as looks, gestures and facial expressions. However, there is a central physical routine which Grosso specifies in the stage directions: whenever the waitress decides to take orders from the other characters, she "*raises her short skirt to reveal her thigh and releases a small note pad from inside a garter strap then a pencil from behind her ear*" (25). This routine with the waitress showing off her body occurs, with minor variations, four more times later on in the play (43, 61, 80, 103) and is responsible for a major comic effect.

While the in-yer-face authors discussed so far imply routines via dialogue or specify them in relatively short stage directions, Sarah Kane is, once again, closest to Beckett

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<sup>41</sup> This, it seems, was the case in the first production of *Mojo* at the Royal Court theatre. Thus, seven out of the fourteen reviews assembled in the *Theatre Record* recalled Sweets and Potts mainly as being a pair of "pill-popping" crooks (Rev. of *Mojo*, 1995).

in her approach to this aspect. Not only are violent physical interactions so frequent and accurately specified in *Cleansed* that Saunders speaks of a “ritualised cruelty” (91); as Beckett does for his hat-switching routine, Kane also uses more than a whole page to describe how Tinker feeds Robin the whole box of chocolates he has bought for Grace:

[...]  
 TINKER *throws him another [piece of chocolate].*  
 ROBIN *eats it.*  
 TINKER *throws him another.*  
 ROBIN *eats it.*  
 TINKER *throws him another.*  
 ROBIN *eats it.*  
 TINKER *throws him another.*  
 ROBIN *eats it.*  
 [...] (Kane 139)

Although it would be perfectly sufficient to describe the tossing-and-eating process once, Kane repeats the same instructions over and over, drawing attention to importance of the physical representation of this mechanical process. Like Beckett, she demands an abstract routine via meticulous stage directions.

In spite of the fact that they are less noticeable on the level of the text alone, in-*yer-face* theatre can be said to feature physical routines. Generally, the activities constituting these routines are less abstract and more integrated into the dramatic context. Thus, beer-drinking and pill-popping certainly are more common everyday activities than hat-switching and chair-preparing for invisible guests. Also, most activities evolve logically from the respective context: the drug taking seems quite appropriate for the 50s Soho nightclub milieu, beer drinking is such a common activity that it would not, normally, have to be discussed at all. At the same time, however, these activities are being repeated so frequently in the in-*yer-face* plays that they lose any actual function with regard to furthering the plot or defining the characters. Ultimately, they end up being routines: referring back to themselves and the bodies performing them – as do many of the staged activities in the theatre of the absurd.

## 8. Language and dialogue

### **8.1. The absurdity of ordinary speech**

Language and dialogue in absurdist theatre, especially in Pinter's early plays, often seem to imitate a kind of colloquial small talk. Sentences tend to be short, often no longer than a single line, and the syntactic structure is simple, even elliptical. The different characters' lines often have the same length, which, in combination with their general shortness, results in quick exchanges characteristic of everyday small-talk. More specific features of natural conversation are also reproduced. Particularly Pinter, as Esslin notes, has a

clinically accurate ear for the absurdity of ordinary speech [which] enables him to transcribe everyday conversation in all its repetitiveness, incoherence, and lack of logic or grammar [...] the dialogue of Pinter's plays is a casebook of the whole gamut of *non sequiturs* in small talk [...] [it] follows a line of associative thinking in which sound regularly prevails over sense. (*Th. o. Abs.* 243/244)

All this, of course, sounds like a highly mimetic approach to dialogue, which Pinter actually seems to confirm when he expresses his desire to let his characters articulate themselves naturally and not according to any dramatic convention. Thus, he states that his job as an author is "not to impose upon them [the characters], not to subject them to false articulation, by which I mean forcing a character to speak where he could not speak or making him speak of what he could never speak" (Pinter qtd. in Pfister 121). However, as Wallis and Shepherd note, all dramatic dialogue can only be a representation of social conversation, and within this representation, "the unwritten rules operate in a more condensed more efficient way". They see Pinter as an artist who exploits these rules and pushes his dialogue "into bigger, clearer shapes to the point that the artifice becomes delightfully clear" (55). This view on Pinter's dialogue ties in with Pfister's, who comments that a closer analysis of the plays exposes aesthetic patterns which contradict Pinter's claim to straightforward realism (121).

From this point of view, then, everyday speech can be seen as a basis for a dramatic dialogue in absurdist theatre. Each absurdist playwright, it seems, develops his own aesthetic of language from this basis. While Pinter often remains very close to realistic dialogue, Beckett is more radical, pushing towards extreme minimalism, exposing the bare bones of the language. Ionesco, especially in *The Bald Primadonna*, likes to exaggerate the use of clichéd phrases, using whole dialogue passages and



arguments from textbooks, which results in a more expansive style and longer sentences. Still, what lies at the bottom is the structure of everyday small-talk, no matter in what direction the individual authors prefer to stretch the basic features in order to arrive at their own particular pattern of dramatic dialogue. This will become more obvious when we start looking at features of ordinary everyday speech in concrete text passages.

Before going into detail about the presence of these features in absurdist plays, however, it seems necessary to mention that – as critical commentary suggests - the dialogue in in-*yer-face* plays, too, is very close to ordinary everyday conversation. Thus, Sierz mentions that “nineties drama usually has curt televisual dialogue” (*In-Yer-Face* 243) - the television reference suggesting that the dialogue is, at least, not meant to be in any way artful or sophisticated but tends to be conceived realistically. Piribauer, in her chapter on language and style, states right away that in-*yer-face* dialogue is “colloquial, simple and fairly rooted in slang” and that “none of the protagonists uses difficult, sophisticated words or elaborate sentences [...]” (152). Moreover, with regard to language, she acknowledges “a remarkable influence” of the theatre of the absurd, especially Pinter’s early work, on Sarah Kane and Philip Ridley’s plays, and the idiosyncratic features of Pinteresque dialogue she mentions recall the condensed characteristics of ordinary conversation as pointed out by Esslin (*Th. o. Abs.* 161). Finally, Phyllis Nagy, herself an author of the in-*yer-face* generation, holds the view that the dialogue she writes is strongly based in reality:

I’m writing naturalism the way I know it. This is the way people speak and have conversations. They don’t answer questions fully and speak in interior monologues to themselves – unless they’re insane. It makes me angry when certain plays are held up as paragons of naturalistic writing, when they actually bear no relationship to any thought pattern or speech patterning I’ve ever encountered. I think I’m writing naturally and those people aren’t. People are elliptical; we’re associative (*Interview* 20)

Of course, the same argument which can be made with regard to Pinter’s claim to producing naturalistic dialogue can be made here: since dramatic dialogue is always produced by a writer, it is necessarily a construction and can never be entirely naturalistic or mimetic. It seems, therefore, likely that in in-*yer-face* plays, too, the naturalism of everyday speech turns into an aesthetic concept of dialogue where the characteristics of small talk are employed in an exaggerated manner, ultimately exposing the artifice of the dialogue.

### 8.1.1. Elliptical patterns

I have already mentioned that the prime feature of ordinary speech is the shortness and syntactical simplicity of utterances, in short, its very economical style. This economy is due to elliptical patterns which operate, on the one hand, on a syntactic level, through an omission of certain words or phrases. On the other hand, however, elliptical patterns may also determine other levels of dialogue: as Nagy claims, people on the whole are elliptical and associative, in their thinking and reasoning. In small-talk, where no important point or argument has to be made, these elliptical thought structures surface. For an analysis of dramatic dialogue which builds on the structures of small talk, then, we have to extend our understanding of ellipsis from a merely syntactical concept to include the levels of content and context: if the dialogue is elliptical, this also means that certain bits of information or references and whole sentences which would be necessary to make sense of a subsequent utterance are simply omitted. As a matter of fact, most of the idiosyncratic features of Pinteresque dialogue mentioned by Piribauer, such as people changing subjects abruptly, talking at cross purposes, refusals to answer questions and non-sequiturs (161) can be summarised under this extended concept of ellipsis. It is these elliptical patterns which are responsible for much of the incoherence in everyday talk which Esslin refers to when talking about Pinter's dialogue and, as a consequence, for the fact that typical absurdist dialogue often seems to consist of "incoherent babblings" (*Th. o. Abs.* 22).

Being modelled after everyday talk, dialogue in absurdist plays thrives on the condensed reproduction of elliptical patterns. Thus, Beckett's linguistic minimalism is a result of omitting words or phrases but also whole thought processes:

VLADIMIR. [...] Well?

ESTRAGON. Nothing.

VLADIMIR. Show.

ESTRAGON. There's nothing to show.

VLADIMIR. Try and put it on again.

ESTRAGON. [*Examining his foot.*] I'll air it for a bit.

VLADIMIR. There's man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet. [*He takes off his hat again, peers inside it, feels about inside it, knocks on the crown, blows into it, puts it on again.*] This is getting alarming. [*Silence. Vladimir deep in thought, ESTRAGON pulling at his toes.*] One of the thieves was saved. [*Pause.*] It's a reasonable percentage. [*Pause.*] Gogo.

ESTRAGON. What?

VLADIMIR. Suppose we repented.

ESTRAGON. Repented what?

VLADIMIR. Oh... [*He reflects.*] We wouldn't have to go into the details.  
 ESTRAGON. Our being born?  
 [VLADIMIR *breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.*]  
 VLADIMIR. One daren't even laugh any more.  
 ESTRAGON. Dreadful privation.  
 VLADIMIR. Merely smile. [*He smiles suddenly from ear to ear, keeps smiling, ceases as suddenly.*] It's not the same thing. Nothing to be done.  
 [...] (Beckett, *Complete* 13)

Obviously, in this dialogue, it is not only the syntactic structure of the one- or two-word sentences which is elliptical but also the structure of the whole dialogue. Vladimir, for example, switches from "this is getting alarming", which refers to his hat, to the biblical reference of "one of the thieves was saved". However, since the thoughts behind this transition are not verbally uttered, the dialogue itself remains elliptical and incoherent to the listener, who mainly registers a very abrupt change in reference and topic. Also, due to the elliptical syntax and the fact that Vladimir, again, changes the topic, it remains unclear whether Estragon's "dreadful privation" refers to the fact of being born or to the fact that one cannot even laugh anymore. In contrast to Beckett, Pinter tends to be less metaphysical in the overall conception of his plays as well as in the topics which are discussed by the characters; also, he does not push his language quite as far towards minimalism as Beckett, which makes his dialogues seem closer to natural conversation. Still, he relishes the subtle exaggeration of elliptical patterns of speech, as the following example from *The Dumb Waiter* shows:

GUS. [...] (*He catches sight of a picture on the wall.*) Hello, what's this?  
 (*Peering at it.*) 'The First Eleven.' Cricketers. You seen this, Ben?  
 BEN. (*reading*). What?  
 GUS. The first eleven.  
 BEN. What?  
 GUS. There's a photo here of the first eleven.  
 BEN. What first eleven?  
 GUS. (*Studying the photo*). It doesn't say.  
 BEN. What about that tea?  
 GUS. They all look a bit old to me. (Pinter, *Plays One* 133)

Again, the dialogue does not only include ellipsis on a syntactic level, consisting of very short and simple sentences. It is also determined by the fact that an incomplete sentence like Gus' "the first eleven" does not provide enough information, so that Ben has to ask "what", the first "what" itself being a very unspecific question which might refer to Gus' "you seen this, Ben" in the sense of "what should I have seen" but

might also refer directly to “the first eleven” in the sense of “what kind of eleven”. In the end, the two guys are talking at cross-purposes, with Ben referring to making the tea - which is an unexpectedly quick change of topic - and Gus continuing to talk about the picture, which prevents him from answering Ben’s question. This accumulation of ellipses on various levels makes this short bit of dialogue seem rather incoherent to the listener.

Another interesting aspect which is exemplified in the two bits of dialogue quoted above is the frequent use of the word “what”. Taking a closer look at both Beckett’s and Pinter’s early plays, one realises that “what”-questions occur with a high frequency in the dialogue. This is not surprising, if we consider the elliptical nature of most of the dialogue – after all, a what-question usually implies that one dialogue partner cannot follow the other’s line of argument or hasn’t understood what the other person is referring to. Thus, we might regard the frequent occurrence of what-questions as a central feature of elliptical dialogue.

While Beckett and Pinter like to push elliptical patterns to the point of making dialogues seem incoherent when one reads over them quickly, it is usually possible to make sense of them on reading the respective passage a second or third time, or on hearing it spoken in performance, since vocal inflection does a lot to specify the exact meaning and reference of one or two-word utterances. Hardly ever does the dialogue dissolve into complete incoherence, at least, not in Pinter’s and Beckett’s early plays. This kind of dissolution of dialogue, with elliptical patterning being brought to its extreme conclusion, can be found at the end of Ionesco’s *The Bald Primadonna*. Here, the dialogue actually consists of nothing more than incoherent babblings:

MRS SMITH. Cock, you’re fowling us.  
 MR MARTIN. I’d rather lay an egg than steal an ox.  
 MR SMITH. Mucky duck.  
 MRS MARTIN. Ah! Oh! Ah! Oh! Stop grinding my teeth.  
 (Ionesco, *Plays 1* 117)

In-*yer-face* plays do not contain dialogue as completely incoherent as Ionesco’s. They are more in line with Pinter and Beckett, pushing ‘natural’ elliptical patterns to extremes. Still, their style is linguistically even more reduced. This is particularly obvious in Butterworth’s *Mojo*: the dialogue of the play has immediately been connected to Pinter and Beckett by several reviewers<sup>42</sup> but it has also been noted for

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<sup>42</sup>Thus, Sierz claims that “the virtuosity of Butterworth’s language games is reminiscent of Mamet and Pinter [...]” but also of Absurd drama in general (*In-Yer-Face* 162) and Robert Hewison from the

its insane speed, references to which abound in the reviews. Thus, there is talk of the “high-octane dialogue” (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 163), “quick-fire patter” which “throws out jokes like confetti” (Church 954), “speed-fuelled, foul-mouthed chatter” (Shuttleworth 955), “rapid-fire dialogue” (Smith 956) or “a verbal St Vitus’s dance” (Kellaway 956). Here is an example from the beginning, which already sets the tone for the rest of the play. Sweets and Potts are sitting about, drinking tea.

SWEETS. Is that brewed?  
 POTTS. Four minutes.  
 SWEETS. You want a pill?  
 POTTS. My piss is black.  
 SWEETS. It’s the white ones. Don’t eat no more of the white ones. (*Pause.*)  
     So where is he sitting?  
 POTTS. Who?  
 SWEETS. Mr. Ross.  
 POTTS. He’s on the couch.  
 SWEETS. Right.  
 POTTS. Mr. Ross is on the couch.  
 SWEETS. Good. How is he?  
 POTTS. What?  
 SWEETS. Good mood, bad mood, quiet, jolly, upfront, offhand. Paint me a picture.  
 POTTS. Tan suit. No Tie. Penny Loafers. No tassle.  
 SWEETS. Uh-huh. Right. Does he look flush?  
 POTTS. He’s Mr. Ross.  
 SWEETS. Absolutely.  
 POTTS. He’s a flush man.  
 SWEETS. Naturally. (Butterworth 3)

Obviously, Butterworth’s dialogue builds on elliptical patterns on several levels, as do Beckett’s and Pinter’s<sup>43</sup>. This is indicated by the one-word utterances and the characteristic “what” (or “who”)-question in the middle of the passage. Especially in the beginning and the end of the passage, there are some abrupt changes of subject and questions are not being answered: thus, the topic of discussion changes within the first four lines from tea to pills and their effect on the human body. The question whether Mr. Ross looks flush, then, is not answered by a yes or no but countered by another statement the meaning of which is only revealed in the subsequent lines. On the whole, Butterworth’s dialogue is more reduced than Beckett’s or Pinter’s: he includes less pregnant pauses or physical activities as fillers between rapid changes of

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*Sunday Times* notes that “the verbal menace of Pinter” collides with the physical violence of Tarantino in *Mojo* (954).

<sup>43</sup> The tendency towards elliptical patterns has not escaped the notice of reviewers: Usher from the *Daily Mail*, for example, describes the dialogue in *Mojo* as characterised by “stream-of-consciousness chatter and dazzling non-sequiturs” (956) and Kellaway as consisting of “surreal cobbling and gobbled words” (956).

subject and his sentences are even shorter and more elliptical in their structure. This is what makes his dialogue so incredibly fast and which has most probably caused reviewer Kate Kellaway to describe *Mojo* as being somewhat like “Beckett on speed”<sup>44</sup>.

While Butterworth relies very much on the speed of the exchange, Nick Grosso’s dialogue is a little slower but also exposes the absurdity of ordinary speech impressively by relishing elliptical patterns. The point of departure for the following conversation is Paul McCartney:

WAITRESS. what about him anyway  
 MAN. well you know his youngest  
 WAITRESS. stella  
 MAN. mary  
 WAITRESS. the fashion guru  
 MAN. that’s stella  
 WAITRESS. i know  
 MAN. well she went to my school  
 WAITRESS. where  
 MAN. just around the corner here  
 WAITRESS. happy times was they sir  
 MAN. (*checks*) what  
 WAITRESS. well  
 MAN. (*stares back at Waitress nonplussed*) i was fine at school thanks for asking  
 WAITRESS. no i thought you may have been a tad unpopular  
 MAN. (*scoffs dismissively*) why would you  
 WAITRESS. bcos you’re on your own sir  
 MAN. i like dining alone so what  
 WAITRESS. so she went there so what then this stella then  
 MAN. mary  
 WAITRESS. that’s the one  
 MAN. well her dad coulda sent her anywhere  
 WAITRESS. cheapskate  
 MAN. what  
 WAITRESS. so he lumbered the state  
 MAN. no no you don’t get it  
 WAITRESS. i bet she got free dinners (Grosso 11/12)

While the dialogue bit from *Mojo* is reminiscent of Beckett, Grosso’s seems closer to Pinter, since he includes an element of opposition between the characters. Instead of supporting each other or talking about the same topic, as Vladimir and Estragon and Sweets and Potts mostly do, the waitress and the man seem to be talking at cross-purposes, as do Ben and Gus in the example quoted above. Thus, the waitress changes the topic abruptly within a single sentence. She jumps from a discussion of

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<sup>44</sup> See full quote on page 11 above.

Stella (or Mary) McCartney to a hint that the Man-character was unpopular at school. She then changes back to the original topic but does not seem to listen to what the man has to say and suddenly throws in her theory of Paul McCartney being a “cheapskate”, lumbering the state. These abrupt changes of topic elicit the typical and mandatory what-questions which, actually, occur with inflationary frequency in *Kosher Harry*. The abruptness of the changes is also caused by the very short sentences: the references and connection to what was said before of minimal utterances like “the fashion guru” or “cheapskate” cannot be immediately determined. Significantly, and in contrast to the absurdists or other in-er-face writers, punctuation is omitted entirely in Grosso’s play, which transfers the feeling of the elliptical style of ordinary conversation onto the page: periods, question marks, commas or the capitalization of letters to mark the beginning of a sentence can at least point to inflectional patterns which might help decipher the meaning of elliptical utterances. The omission of punctuation, then, brings the reproduction of elliptical speech patterns in plays to its visual fulfilment in the printed text.

Sarah Kane, too, abandons punctuation, most obviously in her final play, 4.48 *Psychosis* but there are also passages in *Cleansed* where she does so. Of all in-er-face writers, her style is the most reduced and minimalist. Kane’s dialogue shows that the transition from elliptical patterns of ordinary speech to deliberate incoherence is gradual:

WOMAN. Friends.  
 TINKER. Don’t think so.  
 WOMAN. I can change.  
 TINKER. You’re a woman.  
 WOMAN. You’re a doctor. Help me.  
 TINKER. No.  
 WOMAN. Is it someone else?  
 TINKER. No.  
 WOMAN. I love you.  
 TINKER. Please.  
 WOMAN. Thought you loved me.  
 TINKER. As you are.  
 WOMAN. Then love me, fucking love me  
 TINKER. Grace  
 WOMAN. Don’t turn away  
 [...] (Kane 138)

Some of the utterances in this passage, especially in the beginning, clearly relate to previous ones, but the reference of Tinker’s “please” remains ambiguous, as does “Grace”, since the woman he is talking to is simply called “the woman”. While

ambiguous references tend to become gradually clear in the dialogue of other 1990s plays, Kane often refuses to clear things up. The minimalism of the one-word - sentences at the end of this passage, for example, makes it impossible to determine their specific reference. One is left with the impression that the characters are talking past each other and that the dialogue is dissolving into incoherent words and utterances.

In its essential linguistic minimalism, Kane's dialogue can be traced back to Beckett. His influence, as Saunders claims, "looms" in all her work, among other things "through the stylistic approach of stripping language down to its bare meaning" (55). *Cleansed*, he believes, marks another step forward in a process of paring language down to "a stark minimalism" (88). It should be noted, however, that Kane herself claims that it was Bond's *Saved* which taught her how to write dialogue (Piribauer 158). Of course, the shortness of Kane's syntactic structures is also reminiscent of Bond's dialogue. But while Bond remains close to realism in his transcription of small-talk, Kane is much more poetic, the artifice of her dialogue becoming clear through the way in which she employs elliptical patterns not only on the syntactic but also on the referential level, which, as we have seen, is a feature of Beckett's dialogue as well. Also, with regard to a play like *Crave* (which succeeded *Cleansed*), where she devotes so much attention to the further development of a self-conscious poetic, minimal language, Beckett's influence on Kane's way of writing dialogue can hardly be denied.

### 8.1.2. Repetitive patterns and the dialogue of stagnation

#### 8.1.2.1. Echoes

Apart from its tendency toward elliptical patterns, another basic feature of language and dialogue in absurdist theatre, especially in Beckett, is its repetitiveness. Ruby Cohn, for example, devotes a whole chapter in her book on Beckett's drama to the idea of repetitions<sup>45</sup>, which turn out to be his central linguistic device. Of course, repetitive patterns, like elliptical ones, can be counted among the basic features of ordinary speech<sup>46</sup>, which means that the frequent use of repetitions can be regarded as part of the project of recreating and exposing the absurdity of ordinary speech in dramatic dialogue. However, verbal repetition also mirrors an important general

<sup>45</sup> See „The Churn of Stale Words: Repetitions“, in Cohn (96-139).

<sup>46</sup> Thus, Esslin, in the passage quoted on page 88 above, talks about the way Pinter manages to "transcribe everyday conversation in all its repetitiveness".



theme of absurdist plays, namely that of stagnation, which, as we have seen, is also reproduced on the level of structure. Cohn draws attention to this wider significance of repetition in Beckett by claiming that it serves him as “music, meaning, metaphor” (139).

Certainly, stagnation lies in the very nature of repetition. The fact that something is repeated always implies that no new information is provided on a referential level. Repetitions may put emphasis on a certain word or phrase and introduce irony or sarcasm but they do not add factual information. In dialogical conversation, they often seem to serve what Pfister terms the “phatic” function of language. The phatic function of speech focuses on establishing or keeping up the communicative channel between speakers, enabling dialogical contact. It is fulfilled, for example, when one speaker “reacts to the former’s utterances, thus confirming the communicative contact” (113). Obviously, one way of confirming the communicative contact is to repeat the other speaker’s words. At the very least, this suggests that one speaker has listened to the other and is now referring back to what has been said. New information or an argument, something which would spiral the conversation forward on a thematic level, however, is not provided. A dialogue featuring many repetitions, then, must necessarily tend to stagnate, in spite of the fact that the characters are constantly talking – repetitions may keep up the communicative channel, that is, they might carry the dialogue on a phatic level but they prevent it from moving on thematically. It is, actually, the phatic function which enables characters in absurdist plays to have long conversations without getting anywhere.

The phatic function of repetition is particularly obvious in what Cohn terms “echo doublets”. While the term “doublet” merely refers to the fact that “a word or phrase is heard again immediately or very soon after first mention” (98), that is, to the repetition itself, the term “echo” implies that a word or phrase is repeated by another character. According to Cohn, the rhythm of *Waiting for Godot* in particular is determined by echo doublets (99). Interestingly, this is also the play which Pfister mentions as a prime example for dramatic dialogue in which the phatic function prevails (114). In *Godot*, but also in *Endgame*, we often find echo doublets like the following, where the repetition does not provide any new information but simply serves to keep up the communicative contact, with one character picking up the other character’s idea<sup>47</sup>:

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<sup>47</sup> In order to make the repetitive patterns visible, I will put repeated words in bold print in this chapter.

VLADIMIR. [*Hurt, coldly.*] May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?

ESTRAGON. In **a ditch**.

VLADIMIR. [*Admiringly.*] **A ditch!** Where?

ESTRAGON. [*Without gesture.*] Over there.

VLADIMIR. And they didn't **beat** you?

ESTRAGON. **Beat** me? Certainly they **beat** me.

VLADIMIR. The **same** lot as usual?

ESTRAGON. The **same**? I don't know. (Beckett, *Complete* 11)

Clearly, each echo in the above dialogue creates a link to a previous comment, signalling that the speaker who repeats the phrase has been listening and is referring back to what has just been said. At the same time, this passage draws attention to the inherent feature of a repetition: an echo does not provide any new information, which must always be demanded or added in an additional phrase, as in Vladimir's "where" or in Estragon's specification "I don't know".

While the echo doublets in the above quote do establish a repetitive pattern, the whole passage sounds quite natural. With echo doublets, then, it is their frequent occurrence throughout the play which produces an overall feeling of stagnation or, at least, slowness in the dialogue. However, words or phrases are sometimes repeated more than once in Beckett. Depending on the number of times a word or phrase is repeated, one might also speak of triplets, quadruplets or multiplets, with echoed multiplets done by several characters being referred to as "volleys" (Cohn 101). Such multiple echoes produce a more immediate feeling of stagnation in the dialogue and more directly expose the emptiness of conversation, as in the following passage from *Endgame*:

HAMM. Look at the earth.

CLOV. I've looked.

HAMM. With the **glass**?

CLOV. No need of the **glass**.

HAMM. Look at it with the **glass**.

CLOV. I'll go get the **glass**.

[*Exit CLOV.*]

HAMM. No need of the **glass**!

[*Enter CLOV with telescope.*]

CLOV. I'm back again, with the **glass**. [...] I need the steps.

HAMM. Why? Have you shrunk? [...]

CLOV. I'm back again, with the steps. [*He sets down the ladder under the window right, gets up on it, realizes he has not the telescope, gets down.*] I need the **glass**. [...]

HAMM. [*Violently.*] But you have the **glass**.

CLOV. [*Halting, violently.*] No I haven't the **glass**! (Beckett, *Complete* 105)

Here, the constant repetition of the word “glass” could be said to retain a phatic function in that it gives Hamm and Clov a common point of reference in a world where there is nothing else left to be discussed; in this sense, of course, the verbal echo serves, again, to maintain dialogical contact. At the same time, the exaggerated focus in the discussion on a rather irrelevant subject like the glass and what to do with it immediately exposes the emptiness and stagnation in the dialogue and the characters’ lives. It is also in these passages that the communication becomes nonsensical and, thereby, self-conscious, referring back to its own breakdown. Repetitive patterns also feature prominently in in-*yer-face* dialogue. Ridley is particularly close to Beckett in this respect, his dialogue including numerous echo doublets, as the following examples show:

PRESLEY. What’s his name?  
 COSMO. **Pitch**.  
 PRESLEY. **Pitch**?  
 COSMO. **Pitchfork**.  
 PRESLEY. **Pitchfork**!  
 COSMO. What’s wrong with that?  
 PRESLEY. Oh, **nothing**.  
 COSMO. Don’t look like **nothing**.  
 PRESLEY. It just **surprised** me.  
 COSMO. **Surprise** is good. (Ridley 66)

Apart from such passages where echo doublets accumulate, we also find isolated instances like the following:

PRESLEY. Mummy and Daddy said we were two peas in a pod!  
 COSMO. **Mummy and Daddy were wrong**.  
 PRESLEY. **Mummy and Daddy were wrong!** (52)  
  
 COSMO. They died in the same year?  
 PRESLEY. **The same day**.  
 COSMO. **The same day!** (62)

In another parallel to Beckett, Ridley sometimes extends his echoes to triplets:

COSMO. [...] So why don’t you just go to the shops like **a good boy**?  
 PRESLEY. **A good boy**?  
 COSMO. **A good boy**. (102)

Whatever the exact context in which echo doublets occur in Ridley, they prevent the dialogue from moving forward thematically. A small amount of new information is sometimes provided through a change of tone in the repetition – many repetitions in Ridley, for example, suggest surprise, possibly revealing something about the

character affected by surprise. As in Beckett, however, no real discussion, argument or explanation ensues even from such surprised repetitions, so that their main function remains a phatic one, providing a link, a reaction to another character's previous statement.

Among in-yer-face plays, the use of echoes is particularly noteworthy in *Mojo* and *Kosher Harry*. Actually, the dialogue of Butterworth's and Grosso's play consists mainly of repetitions, whether simple or echoed. As in Beckett, we find passages involving echo doublets where the dialogue sounds almost natural, although, thematically, it moves on at a rather slow pace:

SWEETS. Okay. Okay. Okay. **All we know-**  
 POTTS. **All we know** is '**Fish are jumping** and the cotton is high.'  
 SWEETS. **Fish are jumping**. Precisely.  
 POTTS. **Good**. The end. Talk about something else.  
 SWEETS. **Exactly. Good. Great night**.  
 POTTS. **Great night. Exactly**. We're **fucking** made.  
 SWEETS. My life makes sense.  
 POTTS. Go upstairs and see if there's an angel pissing down the chimney.  
 SWEETS. My whole **fucking** life makes sense. [...] (Butterworth 11)

The following passage from *Kosher Harry*, where the four characters are discussing the Cabbie's son's Pakistani schoolmate and his performance in class is quite similar, although echoes are sometimes divided by several lines:

CABBIE. *remember*  
 MAN. oh **yeh**  
 CABBIE. **yeh** poppadom she goes  
 MAN. who does  
 CABBIE. ol big *nose* **of course**  
 MAN. oh **of course** yeh  
 CABBIE. '**la paz**' he says  
 MAN. er ... (*He looks at Cabbie nonplussed.*)  
 WAITRESS. **la la** what  
 CABBIE. precisely mate  
 WAITRESS. **la paz**  
 CABBIE. cool as you blooming like  
 [...]  
 CABBIE. little Pakistani  
 MAN. **ten** years old –  
 CABBIE. **ten fucking** years –  
 MAN. knows the capital of bolivia  
 CABBIE. wears a **fucking** suit –  
 MAN. shiny **fucking** shoes  
 WAITRESS. **shaves in the morning**  
 CABBIE. **shaves in the morning** thank you darling (Grosso 54/55)

While these bits of repetitive dialogue still sound rather natural and mainly slow down communication, Butterworth and Grosso, in contrast to Ridley, also include passages where the phatic repetitions of everyday conversation are so exaggerated that the dialogue turns self-referential and downright nonsensical in its repetitiveness, featuring multiple echoes:

POTTS. Sweets. Sweets. The shoes. The mother **fucking** shoes on the man.  
 SWEETS. **Buckskin. Hand-stitched.**  
 POTTS. **Baby buckskin. Baby fucking hand-stitched buckskin.**  
 SWEETS **Baby fuckin' buckskin handstitched** by elves.  
 POTTS. **Baby fucking buckskin.**  
 SWEETS. **Baby** what? Who *knows*? (*Laughs.*) Eh? Who **fucking** *knows*?  
 (Butterworth 13)

CABBIE. nah she's just attention seeking (*He clocks Old Woman*<sup>48</sup>.) you be  
**happy** angel  
 OLD WOMAN. what  
 CABBIE. **happy** i said  
 OLD WOMAN. **happy**  
 CABBIE. **happy**  
 MAN. **happy** he said  
 OLD WOMAN. **happy**  
 CABBIE yeh **happy** for fuck sake (*He jolts up on his feet and yells at the top of his voice.*) be fucking **happy** (*The storm grows fiercer outside. Man and extremely hot and bothered Cabbie see Waitress walk on holding a small can of lager and smiling at them.*) oh there you are my lovely about time  
 I'm blooming gasping  
 WAITRESS *puts down the small can of lager which Cabbie cracks open gleefully. The others watch him gulp it down thirstily then gasp contentedly.*  
 OLD WOMAN. **happy** (Grosso 34/35)

Like Beckett, Butterworth and Grosso, also employ multiple echoes, achieving an absurdity effect which exposes the fundamental emptiness of their characters' conversation. The pattern of repetition they weave, however, is generally tighter than Beckett's: the passages become volleys, where words bounce back and forth between the characters.

Also, Beckett's characters – when doing their multiple repetitions – at least pretend to conduct a dialogue: they quarrel and contradict each other. The repetitive dialogues of Butterworth's and Grosso's characters, however, show “monological tendencies” (Pfister 129). They look like dialogues on the page because the text is distributed between two characters, but the fundamental idea of dialogue as consisting of

<sup>48</sup> Characters' names are put in bold print in the stage directions of Grosso's play.

“semantic changes of direction” (129) is violated: in contrast to Beckett or even Ridley, there are no apparent changes of tone in the multiple echoes of Grosso and Butterworth. In *Kosher Harry* and *Mojo*, then, the echoes not only serve to directly express the emptiness of the conversation but also to underline the way in which characters are no longer distinguishable, separate personalities – the lack of semantic changes of direction, after all, is due to the complete consensus that seems to exist between the characters<sup>49</sup>. This, in turn, might be regarded as another reason for stagnation in dramatic conversation: the lack of distinct characters implies a basic lack of antagonism. On the level of plot, as we have seen, such a basic lack of antagonism causes a lack of situation-changing conflict and, therefore, a lack of linear, forward moving action. On the level of dialogue, the lack of antagonism prevents the development of a discussion and exchange of different arguments, which leads to stagnation in the conversation.

#### 8.1.2.2. Refrains

Another kind of repetitive pattern which features prominently in Beckett is the refrain, for which Cohn, with reference to other scholars, suggests the following definition: “a meaningful word or words often repeated during the course of a play, so that the audience grows aware of that repetition” (102). The famous exchange from *Godot* (“Let’s go – we can’t – why not – we’re waiting for Godot”) is used by Cohn as a prime example but she also notes how individual phrases such as “I don’t know” (104), monosyllabic words like “who, how, why, when, where” (103) or nouns like “boot, hat, bone, carrot, turnip, tree, rope, whip, pipe” (105) turn into refrains in Beckett. While repetitive patterns such as single and echo doublets/multiplets tend to work on the level of speech itself, serving as markers of ordinary conversation and, via exaggeration, exposing its inherent absurdity, refrains tend to work on the level of content, defining the respective play’s major themes and/or the characters’ main concerns by drawing specific attention to the repeated words or phrases. Among other aspects such as structure and plot, it is the use of refrains in the dialogue which greatly adds to the feeling of repetitiveness which prevails in Beckett’s plays<sup>50</sup>. Also,

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<sup>49</sup> The same, by the way, is true of the dialogue from *Cleansed* which I have quoted in chapter 5.3.1. on pseudocouples, pages 49-51, where Grace and Graham volley the word “good” between them.

<sup>50</sup> This is also hinted at by Cohn when she claims that “doublets, triplets, volleys, and pounders account for the large quantity of repetitions in *Waiting for Godot*, but the dense qualitative feeling rests on refrains” (102).

it is a refrain word or phrase which often implies some kind of gestural repetition (Cohn 107), that is, a physical routine which occurs several times throughout the play. If in-*yer-face* plays are not as repetitive as absurdist plays in their structure and general plot outline, they seem to be making up for this by using refrains in the dialogue very prominently, demonstrating how the characters are caught up in psychological and physical routines which remain ever the same. Thus, Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* establishes the way in which Presley and Haley are stuck in childish ways of thinking by introducing "mum" and "dad" (mostly uttered together and sometimes in the variant "mummy" and "daddy") as the dominant refrain word of the play, along with the word "chocolate" which is associated with a recurring physical routine of chocolate eating. Also, Ridley turns the twin's nightmare vision of a nuclear holocaust into a refrain, having the account occur four times throughout the play (23-25, 34, 81-82, 89), with variations but always recognisable via tag words such as "voosh", "nothing" and the phrases "Black sky. Black earth. Black nothing". This refrain draws attention to the twins' ongoing, childish paranoia and addiction to storytelling.

In *Kosher Harry*, each of the characters introduces one or several refrain words linked to a personal obsession which the respective person cannot get over. Thus, the waitress remains, throughout the play, preoccupied with her former lover "antonio" who has been stolen from her by the former waitress "bratislavan", who has now been replaced by the equally threatening "russian" also referred to as "gladiola". The racist cabbie is preoccupied with his son's Pakistani schoolmate, whom he and the other characters call "poppadom" or "paki". The old woman's problem is refrained in the recurrent mentioning of her "husband", who betrayed her. Other refrain words in the play are "salt beef" and "potato latka", always linked to the physical routine of the waitress taking orders<sup>51</sup>. All of these words occurring again and again throughout the play not only establish the major themes but also an atmosphere of stagnation with regard to the characters' lives and their conversation, as the themes never seem to change. Another word the occurrence of which cannot simply be accounted for by elliptical conversational patterns and must be regarded as a refrain is the word "what". Thus, I have counted 144 one-word-utterances of "what" on the play's 123 pages, not including the numerous occurrences of the word in longer sentences. This refrain,

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<sup>51</sup> See section on routines and rituals on page 86.

then, seems to establish confusion and the impossibility of effective communication as other major concerns of the play.

Nagy, in *Weldon Rising*, also makes extensive use of refrains. The most popular refrain word which, as I have pointed out in chapter 7.3.<sup>52</sup>, also implies a recurring physical routine, is “beer”. While the constant reference to beer drinking mainly serves to establish a feeling of stagnation - it is getting hotter and hotter, and there is nothing else to be done - there are also refrains which occur less frequently and establish major themes of the play. Thus, Natty regularly uses negative constructions such as “I can’t”, “I don’t”, “I won’t” or “I didn’t”, establishing as a major theme his and the other characters’ passivity. Similarly, Marcel’s constant references to himself in the third person a la “Marcel says”, “Marcel does” etc. constitute a refrain phrase which suggests that the characters no longer know how to relate to their own life and actions. This theme is further developed in another refrain uttered by Natty, who says “I am Natty” repeatedly (20, 23, 25, 27), often followed by his boyfriend Jimmy’s reassurance “so you are”. Other refrain words and phrases serve, in combination with each other, to establish the dichotomy between bravery and cowardice. Thus, “brave, braver, bravest”, uttered twice by Natty (18, 22), ties in with repeated references to courage (22, “courageous” 23) and cowardice (30, “cowards” 44).

Like *Weldon Rising*, *Mojo* also has one dominant refrain word linked to a physical routine, namely the word “pills”. As with the frequent reference to beer, the regular mentioning of pills and pill taking suggests a scenario of stagnation, in which there is nothing to be done except consuming drugs and in which the characters’ knowledge is limited to advice on drug taking, as the following exchange suggests:

SWEETS. My piss is black.

POTTS. It’s the white ones. Don’t eat no more of the white ones.

(Butterworth 3)

This exchange constitutes one of the most memorable refrains of the play and is repeated twice, with variations (15, 17/18). Another quite prominent refrain word is “Mr. Ross”. The frequent mentioning of this name establishes the permanent threat which forces the characters to stay locked up and paralysed in the Soho club and, therefore, a major theme of the play. More notorious, however, than “pills” or “Mr. Ross” is the word “fuck” which occurs in all kinds of variations and combinations throughout the play. While it is certainly part of the idiom which Butterworth has

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<sup>52</sup> See page 86.



assigned to his Soho low-lifers, it can also be regarded as a major thematic refrain word: as well as expressing the characters' claim to coolness, it also expresses, in some situations, their bedazzlement and lack of comprehension. Another memorable refrain, and maybe the most forceful one, is Sweet's and Pott's tag phrase "fish are jumping". It occurs in the beginning (11/12), the middle (27) and towards the end (72) of the play and summarises the two friends' continued hope for something good coming to them. At the same time, the repetition of this phrase pointedly establishes how the two are stagnating in passivity and ignorance: the why, when, where and how the fish are jumping, that is, a concrete idea of the good which is supposed to come to them is never specified and so "fish are jumping" remains an empty phrase which only refers back to itself. By the time we hear it for the third time, towards the end of the play, the likeliness of something good finally happening is about as high as that of Godot actually appearing to pick up Vladimir and Estragon at the end of Beckett's play.

In Kane's *Cleansed*, refrains are not so much employed as markers of stagnation but mainly serve the purpose of emphasising the major themes of the play. Refrain words are not usually repeated with such a high frequency as in the other in-yer-face plays, but the highly reduced style of the dialogue makes repetitions of certain words and phrases extremely forceful. The most common refrain word in the play is "Grace". It is the name of one of the characters but, in the context of a text where love and death are so closely related, it assumes, of course, a much broader thematic significance. Other single refrain words which occur rather frequently are "doctor" and "friend(s)", establishing the contradictory roles which Tinker assumes. Apart from single words, there are two instantly memorable refrain phrases in the play which summarise the uncompromising cruelty of love which is Kane's major theme: "Love me or kill me" (135, 120) and "No regrets" (108, 117, 137).

## **8.2. Language as music**

While the frequent use of repetitive patterns adds to the sense of stagnation which is central to absurdist plays, another important function of repetition is that it adds a musical quality to the text of a play. This is implied by Cohn, when she claims that repetitions also serve Beckett as music<sup>53</sup>. A central feature of (classical) music, for example, is that it is made up of a fixed set of notes which appear again and again, in

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<sup>53</sup> See quote on page 97 above.

different sequences and combinations, to produce a melody. Beckett, it seems, sometimes uses words like notes: in certain passages, he repeats one or several words over and over until the words' meanings become secondary and/or the words are entirely reduced to their sound quality. That is, individual words begin to function as entities of sound or, simply, notes, the combinations of which assume the quality of a textual melody.

Such a musical patterning of text can, for example, be found in the famous monologue done by Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. Here, the pattern of repetitions is very dense and the syntactic structure is fragmented, which makes it easy to perceive words as entities of sound, detached from their actual meaning. If one underlines the repeated words, the text begins to look like a musical score, the underlined words producing a visual pattern of longer and shorter 'notes' on the page<sup>54</sup>:

[...] stockinged feet in Connemara in a word for reasons unknown no matter what matter the facts are there and considering what is more much more grave that in the light of the labours lost of Steinweg and Peterman it appears what is more much more grave that in the light the light the light of the labours lost of Steinweg and Peterman that in the plains in the mountains by the seas by the rivers running water running fire the air is the same and then the earth namely the air and then the earth in the great cold the great dark and the air and the earth abode of stones in the great cold alas alas in the year of their Lord six hundred and something the air the earth the sea the earth abode of stones in the great deeps the great cold on sea on land and in the air I resume for reasons unknown [...] (Beckett, *Complete* 41)

Similar musical patterns can be found in Ionesco's dialogues, as the following passage taken from *The Chairs* shows:

OLD MAN. [...]

And then we arrived and we laughed till we cried to see the funny man arrive with his hat all awry ... it was so funny when he fell flat on his face, he had such a fat tummy ... he arrived with a case full of rice: the rice on the ground, all awry ... we laughed till we cried and cried ... and we cried and cried ... funny fat tummy, rice on a wry face, flat on his rice, case full of face ... and we laughed till we cried ... funny hat flat on his fat face, all awry ...

OLD WOMAN. [laughing] arrived on his rice, face all awry, and we cried when we arrived, case, face, tummy, fat, rice ... [...] (Ionesco, *Plays I* 43)

In both quotes, a whole set of words is repeated over and over, in varying combinations, until the words themselves cease to function as signifiers and one reacts only to the sound of the repeated words. While there is a relatively great variety

<sup>54</sup> I will, in this chapter, underline the relevant repetitions in the quotes, so as to make the musical quality of the text more easily visible.

of different ‘sounds’ in these passages, which creates a rich and varied melody of words, both Beckett and Ionesco also include passages where only one particular word is repeated to create a rather monotonous melody. This is, for example, the case in the passage from *Endgame* quoted above, where Hamm and Clov volley the word “glass” between them<sup>55</sup>. A similar effect of the same ‘note’ being hit again and again is produced in Ionesco’s *The Bald Primadonna*, when Mr. and Mrs. Smith talk about the Watson family, every member of which is called “Bobby Watson”:

MRS SMITH. [...] How do they call them?

MR SMITH. Bobby and Bobby – like their parents. Bobby Watson’s uncle, old Bobby Watson, has pots of money and he’s very fond of the boy. He could very easily take over Bobby’s education.

MRS SMITH. Yes, it’s what one would expect. And in the same way Bobby Watson’s aunt, old Bobby Watson, could very easily take over the education of Bobby Watson, the daughter of Bobby Watson. Then, if that happened Bobby, the mother of Bobby Watson, could marry again. Has she anyone in view?

MR SMITH. Yes, a cousin of Bobby Watson’s.  
[...] (Ionesco, *Plays* 190)

Whether the same note is hit over and over or a whole set of notes is being repeated in different combinations to create a rich pattern of different sounds: the resulting melody is only one aspect traditionally associated with music. Even more central, perhaps, is the idea of rhythm, and it is also on this level that a musical quality is introduced to language in absurdist plays.

Rhythm, in language and dialogue, is not mainly produced through the repetition of particular words or phrases but through the repetition of structures. Thus, a rhythm might evolve when utterances have the same approximate length or syntactic structure. Rhythmical passages often occur when two characters talk as one, complementing each other’s ideas and finishing each other’s sentences, as in the following quote from *Waiting for Godot*:

VLADIMIR. Charming evening we’re having.

ESTRAGON. Unforgettable.

VLADIMIR. And it’s not over.

ESTRAGON. Apparently not.

VLADIMIR. It’s only beginning.

ESTRAGON. It’s awful.

VLADIMIR. Worse than the pantomime.

ESTRAGON. The circus.

VLADIMIR. The music-hall.

ESTRAGON. The circus. (Beckett, *Complete* 34)

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<sup>55</sup> See page 98.

The rhythmical feel of this passage is not primarily created through the repetition of particular words, although, of course, certain pronouns and prepositions which are required by the respective syntactic structure are repeated. The only noun which is repeated, however, is “circus”. Rather than through repeated words, the rhythm is established through the similar overall length of the utterances and the repeated use of simple syntactic structures such as sentences starting with “it’s”, or two-word sentences starting with “the”. Rhythmical dialogue also features prominently in Pinter’s plays. The following example is taken from the third act of *The Birthday Party*, where Goldberg and McCann, once again, ‘interview’ Stanley:

GOLDBERG. We’ll watch over you.  
 MCCANN. Advise you.  
 GOLDBERG. Give you proper care and treatment.  
 MCCANN. Let you use the club bar.  
 GOLDBERG. Keep a table reserved.  
 MCCANN. Help you acknowledge the fast days.  
 GOLDBERG. Bake you cakes.  
 MCCANN. Help you kneel on kneeling days.  
 GOLDBERG. Give you a free pass.  
 MCCANN. Take you for constitutionals.  
 GOLDBERG. Give you hot tips.  
 MCCANN. We’ll provide the skipping rope.  
 GOLDBERG. The vest and pants.  
 MCCANN. The ointment.  
 GOLDBERG. The hot poultice.  
 MCCANN. The fingerstall.  
 GOLDBERG. The abdomen belt.  
 MCCANN. The ear plugs.  
 GOLDBERG. The baby powder.  
 MCCANN. The back scratcher.  
 GOLDBERG. The spare tyre.  
 MCCANN. The stomach pump.  
 GOLDBERG. The oxygen tent.  
 MCCANN. The prayer wheel.  
 GOLDBERG. The plaster of Paris.  
 MCCANN. The crash helmet.  
 GOLDBERG. The crutches.  
 MCCANN. A day and night service.  
 GOLDBERG. All on the house.  
 [...] (Pinter, *Plays One* 92)

As in the example taken from Beckett, the rhythmical feel of this passage derives mainly from the similar length of the utterances and the repeated use of certain simple syntactic structures which Pinter purposefully – and more openly than Beckett –

exaggerates. The excessive repetition of phrases starting with “the” makes this passage sound even more rhythmical than Beckett’s.

The musical quality of a text passage is most pronounced, of course, when the repetition of a particular syntactic structure coincides with the repetition of particular words other than prepositions or pronouns, as in the following example from Ionesco’s *The Bald Primadonna*, where the maid recites “a little poem”:

MARY. The polyanders were glow-worming in the wood.  
 A stone caught fire  
The palace caught fire  
The forest caught fire  
 Men on fire  
 Women on fire  
 Eyes on fire  
The blood caught fire  
The sand caught fire  
The birds caught fire  
The fish caught fire  
The moon caught fire  
The ashes caught fire  
The smoke caught fire  
The fire caught fire  
Caught fire, caught fire, caught fire ... caught fire ... (Ionesco, *Plays I* 114)

Here, the combination of repetition of a simple syntactic structure with the repetition of the words “caught fire” at the end of each sentence results in a monotonous incantation where rhythm and sound dominate over the actual meaning of the individual utterances. An even more obvious example of dialogue and meaning dissolving into sound and rhythm occurs in Ionesco’s *The Lesson*, which features the following dialogue between the professor and the pupil:

PROFESSOR. No. You have two ears. I take away one. I nibble one off. How many do you have left?  
 PUPIL. Two.  
 PROFESSOR. One.  
 PUPIL. Two.  
 PROFESSOR. One!  
 PUPIL. Two!  
 PROFESSOR. One!!  
 PUPIL. Two!!  
 PROFESSOR. One!!  
 PUPIL. Two!!  
 PROFESSOR. One!!  
 PUPIL. Two!!  
 PROFESSOR. No, no, no. [...] (Ionesco, *Plays I* 15)

In this passage, the monosyllabic words with their simple sound structure - “two” being uttered in the presumably high voice of the pupil and “one” in the low voice of the professor - take on the quality of notes which are being alternated for creation of a monotonous, highly rhythmical melody.

A general orientation towards a musical make up of text can be discovered in many in-*yer-face* plays. It is, perhaps, most obvious in Kane, whose work, particularly with regard to language, has often been compared to Beckett. Especially in *Crave*, reviewer Michael Billington believes to have heard “the rhythms of Godot” (Billington qtd. in Saunders 106). Also, it is this particular play which Kane deliberately intended to be “an experiment with form, and language and rhythm and music” (Thielemans qtd. in Saunders 101). *Cleansed*, on the other hand, has mainly been noted for its reduced linguistic style, which most reviewers did not approve of. Still, *Cleansed*, the first production of which occurred only about three months before that of *Crave* in August 1998, contains a number of musically orientated passages which already seem to point to Kane’s later developments in writing dramatic dialogue. Thus, there are a lot of passages where the rhythmical orientation of the text becomes very obvious and is visible on the page<sup>56</sup>:

ROBIN. Grace.  
 Grace.  
 Grace.  
 Grace.  
 Grace.  
 Grace.  
 Please, Miss. (Kane 144)

VOICES. He can never (*crack*) never (*crack*) never  
 (*crack*) never (*crack*) never (*crack*) never  
 (*crack*) never (*crack*) never (*crack*) never  
 (*crack*) never (*crack*) never (*crack*) save  
 you (*crack*) (131)

Actually, these passages bear more similarity to Ionesco than to Beckett, as Kane combines the repetition of a syntactic pattern, namely a one-word-sentence, with the repetition of one particular word. The rhythm produced by this combination is, of course, highly regular and very noticeable, and such extreme examples of language

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<sup>56</sup> In order to maintain the visual pattern which, in this case, indicates the rhythmical pattern of the text, I will be neglecting quotation rules in the following two quotes.

turning into rhythmical incantation occur rarely in Beckett<sup>57</sup>. Apart from such short incantatory monologues, however, Kane, in similarity to Beckett, also includes passages where the musical quality rests on the repetition of certain words rather than syntactic structures. This is the case in the following dialogue where Tinker threatens to kill Carl by pushing a pole up his anus:

TINKER. Close your eyes imagine it's him.

CARL. Please God no I

TINKER. Rodney Rodney split me in half.

CARL. Please don't fucking kill me God

TINKER. I love you Rod I'd die for you.

CARL. Not me please not me don't kill me Rod not me don't kill me ROD NOT ME ROD NOT ME (117)

While Beckett mostly embeds the repetitions in his dialogue into regular syntactic structures, Kane uses elliptical syntax, which makes it even easier to perceive the repeated words as unities of sound in a textual melody rather than carriers of meaning. Kane, then, although she clearly makes use of the same basic devices for giving her text a musical make up, seems, in her extreme style, to be closer to Beckett's later plays than to his early works like *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*.

Nick Grosso, in *Kosher Harry*, on the other hand, includes a monologue which immediately reminds one of Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot*. In Grosso's speech, the Cabbie complains about his son's geography teacher who has asked her class to name the capital of Bolivia:

[...] silly bitch – who knows the capital of – now you must remember these kids don't even know their own fucking names let alone any flaming capitals – I mean asking them a fucking capital is like asking a fucking farm animal the price of toothpaste – I mean they can hardly fucking wipe their arses this lot – they don't even know the capital of england – scotland they think it is – on my life – they think scotland is the capital of england – they think wales is the capital of scotland – that's what we're fucking dealing with – spain is the capital of kuala Lumpur – I mean this is deptford darling sunny fucking deptford but no no she thinks she's in Highgate fucking village chattin to a bunch of brain soldiers so she asks em all the capital of ... (Grosso 51)

Here, the musical quality, as in Lucky's speech, rests on the melody established through the repetition of particular words. Through the constant repetition of always

<sup>57</sup> Beckett's early plays feature only isolated passages where the rhythmical pattern is so pronounced, but they do occur occasionally. One of these passages occurs in *Waiting for Godot*, where Vladimir tries to sing Estragon to sleep, saying: "Bye bye bye bye

Bye bye bye bye

Bye bye bye bye

Bye bye ... " (Beckett, *Complete* 65)

the same words, the grammar and, actually, the whole point of the speech become quite obscure. The whole passage turns into an incantation concerning “fucking capitals”, so to speak. Especially in dialogue, however, which accounts for most of the play’s text, Grosso likes to combine the repetition of syntactic structures with the repetition of particular words for the creation of both rhythm and melody. This becomes obvious in the following passage, where several words are repeated and the lines have a similar length and syntactic structure:

MAN. well they do things another way  
 CABBIE what way  
 OLD WOMAN. the *old* way  
 MAN. a bloke has to make the first move  
 WAITRESS. dash in there  
 MAN. get in there  
 WAITRESS. get stuck in  
 MAN. stick it in her  
**Waitress** *gapes at Man.*  
 CABBIE. are you *sure* (Grosso 74)

Due to the elliptical syntax employed, it is the preposition “in” which, along with the noun “way”, becomes the main carrier of the melody here.

The musical quality is also very strong in the text of Butterworth’s *Mojo*. This has been noted by several reviewers, who have drawn comparisons to music or used diction usually connected to musical subjects to describe the dialogue of the play. Thus, Benedict Nightingale from *The Times* talks about “the staccato argot” (956) of Butterworth’s characters, Shaun Usher from the *Daily Mail* claims that “these choppy cross-currents of dialogue demand a conductor as much as a director” (956) and Charles Spencer from the *Daily Telegraph* directly compares the dialogue to music, claiming that the characters “repeat or vary the same phrase again and again, like jazz musicians improvising” (954).

The strong musical quality of Butterworth’s text suggested by these comments is a result of the repetition of particular words combined with the repetition of particular syntactic structures which we also find in *Cleansed* and *Kosher Harry*. However, while Kane often has these incantatory rants done by a single speaker, Butterworth, more like Grosso, relies on alternation between different speakers. In the following passage, the characters are reacting to the news of their boss Ezra’s violent death:

POTTS. Fucking Nora. Fucking hell.  
 SWEETS. Suffering Jesus. They sawed him in half.  
 SKINNY. Poor fucking man.  
 SWEETS. You sweat your life away ...



SKINNY. Poor fucking man.  
 SWEETS. Into a *bucket* ...  
 SKINNY. Poor fucking man. Poor fucking man. (*Silence.*)  
 MICKEY. Fucking mess ...  
 SKINNY. Poor fucking man.  
 SWEETS. Wake up have breakfast. They saw you in half.  
 MICKEY. Hideous fuckin' mess ...  
 SKINNY. Poor fucking man. Poor fucking man. (*Silence.*) (Butterworth 23)

While Beckett tends to use either repetitive syntactic patterns *or* repetitions of certain words and phrases, Butterworth, like Ionesco and, to a certain extent, Pinter, combines both to create the strong musical feel of his dialogue. Through the frequent word-by-word repetition of a whole phrase like “poor fucking man”, rhythm *and* a melody are introduced to the text. The rhythmical feel of this passage is further enhanced by the fact that all the sentences have similar length, and with the word “fucking” occurring not only in the context of the phrase “poor fucking man” but in almost every line of the dialogue, a melody centred around this word is established. If, in absurdist theatre, this kind of rhythmical dialogue is usually associated with two or more characters talking as one, Butterworth also employs it in passages where antagonistic attitudes are expressed. This can be seen in the following example, where Skinny is terrorized by Baby:

BABY. I promise. I won't cause a fuss, if you just come over here and kiss my pegs.  
 SKINNY. Fuck off. Mickey –  
 BABY. Kiss my pegs.  
 POTTS. Here we go.  
 BABY. Kiss my pegs.  
 SKINNY. Fuck off.  
 [...]
 BABY. [...] I know what I do to you Skinny Luke. Now show me. Kiss my pegs. Kiss them. (BABY *throws a chair at* SKINNY.) Look at the floor. Look at the floor.  
 SKINNY. Great fucking game. Great fucking game. Great fucking game.  
 BABY. Look at the ... Look at the floor. I'll close your fuckin' eyes. Kiss my pegs.  
 SKINNY. Fuck off.  
 BABY. Kiss my pegs. Kiss my pegs.  
 SKINNY. Fuck off. Mickey –  
 BABY. Kiss my pegs. Kiss my pegs.  
 POTTS. Kiss his fucking pegs. (Butterworth 37)

In this passage, Butterworth almost entirely abandons the idea of repeating single words, repeating whole phrases instead, which, once again, produces a very strong

rhythmical feel and a distinct melody of words. As a matter of fact, the repeated phrases seem to work like musical themes and so the whole quote could be said to be structured according to an ABA- pattern, part A being made up of the two themes “kiss my pegs” and “fuck off” and part B featuring the “look at the floor” and “great fucking game”- themes. Clearly, Butterworth takes the idea of language as music to new heights.

If Butterworth goes to musical extremes with his dialogue, Ridley remains closer to Beckett in his approach. He relies not so much on the word-by-word repetition of whole phrases – that is, on repeating a certain syntactic structure *and* certain words - but on the repetition of structures. Thus, an overall rhythmical feel is established in the dialogue of *The Pitchfork Disney* through the frequent occurrence of question-answer patterns. We find several passages like the following in the play, for example:

COSMO. What your parents die of? Heart attacks?

PRESLEY. No.

COSMO. Strokes?

PRESLEY. No.

COSMO. Cancer?

PRESLEY. No.

COSMO. Kidney failure?

PRESLEY. No.

COSMO. Car accident?

PRESLEY. No.

COSMO. Sexually transmitted diseases?

PRESLEY. No. (Ridley 54)

Such question-answer patterns in which the dialogue develops a very pronounced rhythm also feature prominently in *Waiting for Godot*, when, at the end of each act, Vladimir questions a boy who arrives, supposedly, with a message from Godot:

VLADIMIR. Off we go again. [*Pause.*] Do you not recognize me?

BOY. No, sir.

VLADIMIR. It wasn't you came yesterday.

BOY. No, sir.

VLADIMIR. This is your first time?

BOY. Yes, sir.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR. You have a message from Mr Godot.

BOY. Yes, sir.

VLADIMIR. He won't come this evening.

BOY. No, sir.

VLADIMIR. But he'll come tomorrow.

BOY. Yes, sir.

VLADIMIR. Without fail.

BOY. Yes, sir. (Beckett, *Complete* 85)

In both cases, larger syntactic structures are repeated, and the rhythm becomes visible as a textual pattern on the page.

In another parallel to Beckett, Ridley likes to use single words repeatedly over longer passages of dialogue, which does not so much create a clear rhythmical pattern but the impression of a melody, where particular notes are usually hit several times. This is, for example, the case in the following passage, where Presley meets Pitchfork:

COSMO. Shake his hand, then.

*Pause.*

*Presley stares nervously at Pitchfork.*

COSMO. He wants you to shake his hand.

PRESLEY. Don't ... don't have many visitors. Forget what to do.

COSMO. You shake hands.

PRESLEY. Didn't shake your hand.

COSMO. Well, I don't like touching. [...] Go on. Shake his hand. Don't want to offend him, do you?

*Tentatively, Presley takes hold of Pitchfork's hand.*

*He shakes it quickly, then steps back.*

COSMO. Call that a handshake?

PRESLEY. What do you mean?

COSMO. That weren't a handshake, Mr Chocolate. That was a hand touch.

Now, shake hands with him properly before you upset him.

*Pitchfork's hand is still outstretched. [...]* (Ridley 90)

Obviously, the 'note' which is hit again and again here is the word "hand", and the whole passage immediately reminds one of the dialogue from *Endgame* where Hamm and Clov use the word "glass" in every line<sup>58</sup> or Mr. and Mrs. Smith's conversation about the Bobby Watsons in *The Bald Primadonna*<sup>59</sup>.

Like the absurdist, then, in-er-face authors like to write musical dialogue. While employing the same basic methods as Beckett, however, especially Kane, Grosso and Butterworth take the idea of language as music to a new level, more like Ionesco or Pinter do at their most extreme, combining the repetition of structures and the repetition of particular words to produce passages of dialogue which do not only feature a kind of word-melody but which are also highly rhythmical. Still, as in Ridley or Grosso, there are also passages where in-er-face plays exhibit very obvious parallels and similarities to Beckett and the more subtle approach to language as music which can be found in his early plays.

<sup>58</sup> See, once again, the passage from *Endgame* quoted on page 98.

<sup>59</sup> See page 107.

### **8.3. The body of the language**

The approach to language taken in the above chapters might seem unusually ‘technical’. I have focussed on acoustic qualities, which I have tried to make visible by underlining repeated words or putting them into bold print, thus focussing very much on the material or sensual qualities of language. These chapters take their inspiration from Cohn, who freely admits that she would have liked to consider Beckett’s use of repetitive patterns within some philosophical framework, but found “Deleuze, Freud, Frye or Kierkegaard” to be too distant from his “basic verbal practice”, with the result that her research started, quite simply, with “counting” (96) – a very technical approach as well. The reason why this is possible and effective when talking about language in absurdist and in-yer-face theatre is that in both cases the language seems to take on the quality of what Anna Opel has called a “Sprachkörper”<sup>60</sup>:

Der Begriff Sprachkörper wurde eingeführt, um eine dramatische Sprache zu charakterisieren, die die Tendenz hat, sich von der Figur abzulösen und zu einem rhythmisierten, homogenen Textblock zu werden. Er bezieht sich ausschließlich auf den Körper im textlichen System, also auf die rhythmischen und klanglichen Qualitäten der Sprache, auf den Körper als Thema der Stücke. (180)

If we look at language from this point of view, of course, a technical approach which takes into account its material qualities (its body, so to speak) seems logical, almost necessary. But in how far does the concept of a “Sprachkörper” which Opel has developed in reference to Werner Fritsch, Rainald Goetz and Sarah Kane apply to absurdist and/or in-yer-face theatre in general?

As can be seen from the above analysis, the repetitive but also elliptical patterns which occur frequently in both absurdist and in-yer-face theatre do certainly direct the focus towards the musical and rhythmical qualities of the language in these plays. Through the constant back-and-forth volleying of certain words and phrases in repetitive patterns but also through the lack of connection between words and statements when elliptical patterns are exaggerated, words can, at a certain point, no longer be related to a particular character or understood as a part of a communicative effort. Instead, they are perceived, simply, as words, in their visual materiality on the page or their acoustic materiality as a sequence of sounds. The particular rhythmical and musical qualities of these sounds even become (or can be easily be made)

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<sup>60</sup> Opel, Anna. *Sprachkörper. Zur Relation von Sprache und Körper in der zeitgenössischen Dramatik* – Werner Fritsch, Rainald Goetz, Sarah Kane. Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2002.

manifest in the body of the printed text, providing a “Sprachkörper” on a visible textual level.

The detachment of language from a speaker, however, does not only happen via repetitions and elliptical pattern but also through a conscious choice of monological dialogue, which is also popular in both kinds of theatre. I have referred to the monological quality of dialogues in *Mojo* and *Kosher Harry* in the chapter 8.1.2.1. on echoes<sup>61</sup> but have also indicated this tendency when talking about pseudocouples where two characters speak as one<sup>62</sup>. Obviously, in a dialogue where there is no antagonism, the comments of the characters become interchangeable and, thus, no longer relate to one character alone. If reinforced by rhythmic repetitions and elliptical patterns which blur argumentative structures and grammar, this might lead to the impression that, at a certain point, language takes on a life of its own and becomes independent of character. In Opel’s words, it is no longer the character that speaks but the language itself (180). While Opel derives her theory of the autonomy of language from looking at contemporary plays, the same issue has already been addressed in relation to absurdist theatre by Foucault. Trying to paraphrase Beckett, he claims that “the essence of language is the visible erasure of the speaker” (Foucault qtd. in Hunkeler 71), which fits in with Foucault’s own assessment of language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: in his opinion, the only thing which speaks “in its solitude, its fragile vibration, in its nothingness is the word itself” (Foucault qtd. in Sarasin 90).

This typically postmodern attitude to language is indeed not only realised practically by Beckett in his monological dialogues but even turned into an explicit theme of a famous bit of dialogue in *Godot*, where Vladimir and Estragon explain why they cannot stop talking:

ESTRAGON. It’s so we won’t hear.  
 VLADIMIR. We have our reasons.  
 ESTRAGON. All the dead voices.  
 VLADIMIR. They make a noise like wings.  
 ESTRAGON. Like leaves.  
 VLADIMIR. Like sand.  
 ESTRAGON. Like leaves.  
 [Silence.]  
 VLADIMIR. They all speak together.  
 ESTRAGON. Each one to itself.  
 [Silence.]

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<sup>61</sup> See pages 101, 102.

<sup>62</sup> See pages 50, 51.

VLADIMIR. Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON. They rustle.

VLADIMIR. They murmur.

ESTRAGON. They rustle.

[Silence.]

VLADIMIR. What do they say?

ESTRAGON. They talk about their lives.

VLADIMIR. To have lived is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON. They have to talk about it. (Beckett, *Complete* 58)

The form of this dialogue matches the content: Beckett's characters describe autonomous, bodiless voices which ceaselessly whisper words. The exact content of these words does not seem to be important, it is more the talking itself which bothers them. At the same time, they themselves, providing this description, are talking ceaselessly, producing repetitive, rhythmical patterns the content of which is interchangeable.

The autonomy of language which Anna Opel finds in contemporary plays, then, is already an important issue in absurdist theatre. I have, especially in the analysis of repetitive patterns, focussed very much on Beckett, but examples for language taking on a life and body of its own can certainly be found in other absurdist plays – one must only think of the monological, repetitive rant with which Goldberg and McCann cross-examine Stanley in *The Birthday Party* (quoted in the chapter on language as music<sup>63</sup>) or the dissolution of the conversation into completely unrelated words and sentences at the end of Ionesco's *The Bald Primadonna* an example of which I have included in the discussion of elliptical patterns<sup>64</sup>. In both cases, it seems to be the language which controls the speaker and not the other way around. However, most absurdist playwrights, especially Beckett and Pinter in their early plays, like to maintain an impression of ordinary dialogue, the absurdity of which is only exposed subtly and gradually with only occasional bursts where the language runs riot. This subtle game with the conventions of ordinary language enables the absurdist to comment indirectly on the problematic relationship of language and reality in the modern world, turning the failure of language as a means of communication or the basic impossibility of communication into a theme of their plays<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup>See page 108.

<sup>64</sup>See page 92.

<sup>65</sup>Esslin has commented extensively on this aspect of language in absurdist theatre. Thus, he talks about the basic "devaluation" of language in the theatre of the absurd as a response to the way in which language appears to be more and more "in contradiction to reality" in the modern world (*Th. o. Abs.*

Many in-*yer-face* playwrights, as we have seen, use the same basic devices as absurdist playwrights to focus attention on the language itself. However, devices such as repetitive and elliptical patterns or monological structures are used more frequently and less subtly. As a consequence, the artificiality and absurdity of the dialogue is often more noticeable and the impression of the language having a life of its own, as an autonomous body, is stronger. While absurdist playwrights, then, are beginning to recognise the autonomy and materiality of language in combination with the impossibility of communication, certain in-*yer-face* authors like Kane, Butterworth and Grosso (Nagy and Ridley, I would argue, are closer to Beckett's early plays in their rather realistic rendering of dialogue) already seem to be travelling in the materiality of sound and rhythm, having, more or less, accepted the postmodern concept of language as an autonomous force as a given. In this tendency, some in-*yer-face* authors are closer to Beckett's later monologue plays, which no longer pretend to provide meaningful dialogue related to characters and their opinions but feature language itself as an autonomous body within the drama.

## 9. Experiential theatre, sensibilities and the influence of absurdist theatre on in-*yer-face* plays

As my analysis has shown, many parallels and similarities are to be found between absurdist and in-*yer-face* theatre. At the same time, it is never easy to prove the direct influence of one artistic style on another. With absurdist theatre, this is particularly difficult, since it has had such a strong impact: there are few theatrical and dramatic forms in the second half of the twentieth century which do not contain elements which could be traced back, somehow, to the theatre of the absurd. Of course, some authors openly acknowledge influences. Thus, Sarah Kane comments on influences, claiming, for example, that she was "steeped in Beckett" when writing *Blasted*, and also suggesting that the first third of the play might have been influenced by Pinter (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 102). Phyllis Nagy, as Sierz suggests, also acknowledges Beckett's influence (49). Other in-*yer-face* writers, however, openly reject the idea of having been influenced by other authors. Sierz notes, for example, that Jez Butterworth, "like many young writers [...] rejects any talk of theatrical influences, claiming to have seen very few plays" (*In-Yer-Face* 164). Being asked for the

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407) and claims that absurdist theatre shows communication between human beings to be "in a state of breakdown" (409).

inspiration behind *Mojo*, Butterworth simply admits to having “listened to a lot of Tom Waits” (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 164). Similarly, Nick Grosso states that when he started writing and joined the writers’ group at the Royal Court’s Young People’s Theatre, he “knew nothing about the theatre” (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 182).

That writers do not themselves recognize any influences, however, is not to say that such influences have not been at work. After all, many in-*yer-face* writers have moved in circles where they are very likely to have got into contact with Beckett and absurdist theatre in some way or another. Thus, Kane studied drama at Bristol University (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 91); Nagy took a creative writing course in college and then entered the dramatic writing programme at New York University (49) and Ridley, while studying fine art at St Martin’s School of Art, acted in an experimental theatre group (42). Butterworth read English at Cambridge (164) and even Grosso (who never studied English or drama) went through a writing programme at the Royal Court Theatre, as I have already indicated. Even if the in-*yer-face* writers mentioned above had not got to know Beckett and his contemporaries directly in those contexts, they would have got in touch with absurdist ideas on writing drama indirectly, via other authors who employed similar techniques. In any case, the memorable and very Beckettian image of the two dustbins in Butterworth’s *Mojo*, a play which bears so many other similarities to Beckett on levels of language, dialogue, character constellation and plot structure, indicates that an influence might also be at work where it is not recognized or acknowledged.

On the whole, then, a certain amount of influence of the theatre of the absurd on in-*yer-face* plays can hardly be denied. However, in determining the actual significance of this influence, it might be rewarding, in addition to pinpointing and analysing similarities in different areas, to consider whether the combination of these similar elements also achieves a similar overall effect in both kinds of drama. That is, we must ask whether the combined similar elements also produce a similar kind of theatre. Concerning this matter, I have already suggested in chapter 2, where I have introduced possible parameters for comparison, that both in-*yer-face* and absurdist plays combine the various dramatic elements to produce a kind of drama which puts experience before rational understanding. They seem to aim at a theatre which, in its overall conception, can be said to be experiential rather than argumentative.



### **9.1. Artaud, absurdist theatre and in-ver-face plays: experiential theatre**

The term ‘experiential’ has mostly been associated with in-ver-face theatre. Thus, Aleks Sierz employs it in his basic definition of British theatre of the 1990s in the sense of a theatre of sensation which gets under one’s skin and takes one on an emotional journey (*In-Yer-Face* 4). Rabey believes that in-ver-face theatre as a whole should “more gracefully and precisely” be termed experiential. According to him, it “challenges the conventional responses of both audience member and performer, through emphasis on ‘confrontation’ brought to its physical conclusion” offering “an experience rather than a description or explanation of experience [...]” (195). Sarah Kane herself referred to the kind of theatre she was trying to write as experiential, describing a performance of Jeremy Weller’s *Mad* in 1992 which deeply fascinated her: “It was a very unusual piece of theatre because it was totally experiential. As an audience member, I was taken to a place of extreme mental discomfort and distress and then popped out at the other end” (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 92). Also, after having attended a concert of a rock group in Edinburgh, Kane claims to have found herself “longing for a kind of theatre that could speak so directly to an audience’s experience” (qtd. in Saunders 17). In-ver-face theatre, then, has often been commented on for its experiential quality.

While the term experiential does not occur as often in relation to absurdist theatre, the basic experiential quality of absurdist plays has been implied by scholars. Esslin, for example, quotes Eva Metman, who says, in an essay on Beckett:

This new form of drama forces the audience out of its familiar orientation. It creates a vacuum between the play and the audience so that the latter is compelled to experience something itself [...] The vacuum between what is shown on the stage and the onlooker has become so unbearable that the latter has no alternative but either to reject and turn away or to be drawn into the enigma of the plays [...] (qtd. in Esslin, *Th. o. Abs.* 412)

Once the spectator has been drawn into the play’s enigma, Esslin claims, “he is compelled to come to terms with his experience. The stage supplies him with a number of disjointed clues that he has to fit into a meaningful pattern. In this manner, he is forced to make a creative effort of his own, an effort at interpretation and integration.” (413). David Bradby does not talk about absurdist plays in general but openly refers to the “experiential dimension” of *Waiting for Godot* (28). By writing a play about waiting, producing a plot in which nothing happens, Beckett, he believes, “obliges the audience to share the experience, in real time, of what it is to wait” (25).

As the comments quoted above suggest, the experiential quality of in-*yer-face* plays seems to arise from different dramaturgical factors than that of absurdist plays. Thus, Rabey relates experiential theatre to “confrontation brought to its physical conclusion”, directly linking it to the depiction of violence on stage. In Sierz’ definition, this link is less obvious, but in his book, he also mentions the experiential quality of in-*yer-face* plays in connection with effects of shock, sensation and confrontation which are mainly achieved through the acting out of physical violence in front of an audience. The experiential quality of absurdist plays, on the other hand, is defined with regard to a general disorientation of the spectator caused by the fact that traditional rules of dramatic plot and action are violated and only incoherent bits of information are given. That is, the experiential quality is found to be arising from discontinuities in the dramatic form rather than violent images. Aleks Sierz very well summed up this contrast, claiming that “[absurdist theatre] is cool and disrupts by means of destabilising our reason; the other [in-*yer-face* theatre] is hot and disrupts by means of attacking our senses. Both, perhaps, might be called experiential theatre” (*Re: In-*yer-face* vs. abs. th.*).

Since, however, my comparison of in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre above has brought out a number of parallels on the formal levels of structure, character conception and dialogue, it seems necessary to consider in how far in-*yer-face* plays might be understood as experiential in the same way as absurdist plays, not only with regard to visual sensation but also with regard to the aspect of the destabilising of reason. In order to do this, an understanding of Artaud’s basic ideas on theatre is helpful. For, although he can not be said to have entirely invented it, he was the first one to envision and, with great passion, develop the concept of a theatre which aimed at letting the audience live through an actual experience.

Artaud’s writings themselves are often poetic to the point of confusion rather than argumentative, and there are numerous contradictions to be found in the essays outlining his famous theatre of cruelty. Basically, however, the theatre he advocates is experiential in the sense that it is supposed to have the power of affecting the audience not only intellectually but also emotionally, sensually and even physically:

The spectator who comes to our theatre knows that he is to undergo a real operation in which not only his mind but his senses and his flesh are at stake. Henceforth he will go to the theater the way he goes to the surgeon or the dentist. In the same state of mind – knowing , of course, that he will not die, but that it is a serious thing, and that he will not come out of it unscathed....[...] (Artaud qtd. in Plunka 23)

As this passage suggests, Artaud was very serious about the experiential quality of his theatre of cruelty. Still, his verbal fervour has led many scholars to take his suggestions literally, with Plunka actually claiming, for example, that “the purpose of the theatre of cruelty is to transform the human body, the flesh” (23). This rather esoteric interpretation of the theatre of cruelty is certainly supported by Artaud’s interest in rites of foreign cultures<sup>66</sup> and numerous passages of passionate writing on theatre. But, as Christopher Innes, in his assessment of Artaud, claims, it is problematic to attempt an explanation of the theatre of cruelty based on Artaud’s theoretical writings, which mostly “revolve around abstract concepts which are oracular” (*Avant garde* 61). Also, one should take into account that Artaud said about his own writing: “I cannot write without enthusiasm and I always go too far” (qtd. in Innes, *Avant garde* 63). A clearer image of what Artaud wanted his experiential theatre to achieve in theatrical practice can be derived from looking at actual productions under his supervision. Having taken this approach, Innes finds that most of Artaud’s ideas were not too hard to put into practice. For example, Artaud seemed quite satisfied with his production of *The Cenci*<sup>67</sup> although the outcome was “far from the total and revolutionary upheaval of traditional drama that his followers credit him with”. Innes concludes that “leaving aside Artaud’s metaphysical abstractions (those notional theatres of ordeal or exorcism), what he actually tried to achieve was an intense emotional response [...]” (*Avant garde* 88). Also, in spite of Artaud’s constant attempts to explain theatre’s effects on the audience in physical and bodily terms by comparing it, for example, to the plague<sup>68</sup> or simply by calling it ‘cruel’, the central issue for him seems to have been to bring out the contrast between a rational and an emotional, sensual or intuitive response to theatre. Thus, there are many passages in his writings where he refers to this contrast. He states, for example: “I believe only in the violence of what stirs my marrow, not in the evidence of what addresses itself to my reason” (qtd. in Plunka 22). Furthermore, Artaud once wrote: “I might be forced to admit that experience can help me to verify a hypothesis, but it will never make me give up something I have *felt* to be true. I believe only in my intuition.” (qtd. in Plunka 23). Thus, one might regard Artaud’s esoteric concepts as images and

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<sup>66</sup> As Plunka notes, Artaud studied Chinese, Tibetan, Indian and Balinese rites and even travelled to Mexico to get to know the rituals of Indian culture (12).

<sup>67</sup> *The Cenci* was one of the few theatrical productions which Artaud actually realised and supervised in his life. It premiered on 6 May 1935 in Paris (Plunka 12).

<sup>68</sup> See Artaud’s essay “Theatre and the Plague” in *The Theatre and its Double*.

metaphors, designed to bring out what seems to have been most important to him: the difference between a traditional theatre which addresses itself to reason and a theatre which attempts to make the audience feel and actually experience something.

It is through this more differentiated view of Artaud's vision of theatre that one can understand its link to absurdist theatre. This link becomes quite obvious if we look at the specific measures which Artaud implemented to make his theatre 'cruel' and, therefore, experiential. His theatrical cruelty does not depend on the depiction of cruelty on stage, that is, on content, but on form: the way in which the different elements of a theatrical performance are being used and put together. Artaud's leading principle here was a rejection of traditional realism and representational theatre with its inherent reliance on "discursive thought and analytical reasoning", which he criticized for redirecting the spectator "away from instinct or a strictly visceral response to the performances" (Plunka 24). In order to prevent rational responses, Artaud abandoned the dramatic conventions of realism on most levels. Thus, Innes notes that Artaud "reduced the traditional plot [of *The Cenci*] to an outline of brutal simplicity by cutting the self-justification and self-analysis, the tremors of motive or conscience out of which conventional dramatic psychology is built up" (*Avant garde* 66). His characters are supposed to embody metaphysical states of being rather than fully rounded real-life individuals: they are supposed to represent "total man": the characterization in *The Cenci*, for example, was "deliberately unrealistic" and allowed "barely enough personalizing traits for psychological plausibility" (Innes, *Avant garde* 81). Also, Artaud called for an evocative stage design, using real objects but without canvas or painted cardboard in the background which would have provided a naturalistic illusion<sup>69</sup>. Instead, the objects would be presented in unnatural order, unusual size or in slightly distorted perspectives. In production, this resulted in a "hallucinatory mix of actuality and distortion", a kind of "heightening of reality" (Innes, *Avant garde* 74). Furthermore, Artaud attributed great importance to the body on the stage. Thus, he was looking for a language of gestures and movement, proposing "a theatre in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator" (Artaud qtd. in Plunka 27). Practically, this meant that Artaud would work towards stylization of the stage action in which the movements of the actors would be patterned with great precision and according to geometrical shapes (Innes, *Avant garde* 68). The visual component

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<sup>69</sup> Thus, Plunka quotes Artaud saying that "there will be no sets, properly speaking; objects will provide the sets, they will be employed to create theatrical landscapes" (28).

was to be complemented by the use of lighting, designed to produce the most intense impressions of “warmth, cold, fury or fear” (Esslin, *Artaud* 85). Finally, Artaud attributed the highest importance to the non-rational use of language. Thus, he did not wholly reject the use of language in the theatre but believed that “words must be primarily concerned with satisfying the senses” (Plunka 24) and that language should be “appreciated for its sonority and rhythmic, incantatory qualities” (26). In his performance of *The Cenci*, for example, the dialogue was “neither conversational nor conventionally dramatic, but orchestrated for musical effect, and with the delivery formalized to create clear rhythms” (Innes, *Avant garde* 76).

Artaud’s experiential theatre, then, works on two main levels. On the one hand, it bypasses discursive thinking by providing material which is primarily directed towards the senses, such as language based on sounds, evocative lighting and the use of the body as a major means of expression, moving on the stage in a stylized, choreographed manner. On the other hand, by rejecting linear and discursive structures in the area of plot and characterization, his theatre undermines audience expectations, creating the vacuum between the stage and the audience which Eva Metman has observed with regard to absurdist plays<sup>70</sup> and which forces the spectators to experience the insecurities and discontinuities contained in plot and characterization themselves. The two aspects of experiential theatre are combined in Artaud on the level of stage design which, obviously, provides a sensual impression but also messes with expectations, reason and logic by employing distorted perspectives.

As this overview of Artaud’s concept of an experiential theatre shows, he had not only, as Esslin claims, “formulated some of the basic tendencies of the Theatre of the Absurd by the early 1930s” (*Th. o. Abs.* 384). It is also these tendencies which form the most useful parameters for tracing the influence of absurdist theatre on in-yer-face theatre. Thus, both kinds of theatre, as we have seen, reject a linear development of plot, focussing on sequences of events rather than meaningful action based on motives and character psychology. Also, both embrace the concept of unpredictable “open” characters; lacking psychological plausibility, these characters, in a sense, embody “total man” or “all humanity”, as Estragon puts it in *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, *Complete* 78): they are, essentially, the insecurity and discontinuous experience of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century made flesh, with this metaphysical status being

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<sup>70</sup> See quote on page 121.

supported by the fact that the characters are also eccentric individuals on the fringes of society. The approach to stage design is also experiential in the Artaudian sense in in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre: I have shown how both kinds of drama, like the theatre of cruelty, attempt a heightened realism, using isolated objects as scenic markers, producing spaces which are neither completely abstract nor entirely naturalistic. What adds to the hallucinatory, dream-like quality of these spaces in absurdist and in-*yer-face* theatre is the uncertainty about the offstage space which spectators experience due to the lack of information given about this space. In another parallel to Artaud, absurdist and in-*yer-face* authors rely on the theatrical power of physical imagery involving the body on the stage. They direct the focus onto the actors' bodies by presenting them as dysfunctional, violated or by letting them perform stylized activities - routines and rituals- which, to a certain degree, even involve patterned and choreographed movement. As the chapter on the body of language has shown, absurdist and in-*yer-face* theatre, like Artaud, focus on the material qualities of the language. They are undermining its traditional function as a means of communication and argumentation, bringing out instead its sensual qualities through the dissolution of meaning in elliptical or repetitive structures and the simultaneous organization of utterances into rhythmical patterns.

Considering the similarities between absurdist and in-*yer-face* theatre against the background of Artaud's theatre of cruelty, then, not only reveals their closeness to this experiential concept of drama. It also clarifies that the experiential quality of the in-*yer-face* plays is created only partly through staged violence and atrocities; other elements of dramaturgy and form which, outlined by Artaud, have been further developed and made popular in the theatre of the absurd, are, as we have seen, just as important for the experiential quality of in-*yer-face* plays. As the following quote shows, Sarah Kane herself was very much aware of this: "What makes the play experiential is its form. In *Blasted*, the form and content attempt to be one. The form is the meaning", she says. When, in the second half of the play, the English hotel room setting without warning is blown up and transforms into a war zone, profoundly confusing an audience used to theatrical realism, the play is "putting the audience through the experience they have previously only witnessed" (Kane qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 98).

## **9.2. From the 1950s to the 1990s – influences or sensibilities?**

The fact that both absurdists and in-*yer-face* writers seem to produce experiential theatre, then, might be taken as an argument in favour of an influence. Saunders, however, draws parallels between Kane's work and Artaud quite independently from the theatre of the absurd (16), indicating that any similarities between her plays and the theatre of the absurd with regard to the experiential quality might not have anything to do with a direct influence of the absurdists on Kane. Moreover, in an interview from 1998 (a time at which she had already written most of her plays), Kane expressed her admiration for Artaud's concept but also claimed that she had "only started reading him very recently" (qtd. in Saunders 16), which even rules out an immediate influence of Artaud on her work. If we also take into account, once again, the statements of in-*yer-face* writers who claim not to have been influenced by any writer or any kind of drama in particular, it seems necessary to consider reasons other than an influence to account for the similarities between in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre.

Such another explanation for the similarities between in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre might be provided by considering that experiential theatre in Artaud, the absurdists and in-*yer-face* plays is not experiential in an entirely neutral way. That is, the experiential quality is connected to a particular kind or level of experience. For example, the experiences which Artaud's theatre of cruelty is trying to reproduce clearly transcend everyday issues such as politics, love and friendship, touching metaphysical spheres, as the following statement (in which Artaud - poetically, but briefly - sums up the purpose of his theatre) suggests: "The heavens can still fall upon our heads. And the theatre exists, in the first place, to teach us that" (qtd. in Esslin, *Artaud* 82). According to Artaud, "[...] theatre ought to pursue a re-examination not only of all aspects of an objective, descriptive outside world, but also all aspects of an inner world, that is to say man viewed metaphysically, by every means at its disposal" (Artaud 71). Obviously, then, Artaud is interested in fundamental human experiences rather than concrete everyday problems and issues.

The theatre of the absurd, as its name already implies, is also occupied with more essential, general problems of human existence. In this case, these have been summarised under the term 'absurdity'. The human issues which are being discussed in absurdist theatre are not conceived as vaguely and generally metaphysical as in Artaud. They are more closely related to life in the twentieth century and might be

termed 'existential'. Thus, Esslin defines 'absurdity' in reference to Camus and Ionesco, as a condition characterised by a general rootlessness and lack of orientation in a world where religious faith is declining, "a world of shattered beliefs" (Esslin, *Th. o. Abs.* 23): "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Ionesco qtd. in Esslin, *Th. o. Abs.* 23).

In-*yer-face* plays, of course, are even less metaphysically conceived and, in many ways, more down-to-earth (in the sense of more realistic and less dream-like) than absurdist plays. But they, too, can be regarded as touching human concerns which run deeper than more superficial considerations of friendship, love relationships, politics or morals. Thus, Rabey claims that in-*yer-face* theatre, in questioning "the binary oppositions involved in the distinctions of being human [...] shows existential definition confronting an abjection" (195). This, then, animates "ancient fears about the power of the irrational and the fragility of our sense of the world" (Sierz qtd. in Rabey 195). Furthermore, Sierz points to the "rootless" individuals which inhabit in-*yer-face* plays and to their "helplessness and anxiety" which he regards as being not only "sexual, moral" but "existential" (*In-Yer-Face* 238). He also claims that "behind the violence of these plays, lies anger and confusion – a typical response to the difficulties of living in a post-Christian, post-Marxist, postfeminist and postmodern society" (240).

It is not very hard to see that the basic issues which seem to dominate absurdist and in-*yer-face* theatre are very similar, and, in a general way, also correspond to Artaud's idea that "the heavens can still fall on our head": a metaphysical or, at least, existential insecurity pervades these plays, and I would like to suggest at this point that it is the experience of a fundamental uncertainty about oneself and the world - an attitude which has been categorised as nihilistic by many<sup>71</sup> - which constitutes the conceptual core of experiential theatre. As we have seen, it is this very uncertainty and discontinuity which is not only discussed or demonstrated but actually reproduced in

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<sup>71</sup> With in-*yer-face* theatre, the term 'nihilism' or 'nihilistic' often pops up in reviews of plays and in attempts to describe the new theatrical aesthetic. Thus, Kane and Ravenhill, to name but one example, have been referred to as 'New Nihilists' (Wolf qtd. in Urban 44); Ken Urban devotes a whole article to exploring the significance of cruelty for the nihilism he has discovered in in-*yer-face* plays (Urban 38-55), and Rabey talks about the "arguably nihilistic" displays of "social decay, severed isolation and degradation into aimlessness" in in-*yer-face* plays (192). Absurdist theatre is traditionally being related to existentialism, for which nihilism, in denying the universe any sort of intelligibility or meaning and human existence any purpose, value or justification, is a prerequisite. Also, trying to explain the significance of the absurd in the plays of Beckett & Co, the first thing Esslin refers to is Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and the idea that "[...] God is dead" which lies at the very heart of a nihilist sensibility (*Th. o. Abs.* 399).



experiential plays. Parallel to the way in which this experience of uncertainty and rootlessness touches us at the core of our being, it also finds its way to the core of the plays – their very form and structure. It is quite significant, in this context, that Sierz has always insisted on talking about an in-*yer*-face ‘sensibility’, whereby sensibility refers to “a mixture of emotion and ideas, of feeling and, if you will, ideology” (Sierz, *Interview* 142)<sup>72</sup>. In doing so, he is drawing attention to the fact that the aesthetic and form of these plays is not the result of a unified theatrical movement or project but arising naturally from the ‘zeitgeist’. Esslin, actually, has done the same for Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter by relating their plays to the philosophy of existentialism and the related concept of the absurdity of human existence, which could be regarded as a major sensibility of the 1950s. Regarding the question of an influence of absurdist theatre on in-*yer*-face plays, then, this means that we must consider that the similarities which have been uncovered in the form of the plays might also be the result of similarities in sensibility and ‘zeitgeist’ in the 1950s and the 1990s.

## 10. Conclusion

As the last chapter has shown, parallels between in-*yer*-face and absurdist theatre can not only be discovered on a formal, structural level but also with regard to sensibilities and attitude to life which is expressed, among other means, through the form of the plays. It might be rewarding to take a closer look at the relationship between form and the meaning in plays from both in-*yer*-face and absurdist theatre, considering the question whether experiential theatre is inherently linked to a metaphysical sensibility and/or vice versa. A closer examination of the nature of the absurdist and in-*yer*-face sensibilities might also yield interesting results. This, however, would go beyond the scope of this thesis which is primarily concerned with finding a traceable influence of absurdist theatre on in-*yer*-face plays. In this context, the idea of an experiential theatre linked to a general metaphysical sensibility has helped to contextualise both kinds of drama within the theatrical landscapes of the twentieth century and to critically consider the very idea of an influence. Taking into consideration the wide variety of formal aspects in the context of which similarities can be found, we may conclude that in-*yer*-face theatre is hardly

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<sup>72</sup> Thus, Sierz claims that “a new sensibility has become the norm in British theatre” on the very first pages of his book on in-*yer*-face theatre (4). Also, he keeps bringing up the term ‘sensibility’ in interviews and articles on the subject (*Interview* 144, *We all need stories*).

imaginable without the range of innovations introduced to theatre by absurdist playwrights in the 1950s. Thus, parallels can be discovered on almost every level of dramatic writing and performance, from plot structure, character conception, concepts of space, over ways of using the physical presence of the actor's body and the use and build-up of language and dialogue. Of course, not every in-*yer-face* play shows similarities to absurdist theatre in every single category of comparison, and the degree of similarity varies from play to play and from author to author. Also, the categories for comparison have been rather generally conceived, which leaves room for discovering similar tendencies along with direct influences. Still, the accumulation of similarities on a number of different levels along with the frequent occurrence of very obvious parallels and the shared conception of theatre as basically experiential make the idea of an influence of absurdist on in-*yer-face* theatre quite plausible.

In spite of all this, the comparison has shown that in-*yer-face* theatre is very much a product of its time and a postmodernist sensibility. Thus, British playwrights of the 1990s might have picked up the formal innovations of the 1950s absurdist avant-garde but they have combined them – in a manner quite typical of the postmodernist spirit – with other elements. This has also been noted by Merle Tönnies, who states that “despite their preference for an overall ‘unreal’ mode of presentation, the 1990s plays after all characteristically included certain profoundly ‘realistic’ elements” (65). In her opinion, “the 1990s plays pushed the social realism of 1960s drama to its limits, while combining it with the dream-like effects that characterised a rather different strand of the original Theatre of Cruelty”. While this mixing of existing genres could be regarded as a lack of consequence in their artistic vision, one might as well consider that “the sense of a liminal existence at the *fin de siècle* apparently led to the desire to explore the limits of representation in the chosen medium by exploiting all available dramatic means” (66).

Thus, in-*yer-face* plays, for example, like to produce structures of stagnation, revelling in the depiction of meaningless action for large parts of their plays. However, in contrast to absurdist plays, which are often perfectly circular, they mostly resolve this stagnation at the end through unexpected events, a catastrophe or a character who turns out to be capable of meaningful action after all – elements which link in-*yer-face* plays to other, more traditional theatrical styles. Similarly, while absurdist writers like to leave their characters entirely open and ambiguous, in-*yer-face* authors seem to play with the concept of open character for some time and

then gradually begin to provide more information and motivation. In some cases, they also combine characters who remain entirely enigmatic throughout the play with characters whose motivation and psychology are (or become) relatively obvious. Along with this less radical approach to openness of character, in-*yer-face* characters are not as fundamentally, existentially unsure about themselves as the characters in absurdist theatre, but the loss of identity is still significant here, as can be deduced from the prominence of aspects which I have shown to be related to this matter: the frequent occurrence of the pseudocouple-constellation and instances of an autonomously acting environment. In-*yer-face* theatre also picks up from absurdist theatre the concept of the discontinuous, dysfunctional individual as the 20<sup>th</sup> century everyman, but depicts these outsiders and their social context in more detail, adding a touch of social realism to the plays which is not present in absurdist drama. With regard to setting, the uncertainty of the offstage spaces constitutes an important element in the overall conception of in-*yer-face* plays but, in contrast to absurdist theatre, more details concerning the nature of this space are usually given. This reduces the feeling of a general uncertainty about the universe ‘out there’ and invests the offstage with a more real, concrete kind of threat, making the play less metaphysically and more realistically uncomfortable.

Concerning language, the approach of in-*yer-face* authors is, once again, similar to that of the absurdists. By focussing on the characteristic elliptical and repetitive patterns of colloquial, ordinary speech, they develop a dialogue which draws attention to the material qualities of language. Within the context of the more realistic character conception, however, these colloquial dialogue patterns, at the same time, become elements of a social realism in in-*yer-face* theatre. Paradoxically, it is also in-*yer-face* authors who are more prone to producing unnatural pounders of repetitions and rhythmical passages which demonstrate a postmodern playfulness and pleasure in dissolving meaningful language into sounds. This attitude is, to a certain extent, opposed to the absurdists’ melancholy about the dissolution of meaning, which finds its expression in either a more cautious use of rhythms and repetitive patterns or a very demonstrative rejection of meaningful dialogue which can be found in Ionesco and Beckett’s later plays.

Finally, one of the most obvious differences between in-*yer-face* and absurdist plays lies in their use and depiction of violence. The heavy use of violence in in-*yer-face* theatre – especially when considered in the context of routine, ritual and bodily

dysfunction – certainly recalls absurdist theatre’s basic tendency of focussing attention on the body as a physical entity with an expressivity of its own. However, with in-*yer-face* authors including more detailed and realistic depictions of violence and with violent incidents occurring very frequently, violence assumes a sensationalist quality in in-*yer-face* plays which is closer to Edward Bond or Howard Barker’s *Theatre of Catastrophe* than to the absurdist tradition. Also, the detailed and realistic depiction of violent scenes in combination with other ‘realistic’ elements included in the plays certainly adds a degree of (social) realism to the violence in in-*yer-face* theatre.

All in all, then, it can be said that in-*yer-face* theatre, in spite of sharing many fundamental features with absurdist theatre, is a very distinct theatrical aesthetic. It is less unified and more playful in its approach to form (especially with regard to plot and character), more down-to-earth and realistic, maybe even materialistic, in its approach and, generally, less metaphysically anguished. What it shares with absurdist theatre, apart from parallels on the formal level, is a concern with fundamental questions of existence and the ability to make the audience feel and experience a play rather than rationally understand or analyze it. It is difficult to say in how far basic similarities between in-*yer-face* and absurdist theatre are the result of an influence. Considering the idea of an in-*yer-face* sensibility and the virtuosity of in-*yer-face* authors in combining different elements, creating a new aesthetic, it seems quite possible that the authors of the 1990s have rediscovered some of the techniques which I have presented as typical of the theatre of the absurd on their own, in the creative process. I believe, therefore, that the obvious similarities are due partly to an influence, whether direct or indirect, and partly to similarities in the 1950s and 1990s general and artistic ‘*zeitgeist*’. However, one may safely conclude that the theatrical aesthetic which has come to be known as in-*yer-face* theatre could not have developed without the formal innovations which were made popular by the theatre of the absurd some fifty years earlier.

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## **Zusammenfassung**

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit befasst sich mit möglichen Einflüssen des absurden Theaters auf englischsprachige „In-yer-face“-Theaterstücke der 1990er. Dies geschieht durch einen Stückevergleich, wobei die Stückauswahl für beide Arten des Theaters relativ breit gestreut ist. So werden, was das absurde Theater betrifft, Hauptwerke von Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet und Harold Pinter mit fünf Stücken von verschiedenen Autoren (Sarah Kane, Philip Ridley, Jez Butterworth, Phyllis Nagy, Nick Grosso) aus dem Bereich des In-yer-face - Theaters verglichen. Der Vergleich an sich ist in verschiedene Themenbereiche gegliedert, welche die folgenden Teilaspekte abdecken: allgemeine Struktur (Aufteilung in Akte und Szenen; Raum- und Charakterkonfigurationen), Entwicklung der Handlung, Charakterkonzeption, Raumkonzeption, der Körper auf der Bühne, Sprache und Dialog. Im letzten Kapitel werden absurdes Theater und In-yer-face -Theater in den historischen Kontext eines experientellen Theaters der Grausamkeit nach Antonin Artaud gestellt. Die Möglichkeit eines Einflusses wird in diesem Licht noch einmal kritisch hinterfragt.

Die Ähnlichkeiten zwischen absurdem und In-yer-face - Theater, von denen nach mehreren eindrücklichen Theatererlebnissen, dem erstmaligen Lesen der Stücke und der Auseinandersetzung mit der Sekundärliteratur in dieser Diplomarbeit ausgegangen wird, werden im Vergleich zumeist bestätigt. So neigen die jungen englischsprachigen Schriftsteller der 1990er genau wie jene zu den absurden gezählten Autoren dazu, die Handlung stagnieren zu lassen. Charaktere werden wenig definiert, kaum psychologisch motiviert und handeln äußerst widersprüchlich. Wie im Theater des Absurden sind Spielräume in In-yer-face - Stücken zwar an die Realität angelehnt aber niemals vollkommen realistisch, und albtraumhafte Ungewissheit herrscht über Allem, was über den sichtbaren Bühnenraum hinausgeht. Ähnlich dem absurden Theater inszeniert auch In-yer-face - Theater den Körper an sich als Ausdruckselement auf der Bühne, wenn auch oft durch physische Gewalt und sexuelle Intermezzi, was im absurden Theater nicht in derselben Häufigkeit zu beobachten ist. Was Sprache und Dialog betrifft, produzieren In-yer-face -Autoren – wiederum ähnlich den Schriftstellern des Absurden – oft elliptische, repetitive Strukturen, die an die Alltagssprache angelehnt sind und musikalisch anmutende Muster erzeugen. Dies deutet auf ein grundsätzliches Verständnis von Sprache als

Material statt primär als Bedeutungsträger hin, welches offensichtlich bei Autoren beider Theaterrichtungen vorhanden ist.

Trotz all dieser Ähnlichkeiten ist festzuhalten, dass In-yer-face - Theater zwar oft auf die vom absurden Theater salonfähig gemachten dramatischen Mittel zurückgreift, diese aber variiert und mit traditionelleren Elementen bzw. Elementen aus anderen Theaterrichtungen kombiniert. Somit erschaffen In-yer-face - Autoren schlussendlich eine eigenständige theatralische Ästhetik, die in ihrer spielerischen Vielfältigkeit und ihrem Formenreichtum durchaus als postmodern bezeichnet werden kann. Aufgrund vieler grundlegender Ähnlichkeiten mit dem absurden Theater kommt diese Diplomarbeit aber trotzdem zu dem Schluss, dass auch In-yer-face - Theaterstücke, obwohl sie oft (sozial-)realistische Elemente enthalten, der Tradition des experientellen Theaters nach Artaud zugeordnet werden können, welches eher darauf abzielt, den Zuseher durch Bilder und Sinneseindrücke in bestimmte Gefühlszustände zu versetzen und ihn das Gesehene selbst erleben zu lassen, als ihm ein realistisches, aus der Distanz zu beobachtendes und zu analysierendes Abbild der Welt anzubieten. Was die konkrete Frage eines Einflusses des absurden Theaters auf In-yer-face - Autoren betrifft, so ist zu beachten, dass bestimmte metaphysische Welterfahrungen, die im experientellen Theater traditionellerweise vermittelt werden, die Verwendung bestimmter theatralischer Mittel erfordern. Aus diesem Grund könnten manche grundsätzliche Ähnlichkeiten die dramatischen Mittel betreffend auch einem ähnlichen Lebensgefühl, einer ähnlichen Sensibilität in den 1950ern bzw. den 1990ern geschuldet sein. Angesichts vieler eindeutiger Parallelen ist ein gewisser Einfluss des absurden Theaters auf das In-yer-face - Theater der 1990er im Allgemeinen aber nicht zu verleugnen.

## Wissenschaftlicher Lebenslauf

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- Spezialisierung auf englisches Drama im Anglistikstudium: Seminare und Vorlesungen zu den Schwerpunkten William Shakespeare, Interpreting and Rewriting Shakespeare, Englischs Theater im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert, Witchcraft Plays, Restoration and 18th Century Drama und Englischs Drama im 20. Jahrhundert
- Wahlfächer aus Theaterwissenschaft als praktische Ergänzung zum literaturwissenschaftlichen Dramenschwerpunkt im Anglistikstudium
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