

THE NEW ABSURDIST: ELEMENTS OF THE ABSURD IN NEW
RUSSIAN DRAMA

by

Andrew Bedoy

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As members of the Master’s Committee, we certify that we have read the thesis prepared by Andrew Bedoy, titled The New Absurdist: Elements of the Absurd in New Russian Drama and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Master’s Degree.

Colleen Lucey

Colleen Lucey

Date: Jan 12, 2022

John Leafgren

John Leafgren

Date: Jan 12, 2022

BJ

Benjamin Jens

Date: Jan 12, 2022

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon the candidate’s submission of the final copies of the thesis to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this thesis prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the Master’s requirement.

Colleen Lucey

Colleen Lucey

Master’s Thesis Committee Chair
Department of Russian & Slavic Studies

Date: Jan 12, 2022



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Abstract

This thesis examines the importance of the absurd in Russia's New Drama movement. Three different plays are analyzed: *Russian National Postal Service* (1998) by Oleg Bogaev, *Vodka, Fucking, and Television* (2006) by Maksim Kurochkin, and *Man from Podolsk* (2017) by Dimitrii Danilov. Each work is used to examine a different aspect of the absurd in the Russian context. Using these plays, which are some of the more prominent works of New Drama, the thesis demonstrates how the socio-political circumstances affected playwriting in the post-Soviet period. The goal is to show how upheaval, confusion, and changing circumstances bore out in the theater scene through a push towards Absurdism in playwriting. The three plays are analyzed through in-depth close reading that connects New Drama to the Theater of the Absurd and Albert Camus' philosophical writings. Ultimately, the thesis shows that what ties New Drama together is not an overemphasis on documentary style (as many scholars have argued), but a distinct reworking of Absurdism to express Russian reality.

Introduction

A man is interrogated by two policemen about the city in which he lives; he has committed no crime, and is asked questions which no one could reasonably be expected to answer. An old man sits alone in his apartment with no one to talk to and nothing to do so he begins to write letters to himself from increasingly bizarre senders. A writer argues with Vodka, Fucking, and Television, sure that one of them must leave his life, unable to choose which should go. The three scenarios above are each the premise of a work from Russia's New Drama movement, and though the plots bear no practical resemblance with one another, they all share a common irrational quality. It is not that these works are nonsensical, far from it. Rather it would be better to say that these works share an absurdist framework, particularly when one thinks about these plays and their authors in the context of the Theatre of the Absurd. Though the Theatre of the Absurd predated Russian New Drama by several decades, contemporary Russian drama draws a clear link in themes, imagery, and style to its predecessor. As this thesis argues, Russian New Drama is defined by its shared absurdist themes.

The French philosopher Albert Camus titled his 1942 philosophical essay, perhaps the most famous piece of writing on the Absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Despite the myth occupying the role as namesake for the essay, Camus spares but five pages out of over a hundred on it.¹ He puts these pages at the end of the essay and grants Sisyphus the ultimate role as a hero, as *the* absurd hero. Camus dares to say that "One must imagine that Sisyphus is happy."² If Sisyphus is, as Camus suggests, an example of how to live in the face of the absurd, how then does Camus define absurdity? Further, what about that definition influences the work of those who write about the absurd from a literary and performative standpoint?

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Vintage International, 2018).

² Ibid, 123.

Camus writes that “at any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face.”³ The absurd is a universal feeling for it relates to the very act of being alive itself, which is why Camus’ essay is a contemplation on the morality of suicide in an absurdist framework. The Absurd is fundamentally the question “why.” Why do people live, and importantly why do they live the way they do? What is the purpose behind these many collective actions that when taken together are called life? The Absurd is the awakening to the mechanical actions of being. It is thinking of things as they are, instead of how a person relates to them or the feelings they associate them with. It is when the normal, the everyday, becomes the uncanny, and unbearably so. Most importantly, as Camus says, “Likewise the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in the mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs is also the Absurd.”⁴ The absurdist playwright attempts to elicit these feelings in the audience through their work. However, it is not simply enough to say outright that the world is absurd. Everyone is at times aware of the absurdity of being, they might at best be reminded of this fact when you tell them, but it is unlikely that they will feel it.

Camus asks in *The Myth of Sisyphus* “is an absurd work of art possible?”⁵ He claims that for an absurdist piece of art to exist there must be a paradox, one where lucid thought is both used but not apparent. Thought, as an action, is in and of itself the transfixing of the world; that is to say “I think therefore I am.”⁶ However, if the thought of the writer is couched in too much clarity the work lacks in artistry. Ambiguity and implication are where the artist and thesis writer are separated according to Camus. The absurd creator must “give the void its colors.”⁷ Camus says that for the creator of an absurdist work “It is not the matter of explaining or solving, but

³ Ibid, 10.

⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁵ Ibid, 96.

⁶ Rene Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford University Press, 2006), 28.

⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 114.

experiencing and describing.”⁸ At the time of writing Camus admits to having few examples of Absurd works, mentioning a number of authors but not giving any detailed list. The Absurdists, which would come to be associated with Camus' work, had not yet made their debut.

It is worth noting what separates the Absurd from concepts which can be thought of as related though they are each distinct in their own way. The Absurd can often be confused with the Surreal or even the Uncanny because in expression they often share certain artistic features or similarities of tone. In fact works can even use elements of one or another together for different purposes. However it is quite easy to understand their differences as a matter of intent, the use (or lack thereof) of logic in the story world, and key philosophical differences. Unlike the Surreal, the Absurd must contain within itself a form of logic. The Surreal has no need for such things, it needs only to invoke a heightened sense of reality. It is by its very nature, down to its linguistic origins, above reality. Surrealism is connected to the space of dreams, the Absurd to the space of the flesh. Absurdists works are very rarely works which are of an impossible nature, unless it is clear that these impossibilities are mental fabrications. Surreal works generally do the opposite. The Uncanny and Absurd can be separated easily as well. The Uncanny is that which is not quite real, something which the human brain interprets as being skewed somehow and less than, out of place, and or grotesque in character. The Absurd is not so, in some ways it might be considered worse. The Absurd by its very nature must be real and true, not unsettling because it is not quite right, but because it is exactly right.

Theatre critic Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* opens with a story about the performance of *Waiting for Godot* in San Quentin Prison in 1957.⁹ He brings up this performance in the introduction to ask one simple question “Why did a play of the supposedly

⁸ Ibid, 94.

⁹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Third Edition (Vintage Books, 2004).

esoteric avant-garde make so immediate and so deep an impact on an audience of convicts?”¹⁰ *Godot* and other Absurdist plays as a whole received a mixed critical reception upon their initial outings for lacking many of the usual dramatic conventions, being hard to understand at best, or nonsense at worst.¹¹ All of these critiques follow what Camus had been saying were necessary for a work to be in the style of the Absurd. These plays do not come out with their message if they do have one, rather they imply, they direct the audience towards the emotions that they wish to evoke. This is most evident in the prisoners' reactions to *Godot*, which they seemed to understand on a far deeper level than any of the well-read, well-mannered critics who had been criticizing the play for the very things which made it new, unique, and Absurd. Perhaps uninhibited by expectations, Esslin notes, the prisoners feel the connections between the themes present in the play and their own absurd lives.¹² Esslin quotes the prison paper “It was an expression, symbolic in order to avoid all personal error, by an author who expected each member of the audience to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors. It asked nothing in point, it forced no dramatized moral on the viewer, it held out no specific hope.”¹³ The prisoners clearly understood what the play was trying to do and were able to connect with it on the level that Camus suggests an Absurd work should be connected with. To them, these new theatrical conventions existed as a matter of fact instead of a matter of outrage.

Esslin attributes the evolution of these new theatrical conventions to the preoccupations, anxieties, emotions, and thinking of the playwrights, which mirror their contemporaries in the western world.¹⁴ Certainly they reflect what Camus was writing about at the same time. All of the examples of things which Esslin attributes to new conventions of the absurdist playwright

¹⁰ Ibid, 21.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 20.

¹⁴ Ibid.

exist in the works of the New Russian Dramatists: lack of a sensible plot, no real beginning or ending, dialogue which often seems incoherent, dreamlike or nightmarish reflections of the world.¹⁵ Like the Absurdist, the writers of New Russian Drama are echoing the state of their contemporaries in Russia. They are writing about the anxieties and emotions which plague their time and place; they use symbolism, trusting their audiences to experience and feel the meaning of their work rather than to have it be described to them.

The absurdist playwrights of Camus' era - Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, etc. - were formed out of the war period, their formative years occurring during either of the world wars. However, few of these playwrights, and none of the aforementioned, fought directly in either war.¹⁶ It would be impossible not to see how this connection to tragedy, to the horrors that mankind is capable of inflicting in such a casual manner, would not have come to influence the philosophy and later artwork of these playwrights. The lack of engagement with the war on the level of the front lines allows for a more lucid engagement with the idea of the tragedy that was occurring in their lifetime and how hollow life was in the wake of those events. The right amount of connection seems important here, those who engaged with such horror in too direct a manner often find themselves incapable of escaping description and moving towards implication, symbolism, and imagery as Camus describes them. This level of engagement with horror was certainly the case for the Absurdist who prized these things in their own writing. In this context the fall of the Soviet Union provides apt comparison for the casual violence, food scarcity, uncertainty, melancholy, etc. that the Absurdist were subjected to. In other words, these two movements were borne out of a similar, societal framework. They both gained real artistic

¹⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹⁶ Ibid.

influence on a similar time frame relative to the periods of upheaval which influenced their respective writers.

These concerns, of course, are not identical, neither are the things which their particular kind of absurdist writing chose to illustrate. In the context of New Russian Drama, the insertion of the state is far more overt than can be seen in any of the works of the Absurdist, as an example of one difference. The Absurdist on the other hand are often more focused on the relationship between people who are familiar with one another, friends, colleagues, partners, etc. The Russian dramatists meanwhile are much more interested in writing about people who are strangers or less intimately familiar with one another. New Drama does not always include multiple real human characters beyond the protagonist. In these instances, other speaking characters are often some form of mental fabrication or symbolic personification of an idea. There are many other stylistic and thematic differences, but these are some of the most clear and obvious ones when looking at the two movements as a whole. Still the ultimate result of both is bringing about the feeling of the absurd that Camus speaks of “This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.”¹⁷

Russian theatre critic Pavel Rudnev in a book on Russian theatre writes that “The history of Russia, together with the history of Russian culture, moves in leaps, impulses; periods do not develop, but replace one another.”¹⁸ Looking back at the end of the second decade of the 21st century it is not hard to see why Rudnev would come to such an observation. As he notes, Russia was home to the Soviet experiment, whose beginning and ending marked drastic changes in the culture of its people. The rise of the Soviets brought sweeping changes in the world of art, just as their collapse would again see a complete shift in the landscape. This is not to say that each

¹⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

¹⁸ Pavel Rudnev, *Drama Pamyati* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018), 5; This and all other translations of Russian sources are the work of the author of this thesis.

generation arises unaware of the past, and Rudnev acknowledges the connections between generations throughout his book.¹⁹ Moreover the amount of metatextual references found throughout New Drama would disprove such an assertion on its face. Even New Drama does not arise wholly unattached from the history of the Russian theatre, even if it is far more influenced by outside sources than the Soviet era theatre ever could have been. The early Soviet playwrights of the 30's and 40's such as Aleksey Abruzov write plays which in essence believe in the spirit of building communism. The generation which follows and is often typified by Alexandr Vampilov is a blend of realism and romanticism as Rudenev describes Vampilov's works.²⁰ Eventually this too is replaced by the likes of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya whose work reveals the bleakness of the later Soviet era in stunning prose. Even though movements in Russia have a habit of subsuming rather than blending together the throughlines between them can still be found if one looks for them. Eventually however, the walls fall and everything changes again.

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 the Absurdists were able to enter more fully into the Russian theatre space. In their introduction to an anthology of New Russian Drama Maksim Hanukai and Susanna Weygandt note that during the 1990's "the repertoires of their theaters consisted largely of new interpretations of Russian and foreign classics, as well as plays which had been forbidden in the Soviet Union: Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionescu, Russian Avant-gardists such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Daniil Kharms."²¹ The reason for the staging of these plays as opposed to new plays was a perceived lack of talent, funding, and young writers being shut out. However, it did allow for a broader range of plays to begin entering into the Russian theatre scene, including the Absurdists, which prior to that point had been banned.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Maksim Hanukai and Susanna Weygandt, eds., *New Russian Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), xviii.

Coming out of this period the New Russian Dramatists began to emerge in a space which was rapidly becoming more open than ever before, thanks to initiatives by veteran playwrights who sought to create spaces and forums for newcomers in the form of new festivals, workshops, schools, and journals.²² The name New Drama itself is derived from one of these festivals first held in 2002, around the time the movement began to truly come into the fore of the Russian theatre scene.²³

Understanding what these works entering into the scene did is crucial. Just in the names of the authors can the potential for a blending of the repressed Russian past and fresh, at least to the Russians of the day, foreign absurdist be seen. Going back to the pre to early Soviet avant-garde in Russia a reader can find the Absurd in the works of Daniil Kharms. Though it was not published until much later, his play *The Old Woman* foreshadows the works of the Absurdist and later New Drama with its tone, strange plot involving an old dead woman, and sense of style. Considering that his works predate the Absurdist by a couple decades it is not hard to see that the Absurd is something which comes naturally to Russian theatre. Coming together with the works of the Absurdist, one can see how the end of the Soviet Union allowed the theatre to find the links broken by the strict Soviet censorship. Even such works which bypassed the underground art scene within the Soviet Union, prolific though that was. The introduction of all of these works at the same time inevitably had a profound effect on the Russian Theatre scene as the new millennium approached and then was entered.

Many critics note how New Drama emerged during the 1990's with a darker, more violent and negative tone in reaction to the social atmosphere of the day. In a book on New Drama, Mark Lipovetsky and Bridget Beumers write "New Drama is undoubtedly the clearest

²² Ibid, xix.

²³ Ibid, xxvi.

reaction to the identity crisis that has marked the entire post-Soviet era.”²⁴ The first half of the 1990’s were marked by the commercialization of the theater which saw new playwrights shut out, and this did not begin to turn until about 1996 when Olga Mukhina’s *Tanya-Tanya* premiers. However that was not the beginning of the change in the winds for new playwrights. 1994 saw the creation of the Golden Mask Festival which promoted both new playwrights and provincial theatres and a few years later introduced an innovation award which encouraged experimentation in playwriting. Even earlier than that, older playwrights had begun pushing for the development of up-and-comers in the Russian theatre scene. Famed playwright Nikolai Kolyada had begun teaching at the Ekaterinburg Theatre Institute in 1992 and impacted the development of Russian New Drama tremendously.²⁵ which would produce both Vassily Sigarev and Oleg Bogaev, two well-known and respected writers in the movement, as well as many other New Drama playwrights. The Liubimovka Festival founded in 1991 would also become important in the development of New Drama. During the latter half of the 1990’s New Drama authors and supporters such as Elena Gremina, Mikhail Ugarov, and Maxim Kurochkin would serve on the festival’s committee. Both Gremina and Ugarov would later go on to establish Teatr.doc, a theatre in Russia which was well known for staging plays in the documentary style and a fixture of the New Drama movement. By the mid-2000s the movement had come into its own and produced a large number of plays from an increasingly large and diverse number of playwrights. Notably, many of these playwrights were coming from outside of the capital and were rather provincial in origin such as the Durnenkov brothers who would write a number of plays both together and individually, as well as hit playwrights such as Ivan Vyrpaev and Vasily Sigarev.

²⁴ Mark Lipovetskiy and Birgit Boymers, *Performansy Nasiliya: Literaturnye i Teatral'nye Eksperimenty «Novoy Dramy»* (*Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2012), 14

²⁵ Molly Flynn, *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First-Century Russia* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

Vyrpaev's *Kislod*, and Sigarev's *Plasticine* would both premier during this time and their works marked a real highpoint in the movement.

What precisely constitutes a work of New Russian Drama has been some matter of debate as the works which have been attributed to it are quite varied. Hanukai and Weygandt point to “some combination of the following: hypernaturalistic portrayal of sex and violence; the use of profane language and other forms of ‘nonnormative’ speech; fragmentary (often ‘filmic’) plot structures with little character development or action; a preference for monologic discourse over true dialogue.”²⁶ Additionally New Drama is connected by the types of characters which feature as their protagonists, typically a marginalized or disadvantaged person, a childish adult, a drifter or migrant. Of course they are also connected as previously mentioned by the emotional content, the absurdist elements, found within the texts. Other critics point to a pursuit of the real as the defining trait of New Drama, citing the use of a documentary style in some of the works and the naturalistic dialogue present throughout the movement. In theatre, the documentary style typically is created from real events and often uses real speech whether from documents, records, or interviews. Plays created word for word from such sources are known as “verbatim” theatre, a subgenre of documentary theatre. Critic Mark Lipovetsky, in an essay on Documentary theatre in Russia, notes the difference between the particular styles employed in New Drama from other kinds of documentary theatre pointing out that “there are very few examples of strict, orthodox verbatim among the New Drama plays.”²⁷ This concept follows logically with what Camus says about absurdism. The absurd is contained within the everyday, it is in fact most evident in the things which people have the most familiarity with. It stands to reason then that true spoken word, the real phrases of the everyday are capable of evoking the Absurd at times more so than

²⁶ Hanukai and Weygandt, *New Russian Drama: An Anthology*, xxvii.

²⁷ Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, “The Performance of Life: Documentary Theater and Film,” *The Russian Review* 69, no. 4 (2010), 621.

the manufactured language of the author. The way that humans imagine themselves as speaking is quite different than the way they actually speak. One need only to look at the interruptions, assumptions, and miscommunications present in real speech and compare it to the artifice of the author to realize this truth. However, using real speech as a device to enhance the absurd is not the same as using wholesale verbatim. A blend is necessary to achieve the maximum effect which the New Dramatists are looking for.

Chapter 1 - Letters to Yourself: the Absurd and Isolation in New Drama

Not everyone is an absurd hero. In the day to day of people's lives, the rote manner of living can lead to detachment from the world, and eventually from oneself. For most people, they have other's to rely on, to pull themselves onwards, things which even in the face of the absurd they continue living for, even if they are not able to overcome those intense feelings which mark them as human. Camus in his works sees suicide as one of the potential outcomes for people lacking such things. People who, in the face of such existence are "...confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it."²⁸ However, this is not the only recourse for those who find this living to be unbearable, there is also the refuge of madness. Living in a world which cannot be understood, a person may sometimes opt to live within their own world where their fantasies become their reality, where fame, happiness, and joy supersede all else, where boredom and death become distant dreams. Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov is one such person, he has become overwhelmed by existence, lacking any more living friends, family, purpose or community and in the face of that overwhelming absurdity that is existence, he has denied it.

The *Russian National Postal Service* is a play written by Oleg Bogayev and published in 1998 about Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov, an old pensioner who begins to write letters to himself after losing his wife and any sense of community or purpose. These letters grow increasingly more deranged as the play continues. At first they are simply imagined correspondence from old friends, presumably now dead, but they quickly devolve into letters from Martians and bedbugs. The play is intercut between the writing and receiving of these letters as well as all of the supposed recipients arguing over who has rights to Ivan's apartment and possessions. It features far more stage direction and notes than most New Drama plays, carefully orchestrated actions

²⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

that clue the audience into Ivan's state of mind. This style is done because ultimately the play largely takes place within the confines of Ivan's mind, a fantasy of his own construction.

In a paper on the play Inga Monkhat points out that "the act of writing initially has a game status, as evidenced by the author's notes, as well as the hero's discovery of the real author of the letters - himself."²⁹ This game can be seen quite clearly in the way that Ivan goes about hiding the letters from himself. Rather than simply writing a letter, reading it aloud, and then replying, there is an obvious effort that Ivan takes to mask his own involvement:

Ходит по комнате, тревожно поглядывает на стену, где висит зеркало. Думает - как бы похитрее обмануть себя. Вот подходит к зеркалу, просовывает руку, достает письмо. Оглядывается. Положил письмо на стол.

He walks around the room, anxiously glancing at the wall where the mirror hangs. He thinks - how to deceive himself more cunningly. Then he goes to the mirror, sticks out his hand, and takes out the letter. He looks around and put the letter on the table.³⁰

The stage direction puts a lot of emphasis on how Ivan is doing all of these things and leads the audience on a journey through his thought process behind it. Though he initially had simply stuffed the letter into his shirt, Ivan realizes that in order to best fool himself he should pretend as though he found the letter already sitting on the table. In this first act there is still an awareness of action, an acknowledgement by Ivan that what he is doing is ultimately a fantasy of an old, bored man with nothing better to do than write himself letters. His television and radio are broken, his friends no longer sit on the bench they used to, and he no longer goes outside. In many ways Ivan has retreated at first into a state of childishness. He playacts receiving the letter

²⁹Inga Monkhat, "Real'nyy i Voobrazhaemyy Mir Geroya v P'ese O. Bogaeva «Russkaya Narodnaya Pochta»" (Vizual'noe v Literature, Moskva: Obshchestvo s ogranichennoy otvetstvennost'yu "Editus," 2020), 69.

³⁰Oleg Bogaev, "Russkaya Narodnaya Pochta," accessed December 2, 2021, <http://www.theatre.ru/drama/bogaev/pochta.html>.

to no one but himself, calling out his own name as though he were a postal worker and then pretending to receive it as though he had not set it down himself just beforehand. His initial letter is also innocent, wishfully imagining the lives of friends who he knew in his youth but never got to see grow old. He pretends that they had wonderful lives unaffected by hardship or worry as the return message says “Our lives are like fairy tales.”³¹ This is where Ivan’s desire for community and happiness becomes evident in the letters. As far as the audience can tell, Ivan has no remaining family members, or at least none who have come to visit him in many years. He lives poorly, as evident by his long-broken appliances and the poor state of his apartment. However, his ‘friends’ describe lives in which they have no want, are surrounded by success and loved ones, with no sort of trouble, misfortune, or inconvenience in their day-to-day lives. All are things which Ivan is lacking.

As the play progresses the letters become more and more deranged, and as they do so the game stops factoring in to Ivan’s actions. Letters and envelopes begin to appear from places without Ivan having put them there. A letter is found amongst linens, another falls from the mezzanine, and strangest of all, one appears inside of a cake. Likewise the authors of these letters grow increasingly fantastical - at first letters are simply from old friends not seen in many years. Before long, the letters begin to be addressed from figures such as the president, Queen Elizabeth, then even more fantastically from Martians, Bed bugs, and Death itself. It is clear that some of these letters confuse and frustrate him, though apart from one it is assumed that he has written them all, or at least the playwright gives no indication that he has not and he specifically marks in marking out one letter as distinctly “...an ordinary envelope with a stamp and someone else's handwriting.” This letter being the only one called out as specifically not in Ivan’s handwriting suggests that the rest are all authored by our protagonist, even those which the

³¹ Ibid.

audience are not shown him hiding. This fact means that each letter gives more insight into what Ivan wants and is thinking. Even as the letters grow more fantastical they still remain grounded in that they are all about Ivan and offer reflections of who he is, his desires and his fears.

What Ivan desires most is companionship. This is evidenced by the act of writing the letters themselves, which represent communication with the outside world that Ivan has become detached from. Unable to find friends in real life, he invents them, much like a lonely child might have an imaginary companion. However, Ivan also desires purpose. This desire can be seen from the content of some of the later letters. In the letter that he writes from the director of television, he first seeks this in his music, in having others desire to see him play the folk songs which he is very proud of, even though he refuses the invitation in his reply. He again reveals a wish for purpose in the exchange with the president where he is offered a generalship - he notes very clearly his desire and ability to be useful even in his old age:

Несмотря на мой преклонный возраст, я еще могу быть полезным вашей...

(зачеркнул) нашей родине. И готов снова трудиться, не жалея здоровья... на благо и процветание вашей... (зачеркнул) нашей Отчизны. В своем послании, т. Президент, вы горячо интересовались, как же я живу? Отвечаю: живу за-ме-ча-тель-но. Имею для этого все удобства: газ, вода холодная по понедельникам, горячая - регулярно, электричество на 220 В, отопление батарей, настрой мой бодрый, здоровый. Жить еще хочу...

Despite my old age, I can still be useful to your... (crosses out) our homeland. And I'm ready to work again, sparing no health... for the good and prosperity of your (crosses out) our fatherland. In your message, Comrade President, you were particularly interested in how I live? I answer: I live ex-cel-lent-ly. I have all the necessary amenities: gas, cold

water on Mondays, hot water regularly, electricity at 220 V, a radiator, my mood is cheerful and healthy. I still want to live...³²

Ivan has fallen into the habit of living without doing anything. He sits in his house by himself, with no entertainment and does nothing. Without some goal, without something even meaningless as it might be he is barely living. Even Sisyphus has his boulder. He seeks in these letters a sense of self-aggrandizement, but also something to do, some job or function that he can fulfill. He does not want to be kept back or held down by the fact that he is old - in fact he feels trapped by his own age. This feeling is most evident in how he repudiates the rigours of age on his ability to function, despite all of the bad things that have happened to him. Despite not having anything to live for, he still wants to live. He vacillates between deluding himself into thinking that things are not as bad as they might seem and contemplating, even railing against, his misfortune. Unable to accept death, but no longer willing to live fully in his own life and turning to fantasy.

The fantasies that he creates are all varied, though they share the common theme of extolling himself in one manner or another, but there is also a clear divide between the letters and what is happening in his sleep. The sections in which the various characters, real and fictional, all argue with one another take place at Ivan's unconscious level. They only appear when Ivan is sleeping or otherwise drifts off into daydreaming, disappearing when Ivan is disturbed by something in his reality. The first two figments, and the most prominent ones in the play are Queen Elizabeth and Vladimir Lenin, both real historical heads of state, one of which is still alive. In the play they are meant to represent the two ideologies of Capitalism and Communism, as evidenced by much of their dialogue:

Елизавета II. Это вы его довели.

³² Ibid.

В.И.ЛЕНИН. Я?!

ЕЛИЗАВЕТА II. (Вздыхает, качает головой.) Иван Сидорович... (Вытирает слезы.)

В.И.ЛЕНИН. (Указывая на спящего.) Вот вам первая жертва экономических преобразований! Мешок в костюме! А был здоровый, крепкий мужик! Что натворили! Нет! Это вы! Купи-продай!

ЕЛИЗАВЕТА II. Вас скучно слушать.

ELIZABETH II. It was you who brought him to this.

V.I.LENIN. Me?!

ELIZABETH II. (sighs, shakes their head) Ivan Sidorovich... (Wipes away her tears.)

V.I.LENIN. (Pointing to the sleeping man.) Here is your first victim of economic transformation! Sack in a suit! And he was a healthy, strong man! What have you done! No! It was you! Buy and Sell!³³

Here they are arguing over who is at fault for Ivan's current state of dissociation and poverty, or more accurately which economic and political system has brought the hero to his current state of madness. They are figures which are emblematic of countries which espouse the two major ideologies and at first trade insults over the two systems, evidenced by their word choice. They are fighting over which ideology should occupy the first place in Ivan's mind. In 1997 when the play was being written this was still at the forefront of the minds of Russian people and politics, the decline of Russia that occurred in the 90's was still ongoing and the effects of so called "shock therapy" had thus far been devastating to the economy.³⁴ The play references Ivan's financial difficulties and growing hunger at several points throughout the play, clearly the difficulties of the time had a severe impact on the writing of the play. However Bogaev is not really

³³ Ibid.

³⁴Theodore P. Gerber and Michael Hout, "More Shock than Therapy: Market Transition, Employment, and Income in Russia, 1991–1995," *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 1 (1998): 1–50, <https://doi.org/10.1086/210001>.

commenting on the merits of either system, very little of substance is said by either of the two figures in support of their own system. Instead they simply insult and argue with one another over Ivan. Which system his subconscious self associates with is what is really at stake in their arguments.

As the play goes on these two figures are joined by many others who also represent this divide in his mind. Stalin, Robinson Crusoe, Chapaev, Lyubov Orlova, are the subsequent figures to enter into the argument that is taking place in the subconscious. Though the new additions have no or few lines at all in the play, what they represent is still clear from who they are. Stalin of course led the Soviet Union during the second world war and a large portion of the 20th century besides, his inclusion has the most to do with his impact on Russian culture. In general this is referenced by the area of the apartment which they are granted “Plus - the living area of the restroom - four square meters.”³⁵ This is fairly obviously a reference to the housing shortages which plagued the Stalin era and the tiny living spaces granted to families.³⁶ Chapaev is of course the famous soldier of the civil war, well known from the early Soviet novel and film which bear his name.³⁷ He is an allusion to the wars which Russia faced in the first half of the 20th century, as evidenced by the awarding of Ivan’s medals to his group in the will reading section of the play. These are core cultural touchstones which continue on into today and that the play also references twice in Ivan’s letters to the friends from his youth. Lyubov Orlova was a Russian actress who featured in many early soviet era films. She receives in the division of Ivan’s belongings the kitchen and all things relating to cooking. This is most suggestive of her being perceived by Ivan as a model of a Russian femininity, since she was one of the biggest

³⁵Bogaev. “Russkaya Narodnaya Pochta.”

³⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinsim Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁷ Angela Brintlinger, “Revisiting Chapaev:,” in *Chapaev and His Comrades, War and the Russian Literary Hero across the Twentieth Century* (Academic Studies Press, 2012), 232–56.

stars of the era in which Ivan grew up.³⁸ Crusoe interestingly both has no lines, letter, or receives anything in the scene in which Ivan's belongings are doled out. Were it not for his name being mentioned during the cake cutting scene near the end of the play, the audience would be forgiven for not even knowing that he was in the play at all. He is given the attribute "Man without fear" in the list of characters that precedes the play. His lack of granted possessions may be attributed to the story that he exists in. Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's novel of the same name is a castaway surviving alone for decades on a desert island. In a play about a lonely man with no one, it follows that Crusoe would be the figure that Ivan most closely connects with himself. Through this lens, Ivan sees himself as a castaway from society, lost at sea after the death of his wife. This is the reason why Crusoe receives nothing of Ivan's; he is most closely connected to Ivan's current sense of self and has no need for these things.

The figures of Ivan's unconscious already discussed are closely connected to Ivan's past, his cultural background and feelings about himself and he does not receive any letters from them. However there are more figures which appear in the unconscious level of the play, Queen Elizabeth, Sevastyanov, the Martians, and Bedbugs. All of these figures write letters to Ivan which appear in places that the audience never sees Ivan hide them. This hidden nature suggests that they exist somewhere between Ivan's consciousness and unconsciousness. Unlike the president or television director, who are entirely external concepts that Ivan writes to, these figures do still hold a place in his subconscious. As previously mentioned, the Queen can be seen as relating to Capitalism, still new to the country. The Martians are closely connected to Ivan's humor or sense of entertainment, this can be seen by how he loudly laughs when writing and "receiving" their letters. They also receive his television, something which he used to keep

³⁸Arkadiy Nikolaevich Neminushchiy, "Kategoriya Zhenstvennosti v Sovetskom Kino 1930-kh Gg," *Vestnik Pskovskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, Sotsial'no-gumanitarnye nauki*, no. 3 (2016): 117–26.

himself entertained. Sevastyanov most closely connects to his sense of pride or outer appearance based on the language used in the letter and the objects he receives. In the letter he describes Ivan as being “venerable” and is given objects which relate to Ivan’s personal appearance, outerwear, hygiene tools (curved scissors and a washing machine), and a “cabinet with a quality mark” to store clothes in.³⁹ The bedbugs conversely seem to be a manifestation of his shame or frustration. They appear after he begins to play the accordion poorly, “The accordion in his hands seemed to go crazy: out of tune, screeching every now and then, but it sounds loudly, in all voices, like the fanfare of a pagan army.”⁴⁰ They also offer to sleep with him at night, which is more of a threat as they are bedbugs, and he fears and hates them: “Ivan Sidorovich looks fearfully at the mezzanine, and at the pile of linen. Then he threatens them with a fist.”⁴¹ They of course receive the accordion, an object of frustration. Finally there is the Queen, she receives the rest of the room and is the one doling out objects, but is then beaten on by everyone else. Her acting as arbiter of his possessions mirrors how capitalism is looked at in Ivan’s mind, seeking to consume everything it can as he fights against it.

This interplay between all the figures happening on the deeper levels of Ivan’s mind are a result of his loneliness and abandonment by society. Each of the figures are invented as his psyche fractures under the weight of his depression at the state of his life. This is why they slowly build and become more and more abstract as the play progresses. The final one is the most important, death. This is the concept which Ivan struggles the most with. He clearly does not want to die, he notes in many of the letters his capability and desire to live healthy and for a long time still, but also grows tired easily and can be seen rubbing his chest and coughing throughout the play. This, along with death saying that his time has come, suggests that Ivan is ill

³⁹ Bogaev. “Russkaya Narodnaya Pochta.”

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

and going to die soon, though the play offers no definite answer on that point. However, Ivan acknowledges too that his current life is not really living at all. Death gives him for his birthday the gift of living forever and he is clearly somewhat perturbed by the idea:

Иван Сидорович озадачен, не знает верить или нет письму, рассеянно бродит по комнате, наступает на комочки писем. - Вечно. Вечно. Вечно... - вслушивается в свой голос, в интонацию нового слова - Вечно. Вечно. Вечно.

Ivan Sidorovich is puzzled, does not know whether to believe the letter or not, and wanders absentmindedly around the room, stepping on the wads of letters. - Forever. Forever. Forever ... - listens attentively to his own voice, to the intonation of the new word - Forever. Forever. Forever.⁴²

Ivan's inability to distinguish between reality and his imagination as the play goes on suggests a more metaphorical death, a kind of suicide of the mind. From an absurdist viewpoint his body is still functioning and all the pieces of his personality are there, but they are not capable of being in the world. When staring into the absurd Ivan chooses to flee from existence rather than accept it as the absurd hero would do, or to reject life completely as the person who chooses suicide in the face of the absurd might do.

Ivan is reminiscent of the "little men" of Russian literature, particularly the works of Gogol and Dostoevsky.⁴³ Fearful, poor, and cut off from the rest of society, this character type often finds themselves in stories which blur reality and fantasy. These characters are unable to break free from their downtrodden lives and end up dead, dispossessed, or mad much like Ivan at the end of the play. These characters are closely tied to the absurd because they represent failures of society to care for or acknowledge the downtrodden who consequently find themselves

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Olga Sergeevna Shurupova, "Образ «Malen'kogo Cheloveka» v Peterburgskom i Londonskom Tekstakh," *Vestnik Cherepovetskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*, no. 4 (57) (2014): 120–23.

pushed out or pushed down by the rest of society for what they represent, a possible future.

Bogaev uses this connection and this character type in the play to examine how the changes of the new Russia were affecting these most vulnerable people, showing that in the face of this new absurdity they must seek out fantasy as a means of staying alive.

Chapter 2 - Battling Your Vices: Self-reflection in the Face of the Absurd

Fiction is full of people who have bad habits, stories have been made entirely based around one bad habit that leads them into situations which can be equally comedic or tragic depending on the story. For some characters these things go beyond what might be called a bad habit and develop into full blown addictions, things which they cannot live without and feel compelled to seek out. People often rail against their own addictions, they make a show of contrition to themselves or others and pledge to stop or cut back. Most often they renege on these self made promises. The play *Vodka, Fucking, and Television* published by Maxim Kurochkin in 2006 deals with issues of addiction, depression, and anxiety through the absurdist lense; it is an example of what happens when a person takes a look at their habits and engages their reality with lucid thought.

Conceptually this is a rather simple play consisting of just four actors, no scene changes, no exits or entrances. Three of the people on the stage are not even real people, rather they are anthropomorphized concepts, these being the titular Vodka, Fucking, and Television. Use of figmentary characters who really exist within the mind of the protagonist is a theme that many of the New Drama plays share. In this instance, they are the conceptualizations of things which the “Hero” understands to be his own major vices. It is his perception that these things are collectively preventing him from writing: his profession is suggested to be a playwright, and he must rid himself of one of them. The rest of the play follows out from this premise in almost a chaotic courtroom fashion.

The text makes abundantly clear that the protagonist is suffering from Camus’s “...divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting.”⁴⁴ In order to alleviate his

⁴⁴ Maksim Kurochkin, “Vodka, Yeblya, Televizor” 2006, <https://theatre-library.ru/authors/k/kurochkin>.

suffering he is attempting to take a look at his life realistically and lucidly in order to ease his current suffering and writer's block. In the opening monologue he says:

Я же не пидар безвозрастный. Я должен от чего-то отказываться, чтобы прожить в согласии со своим обостренным чувством прекрасного. Когда старый пердун изображает из себя Офелию – это не прекрасно. Но когда он честно и гармонично заявляет – я старый, зажатый жизнью эстет – это вызывает, как минимум, уважение. А сейчас, вот прямо сейчас я буду решать – от кого мне отказаться. Чтобы... Ну, вы поняли.

I'm not some ageless fag. I have to renounce something so that I can live in harmony with my refined sense of beauty. When an old fart makes himself out to be an Ophelia, it's not pretty. But when he honestly and calmly declares - I am an old run down esthete - that elicits, at a minimum, respect. And so now, at this very moment, I will decide - what I shall renounce. In order to... Well, you know.⁴⁵

The realization of the trajectory of his life is evident here in the text. The Hero has come to an awareness of the mechanisms of his life and is attempting to wrestle with them; he has a vain hope of committing a grand act of self-evolution and so must rid himself of one of his vices. As in Camus, it is respectable to have a clear awareness of one's life, this is an awareness of the absurd and the first step towards becoming an absurd hero. However, in that context his ultimatum is silly, Sisyphus after all cannot reason with his boulder.

These three vices are just that, representations of some of the things that make up this particular individual's boulder. They are part of the day to day rote that makes his life unbearable but at the same time give it some meaning. They of course could be replaced with other things, vodka could just as easily be some kind of drug, television could easily be video games, any sort

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of sensual pleasure. In this instance, they relate to one person and become a shared feeling with the audience through their specificity. In other words, everyone has something like this. What that thing is does not matter, what it makes a person feel does. In this case each idea is having to make the case for its own continued existence in the Hero's life, but of course the hero has control over the final choice, and if the decision were at all easy or simple to make, then he would have made it quickly. What the play really is then, is the Hero justifying each of his own vices to himself.

How the hero justifies his actions is already previewed at the beginning of the play, in fact in the very first lines: "I'm 33 years old and according to science I haven't been able to learn for 8 years already. After 25 people don't change."⁴⁶ By the words of the Hero himself he is incapable of change, everything that takes place between this point and the ending is essentially a farce. However, just because it is farcical does not mean that it is not meaningful; *Waiting for Godot* after all is arguably just as farcical. Both plays end and begin with essentially no real change in the characters' circumstances despite resolutions to change themselves. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon start and end underneath a tree waiting, having failed to enact meaningful change, despite their resolutions to leave or commit suicide. Likewise, the Hero resolves to change but ends up essentially back where he started, having decided not to do anything about his problems. What happens between the beginning and the conclusion in *Vodka, Fucking, and Television* is self-introspection phrased as a conversation. This is ultimately what absurdism is, a feeling that arises out of serious introspection.

If the play is just introspection then why use the artifice of these anthropomorphised ideas? Discarding the obvious answer that it is more interesting, it also provides more insight into the mind of the character than if they were just monologuing alone on stage. Each of the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

characters is a reflection of the hero, the way that he views the world, and the way that he relates to it. Understanding this is key to understanding the text. When, for example, the Hero is monologuing about Vodka kiosks “It’s torture to walk these 200 metres, when I remember how wonderful it was to buy vodka just outside the apartment.”⁴⁷ His words are of course ridiculous sounding, 200 metres is at worst a five minute walk, ten minutes round trip. However, it is another aspect, another mechanical part of life that, when added all together, contributes to the unbearableness of being for the Hero.

Taking each of these ideas and looking at them individually, it is not hard to see how they contribute to the character’s current state, but it is also clear how fundamentally he cannot live without any of them. Television comes first in the order of the play, having drawn the shortest straw. Its self-justification is simply “Television is a magical window onto the natural world, a source of knowledge, a reliable friend in times of sadness and depression.”⁴⁸ The argument here is essentially that the Hero watches too much television and is distracted from his work by it. Not much time is really spent on Television, who seems to be aware that they are the least fundamental or addictive vice, or at the very least they are the least confident “Farce! Farce! This is a farce! I warned you. This is a farce! We’re in the midst of a farce!”⁴⁹ Television is the most recent of the three concepts in the history of the world and the least fundamental to human needs. However in the midst of his depression and anxiety, Television is a comfort that allows him to dissociate from his state of anxiety about life. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, television was boring according to the play, there was nothing worth watching. The problem with television therefore is that it is too enticing, it stimulates too much and allows the Hero to distract themselves. The fact that it is so enticing is portrayed as a creeping Western influence, an

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

underlying anxiety about the change in the world. Beforehand television was orderly and full of facts and figures of interest to few people, however now there is *DuckTales*, The Discovery Channel, and all other manner of entertaining programming. These commercial, exciting, and shiny shows are to the hero a form of sedation which causes him to lessen his interest in intellectual pursuits and he notes that he no longer reads as he used to. The television, now full of Western excess, dulls and entraps the hero and he perceives this as part of the reason he can no longer write.

Vodka goes second and seems more secure in their position, stating that “Man cannot live without vodka.”⁵⁰ Since the Hero goes out to buy vodka in the middle of the play, this is true for the Hero at least. However, it is also recognized as the most destructive of all the vices which the Hero has put forth to examine. Vodka kills, and it is aware of that itself. Vodka seems to be the most willing to be cut back upon because ultimately that will let the Hero drink more over his lifetime rather than dying early from any number of alcohol related diseases. Though Vodka seems to be the clearest of the vices which should go, the one of the most harm and least value, the Hero is incapable of leaving it even as he rails against it. Though the hero will justify Television and even Fucking, not one word is said in Vodka’s favor. There is always a sense of impending doom, of decline when the Hero is talking about Vodka, which in context refers to any alcohol.

Finally, the play arrives at Fucking. This is easily the longest of the three sections and takes up the majority of the second half of the play with a significant back and forth between the Hero and Fucking. Fucking here is not the act of sex itself necessarily, though linguistically both the Russian *Eblia* and the English “Fucking” do refer to the act itself. Instead it could be described as the sex drive or desire and refers to any act of a sexual nature or that is predicated

⁵⁰ Ibid.

on desire such as flirting. Fucking as a character is poetic, quoting from Aleksandr Volodin and elsewhere reaching for wit and clever turn of phrase. It also seems to have the most control over the Hero within the scenes of the play. There are several instances where the Hero will repeat the words of Fucking verbatim, cluing the audience in to that control:

ЕБЛЯ. С телевизора и начнем.

ГЕРОЙ. С телевизора и начнем...

ТЕЛЕВИЗОР. ТЫ ВИДЕЛ? СЛОВО В СЛОВО.

FUCKING: We'll begin with Television.

HERO: We'll begin with Television.

TELEVISION: Did you see that? Word for word.⁵¹

The big turning point in the play is when the Hero resolves to leave Fucking, only to have it revealed that Fucking is his wife. This revelation only makes sense: how can the Hero simply give up on sexual desire while still being in love and desiring his wife? He cannot let go of his desire, it is too fundamental to his being. Even just limiting himself to his wife proves to ultimately be an impossibility, no matter how many times he repeats the mantra “Fucking is my wife.”⁵² Ultimately, to cull such a thing as desire for all others in his life is an impossibility: after all, the Hero says “I’m not a robot.”⁵³

The play ends with the Hero giving up nothing, after all the conversation, arguing, and testimonial, the Hero resolves not to lose any of his vices. Having examined the Hero’s life and problems, he comes back around to understanding himself in greater depth. He says:

Сегодня я посмотрел в зеркало. Там... Там был одуревший от новостей и рекламы, спившийся, ебливый, влюбленный в жену зверек. Я подумал – неужели удача?

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Неужели есть счастье и для воспитанного мальчика? Вам этого не понять. Это прекрасно. Это прекрасно, как небо. Это честный, выстраданный пиздец – это свобода.

Today I looked in the mirror. There...I saw a man dazed by the news and commercials, a drunk, fucking, in love with his wife little animal. I thought- aren't I lucky? Is there really happiness even for a well-behaved boy? You don't understand such things. This is beautiful. As beautiful as the sky. This is honest, hard-won shit-this is freedom.⁵⁴

This is where the play circles back to Camus absurdism. In going over all of his faults, the Hero is able to come to a place of lucidity, one where he understands himself and can see the absurd in his life as it is. Like Sisyphus he chooses to greet the absurdity of his life with a smile on his face rather than sink into despair or delude himself into some other hope. By doing this the Hero is able to become an actual Absurd Hero and stop pining for the past in order to live more fully in the present.

Though there is some universality to this scenario and what the Hero is struggling with, there are many things about the play that are particularly Russian in character and lend itself to the New Drama style. Fucking could have easily been desire, lust, or some other such word, but Kurochkin is not using it just for the sake of aesthetic purposes, though it does color the tone of the play. The use of vulgarity lends the play a certain sense of honesty even in the bizarre narrative that has been constructed. It also takes away any amount of sacredness or poetry from the deed itself. Though during the course of the play Fucking might use poetry, the vulgarity reminds the audience constantly that this is ultimately not a higher sense. Though Fucking rails against this and even the hero deludes himself momentarily into ascribing a more soulful line of

⁵⁴ Ibid.

thought to what is being described; the hero's desire arousing from such commonplace things as celebrities like Pamela Anderson or a shampoo commercial tell the reality of things.

Likewise, the use of Vodka alludes to the particular problems of Russia especially at the time the play was written. It is important that the name of the vice is Vodka and not alcohol, however. The Hero says it here "I was born in the USSR, I lived in a country where the vodka tradition was an important element of culture."⁵⁵ The connection between culture and Vodka is hammered home during the monologue about having to walk farther to get vodka, where again the Hero's anxieties about change and the future are front and center in the play. Though the play was first staged in 2006, it was written in 2003.⁵⁶ This was at a peak of alcohol poisoning and alcohol related deaths, second only to 1994, and at the tail end of the worst ten year period for alcoholism on record in Russia.⁵⁷ Vodka was of course the most popular drink by far especially if *Samogon*, self-distilled spirits which typically are very similar, are included.⁵⁸ Vodka has always been associated with Russian culture, the play even includes one of many famous sayings surrounding vodka "*Bez vodki zhit' nel'zia*."⁵⁹ This grounds the play to that particular time and place, as the Hero breaks the fourth wall in his monologue to offer the audience information on where to find some hard liquor after the show. It also challenges the audience directly.

This play is very specific to the author. Kurochkin claims in the notes that "The author is not represented by the Hero in this play."⁶⁰ However he follows it with perhaps the most tongue in cheek authors note that can be found claiming that "Even in the army, he steadfastly refused to curse for the first two and a half months."⁶¹ As far as the audience is to be concerned, the Hero is

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ John Freedman, "Maksym Kurochkin: A Writer for Paradoxical Times," *TheatreForum*, no. 32 (Winter/Spring 2008), 87.

⁵⁷ Aleksandr Nemtsov, "Alkohol'naya Situatsiya v Rossii," *Sobriologiya*, no. 2 (2014).

⁵⁸ Kurochkin, "Vodka, Yeblya, Televizor."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

the mind of the author and these are a version of his thoughts about himself that are being staged. This connection between the two lends a sense of reality to the play. Of course the two are not exactly the same, as noted by the author and hero's different choice in television brands, but what is being shown has a lot of truth in it. From the hero we see feelings of intense guilt over the idea that he still finds other women desirable and wants to flirt with them, or intense self-hatred over how alcohol negatively impacts his life, or the simple desire to read more and watch less television. Like in Bogaev's play the protagonist of this play can be considered a "little man" of Russian literature. Though not as lonely or pathetic as Ivan, the Hero is as equally self loathing as any of the characters that can be found leading the pages of a Dostoevsky novel. Or even further back the reader can compare the Hero of this play to Samson Vyrin of Pushkin's "Stationmaster" a character who has thrown themselves towards vice in their grief and despair. All of these ideas come from a fundamental place of truth and reality, things that are paradoxically prized in New Drama, a movement which embraces fragmentation and imagination in storytelling forms and styles. And a movement that says reality is absurd and understanding one's own role in this absurdity is necessary for living.

Chapter 3 - The Absurd State: The Individual, the State, and the Absurd Juxtaposition

Each day, nearly every individual goes through life with an expectation of what the day will bring them. They wake up, prepare for the day, commute, work, eat lunch, work, commute, relax, and sleep. Some days their expectations might be different: they might be leaving for vacation, they might be going on a date with a new person, perhaps it is the weekend, but they always have expectations. Lives are built on expectations. This is not to belittle the unexpected, merely to point out its comparative rarity in the lives of each individual. Like Sisyphus each day expects to roll his boulder up his hill, people expect to continue the processes of their life. The Absurd arises when one is made aware of their expectations of these processes, their ceaselessness, their repetitiveness. The main character of one New Drama play has an encounter in which he is forced to come to terms with the absurd in his life. Unexpectedly this encounter is with state actors, namely the police who push the character towards self-development. By using this unexpected source of development towards becoming Camus' absurd hero, like Sisyphus, the playwright is able to critique the role of the state in people's lives.

The play in question is Dimitrii Danilov's *Chelovek iz Podol'ska* or *Man From Podolsk* first published in 2017, wherein the titular character is taken in one day by the police. In the course of their interrogation he is brought about to the realization of the absurdity of his life and his hitherto inability to overcome it. The use of the state by way of the police as Danilov's tool for birthing this new consciousness of the man is particularly interesting. Neither Camus nor the Absurdists tackle the state in their writings and plays, but Danilov here brings it to the forefront.

The play opens with the man from Podolsk, later revealed to be named Nikolai, already detained and under interrogation. The policeman who is conducting the interrogation cannot answer why Nikolai has been detained. He says that is what they will determine through the

interrogation. The first unusual question that the officer asks is “Name the population of Podolsk. Preferably with an accuracy of at least ten thousand.”⁶² Nikolai does not know and guesses incorrectly. A nearby prisoner called “Man from Mytishchi” in the script, begins to interject with the answers and hints, scolding Nikolai. The policeman says of the two:

Ничего, будем с вами работать, будем вас развивать. Вон, мытищинский наш клиент еще хуже вас в первый раз выступил, а сейчас уже виден большой прогресс. Встал на путь становления более или менее сознательным человеком.

No matter, we will work with you, we will develop you. Look, our client from Mytishchi was even worse than you his first time out, and now we already see a lot of progress. He has begun the journey to becoming a more or less conscious person.⁶³

The first policeman’s dialogue reveals what is really going on here: the goal of the policemen is to develop the consciousness of the people they are working with. Such a goal is entirely unexpected as it goes against the assumptions the audience starts with, which are that these policemen are corrupt and hassling Nikolai for no good reason. Nikolai too is so confused that he calls the situation “absurd.” Of course the “logical” version, as the cops explain, is for them to beat him up and plant some drugs on him. This idea is repeated every time Nikolai grows frustrated with what they are saying or asking of him, and when he lashes out, the officers remind him of the way things could be. Both parties must acknowledge that only one side has the power in this situation, that functionally Nikolai cannot control what is happening nor could he really leave this situation unless they allowed him to. An obvious parallel of course can be seen with Sisyphus, a prisoner of the gods forced to roll his boulder up his hill. This parallel calls into question the role of those who enforce these aspects of our society.

⁶² Dimitriy Danilov, “Chelovek Iz Podol'ska,” *Novyy Mir*, 2017, https://magazines.gorky.media/novyi_mi/2017/2/chelovek-iz-podolska.html.

⁶³ Ibid.

Taking a step back and considering what the role of the police is in Russia vs what the idealized version of a police force is, the juxtaposition that Danilov is creating becomes very stark. Nikolai and the audience expect corruption, they expect brutality. Because for many individuals past experience and history tells them that such acts are probable in an encounter with the police, especially for someone arrested without cause. However, this force of brutality is not what the police in the public facing eye want to be perceived as. Generally a police force wants to be seen as helpful, catching criminals, keeping the peace, being a part of the community, etc. But when that altruism actually happens, when confronted with a police presence which is actively seeking to enhance the lives of the individual, it is incomprehensible, absurd as Nikolai exclaims. He even doubts that they are police officers at all “Where are we? Are you even the police?”⁶⁴ The play heightens this juxtaposition every time the police officers switch into the role that Nikolai, and the audience, is expecting of them. When Nikolai pushes back against them, they remind him that they could easily use force against him and do all these malicious things. Danilov is acknowledging the monopolization of force that the state has, but reverses the usual construct. Force here is used as a reminder of how things are in the real world, or at least the perception of how they are. It is another reminder of the juxtaposition that Danilov is creating, helping to highlight that the real absurdity is not the situation that is playing out before us. The police officers even acknowledge the usual state of affairs “you can never relax, especially if you are dealing with cops.”⁶⁵ However the other prisoner from Mitschi also undercuts this saying “They won’t do anything to you.”⁶⁶ What he says is true as well; they never harm Nikolai in any way throughout the play, though there are several instances when the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

inherent threat of force that the police represent is reminded to Nikolai and the audience. Instead what they prefer to use is encouragement.

In particular Marina, in the script named “Female Officer”, is the most encouraging of all the characters and the one whom Nikolai opens up to the most. Marina from her introduction is the most upbeat and positive of all of the characters in the play, seeming like a picture of the absurd hero. She constantly uses emphatic statements and her speech is marked by the use of exclamation points. Not only that, but she is also the only character who is consistently encouraging and concerned with the prisoners:

Да нет же, Николай, ну расслабьтесь, откиньтесь на спинку стула, расправьте плечи (делает несколько массирующих движений). Вот так. Вот так. Глубоко вдохните... и медленно выдохните... (Человек из Подольска издает сопение). И еще раз... Хорошо. (Возвращается на свое место).

No, Nikolai, come on relax, sit back in your chair, straighten your shoulders (makes a few massaging movements). Like this. Like this. Deep breath... and slowly exhale... (The man from Podol'sk releases a sniff). And once more... Good. (Returns to their place).⁶⁷

In comparison to the other police officers who still threaten and goad, Marina only switches once into a threatening posture before snapping back to her usual, affable, self. The way that the first police officer is more forceful in his speech compared to Marina is a parallel of the “good cop, bad cop” routine that is associated in fiction with these sorts of situations. However, that too is a form of coercion which is meant to lure the interrogee into revealing information on a case. This technique is effective and Nikolai does have an easier time opening up to more details about himself once Marina enters the play.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

The fact that Marina is the only female figure in the play and also occupies this more nurturing, understanding role is no coincidence. These sorts of character traits are often associated with femininity and more specifically motherhood. The direction of the play describes the character as “a beautiful and well groomed woman ‘ageless’ with a pronouncedly refined appearance and manners.”⁶⁸ The specificity of her being ageless is most noteworthy as it is a quality that allows the character to bleed between youthfulness and wisdom, between idealism and reality. Both the Russian “bez vozrasta” and the English “ageless” imply a character who is mature yet young looking. Were she youthful, it might be assumed that the character is naive and fulfilling the role of the bright-eyed young woman. Were she elderly, it might be assumed that she is being sentimental in her descriptions and caring as a fulfillment of her role as a mother figure. Instead she is both of these things and yet neither, she holds authority as the highest ranked among the police officers but still participates in the day to day operations.

Looking at this play in the context of critiquing the role of the Russian state in people's lives, having the highest authority figure exhibit all of these qualities shows another aspect of the critique. The Putin regime has often been noted for its desire to portray Putin as a masculine, even hypermasculine, figure.⁶⁹ Much has been written about the performative aspect of Putin's masculinity as a policy of the state that seeks to advance the message that Russia is strong, powerful, and commanding.⁷⁰ This performative nature can be seen in official publicity stunts and commercial enterprises which feature the Russian president with exotic animals, doing adventurous activities, being desirable to women, etc. By giving Marina this role of authority in the play there is a clear reversal of this figure. This reversal suggests that in a more idealized

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Alina Alekseevna Alekseeva, “Politicheskie Portrety V. V. Putina i D. A. Medvedeva (Na Materiale Sovremennoy Pressy i Assotsiativnogo Eksperimenta),” *Politicheskaya Lingvistika*, no. 3 (2012): 64–80.

⁷⁰ Yekaterina Dmitrievna Zabrodkina and Veronika Pasyukova Vladimirovna, “«Trudno Byt' Bogom»: Evolyutsiya Politicheskikh Obrazov Vladimira Putina,” *Upravlencheskoe Konsul'tirovanie*, no. 2 (86) (2016): 43–50.

setting the state would take on a maternal rather than paternal role as has been historically the case in Russia. Her implied patriotism contributes to building this idea of her as a figure of leadership. This implied patriotism is most evident when Marina brings up the Moscow anthem: “What a delight! It captures the spirit! I want to sing the anthem of Moscow! Nikolai, do you know the anthem of Moscow?”⁷¹ However, throughout the text she also builds an argument that it is proper to love Russia, that Russia has the same things that can be found in the west, particularly when discussing Nikolai’s trip to Amsterdam “In Amsterdam there is the Oude Kerk, in Podolsk the Trinity Cathedral. In Amsterdam there are canals, in Podol’sk, estates. Why is one better or worse than the other?”⁷² Her words here are a reversal of a common argument that the Russian state uses to deflect criticism away from their own actions and move it onto their critics, a form of whataboutism. That is wherein they criticize other aspects of other countries as an excuse to move the topic away from their own issues and not address them. It makes sense that Marina, who mirrors the Russian state, would take this line of reasoning. Of course it also follows an absurdist point of view, that one should take joy in their being even if what they are doing cannot be said to be good or useful.

One aspect of absurdism that this play’s philosophy elaborates on which is lacking in Camus is in how to achieve the status of absurd hero. In the play it is clear that becoming “conscious” must be an act that is done with intent. The police’s desire to have Nikolai reach consciousness is why Marina gives Nikolai “homework”, in order to have him impress upon himself the feelings and ideas that they are trying to impart to him. The police in the play view their actions as a service, part of their duty towards society: “When we were still in school, I remember, they taught us that one of the most important functions of the police (back then we

⁷¹ Danilov, “Chelovek Iz Podol'ska.”

⁷² Ibid.

were still called the Militsiya) is educational work with the population.”⁷³ Danilov here is highlighting the multifaceted role that the police are supposed to play in society. This argument brings the idea that people need assistance through encouragement in being more conscious people, that it is not necessary for the individual to achieve the heroism of Sisyphus all on their own. In the world of the play this assistance is one function of the state, to improve the lives of their citizens mentally.

It is worth noting that this function is not being done to pacify people. Pacification is a goal that the state often will seek in order to better control the populace and, though that argument could be made for the play, there is ample evidence in the text to support the idea that the police are pushing for critical thinking as well as conscious living. The clearest evidence to support this is found in this dialogue from Marina:

Николай, вы немного странный вопрос задаете. Это все равно, что спросить, нравится ли вам «Черный квадрат» Малевича. Или представьте себе человека, который говорит: «Знаете, мне так нравится 4’ 33” Кейджа, так приятно иногда послушать, под настроение». Эта музыка не предназначена для того, чтобы нравиться или не нравиться.

Nikolai, you are asking a somewhat strange question. It is the same as asking if you like Malevich’s “Black Square.” Or imagine a person who says: “You know, I love Cage’s 4’33”, It is so nice to listen to sometimes, depending on the mood.” This music is not meant to be liked or disliked.

Marina here is referencing two different works in two different mediums. The first is the painting by Kazimir Malevich which consists of a canvas painted entirely in black with broad brush strokes. The second is a composition by composer John Cage which features no deliberate sound

⁷³ Ibid.

by the musicians, in other words it is a silent composition. Both of these works can be said to emphasize a certain lack or nothingness, as black of course is the absence of color so too is silence the absence of sound. They are not works which are meant to be enjoyed in the typical sense, they do not please the eye nor the ear since there is nothing there to be pleased by. They are meant to make their audience think and consider what is the nature of this art, how is it defined and what is its most base form. Through the use of these references there is an acknowledgement that not all things are meant to be enjoyed in the typical sense. This seems somewhat counter to what Marina says later about enjoying one's surroundings, but when one takes it apart that isn't really the case. Being present and aware is the first step towards feeling fulfilled which leads towards happiness. Simply enjoying anything and everything is not the same thing as being present and seeking to understand the world around oneself. That is the distinction that is being made by Marina using these references here and it is a critical difference because it acknowledges that simply enjoying everything and anything means not thinking critically, which is not the intent of these characters. Their intellectualism can be shown again by the police's knowledge of Sorokin and Einstürzende Neubauten, that these are educated people who can think and critically consider what is around them. If their goal were simply to pacify people through insisting that everything is worth being happy about and fulfilling, then they would not bring these examples up in this way; in fact it would be far easier to dismiss them if that were the intended goal.

In contrast, the state typically operates in a way that is counter to what Marina here is doing. In an authoritarian regime, such art which is meant to expand one's horizon would be labeled as decadent or not worth much. Malevich of course suffered such suppression by authoritarianism under the Stalin regime, "Black Square" was put away in the archives and has

suffered damage as a result.⁷⁴ Sorokin's work also has significant emphasis on anti-Soviet and later more generally anti-authoritarian themes. The specific work of his which is referenced in the play is the novel *Their Four Hearts* a commentary on the Soviet state written in the same year that the Soviet Union fell. The police's awareness of these works which might seem counter cultural and highly intellectual gives these characters a broader sense of awareness. Moreover their encouragement and acknowledgement of the value of these texts and works go against the typical repressive habits of the state, particularly as has been historically the case in Russia.

Russia's "little man" can be seen again in this play, perhaps showing the concept's endurance as a theme of works which show an absurdist bent. Our man from Podolsk is equally as downtrodden by life as any of the figures which are ascribed this title across the Russian canon. Interestingly on his point are some linguistic similarities behind the man from Podolsk and Dostoevsky's Underground man. In Russian the main character is often called Подольский or *Podolsky* with the implied noun of человек or *Chelovek*. This is quite similar in sound to the Russian for "underground man" подпольный человек or podpol'nyu chelovek. Close enough to be an unlikely coincidence and an interesting connection regardless. Though the main character of this play is far more well adjusted than that of Dostoevsky's work the conflict of ideas that is so central to that story plays out here as well in the ideological battle between the police and Nikolai.

This also brings up the importance of the city that Nikolai is from as his particular place of residence is more important than just as a reference to Dostoevsky. For one thing, Danilov has a record of showing interest in cities, what sorts of character they each possess and what sort of people inhabit them. His 2012 work *Description of a City*, a novel which describes an unnamed city carefully, with great detail and effort taken to catalogue the experience of visiting, walking

⁷⁴ Aleksandra Shatskikh and Marian Schwarz, *Black Square* (Yale University Press, 2012).

around, living, and existing in that particular city, shows this to be a matter of fact. Podolsk is a city in the Moscow region, close enough that some people would commute to Moscow to work, but far enough that it has no metro stop of its own and one must take a regional train or otherwise travel by car into the city. Far removed from Red Square or other Moscow attractions like the theatres, sports arenas, art galleries, or parks it is suburban in a more literal and less American sense of the word. A reader can view it as a place which is ordinary and in very few ways exciting for someone who hates their job and wants to be a musician. Close enough to the city that going into the city is not much of an event, but far enough to make it a necessary hassle to escape small city living. That is the world in which this character is existing, and the source of their sense of the Absurd.

Danilov's work here can be seen as a particularly Russian elaboration of the absurd because of its use of, and commentary on, the State and its typically repressive habits. This is particularly relevant as a trend within New Drama as the movement begins to enter into the late 2000's and 2010's. Plays have gradually taken on more of an anti-establishment bent as the Putin regime has progressed onward, this play being only one example of one which heavily leans on themes of the interactions between the modern Russian state and its populace. *The War Has Not Yet Started* by Mikhail Durnenkov, mentioned in the introduction as a notable New Drama writer, comes to mind as another example of such a work during this timeframe. In *Man from Podolsk* of course such concepts as the negative overreach of the state are turned on their head. The only thing which combines the reality of the play and the lived Russian reality is an acknowledgement of the implicit and explicit threats which make the system work. Even in an idealized state, the police are still the police. No amount of altruism on the part of individual officers can ultimately change the fundamental nature of what a police force is. The very words "police" and "force" are

inextricably linked in this way. If nothing else in the play itself can convince someone of this plays connection to the absurd it is the following lines:

Первый полицейский. Любишь абсурд?

Человек из Подольска. Люблю абсурд.

Первый полицейский. Любишь абсурд? Громче, громче отвечай!

Человек из Подольска. Люблю абсурд!

Первый полицейский. Любишь абсурд?

Человек из Подольска. Люблю абсурд!!!

Первый полицейский. Любишь абсурд?

Человек из Подольска (*орет*). Люблю абсурд!!!

FIRST POLICEMAN. Do you like absurdity?

Man I love the absurd.

FIRST POLICE. Do you like absurdity? Louder, louder answer!

MAN FROM PODOLSK: I love the absurd!

FIRST POLICE. Do you like absurdity?

MAN FROM PODOLSK: I love the absurd !!!

FIRST POLICE. Do you like absurdity?

MAN FROM PODOLSK (yells): I love the absurd !!!⁷⁵

If that still fails one can always take it from the mouth of the author themselves taken from an interview they answered questions about the play:

В нашей жизни полно абсурда, мы с ним сталкиваемся буквально на каждом шагу.

А почему произошел выбор абсурда как творческого метода – просто так

⁷⁵ Danilov, “Chelovek Iz Podol'ska.”

получилось, это было просто интересно, я вообще люблю абсурдные ситуации как предмет творческого описания.

Our life is full of absurdity, we are faced with it literally at every step. And why the absurd was chosen as a creative method - it just happened, it was just interesting, I generally love absurd situations as a subject of creative description.⁷⁶

By turning these concepts on their head, making them absurd, Danilov provides an interesting commentary on the role of the police and how it might look in another world. All of the characters and their particular mannerisms and descriptions help to drive home this point. The play ends with this direction: “The music breaks off at a climax, and five figures freeze in strange, pretentious poses.”⁷⁷ This quote is an acknowledgement of how the play is not realistic, how it is fundamentally absurd.

⁷⁶ Yuliya Vinogradova, Dar'ya Krasovskaya, “Interv'yu s Dmitriem Danilovym - Lyublyu Absurdnye Situatsii...,” accessed January 11, 2022, <https://litschool.pro/intervyu/dmitry-danilov-interview/>.

⁷⁷ Danilov, “Chelovek Iz Podol'ska.”

Conclusion

The New Drama playwrights like Bogaev, Kurochkin, and Danilov were very interested in how the environment of Russia was shaping people during this tumultuous period. The disaffection with what was being done and hopelessness surrounding everything that was happening lead to serious introspection about what living really means to the individual. All of the plays, and New Drama generally, are tied together by the absurdist framework, but what each play, and the three used here are not even the most unusual New Drama has to offer, chooses to do with that differs vastly. This is despite the plays each being published almost a decade apart, New Drama itself spanning a twenty year period already. These three plays hone in on one aspect of society in particular in order to provide a deep examination of their own chosen element.

Bogaev's play focuses most on examining the destruction of community structures and how social isolation affects the psyche. Throughout *Russian National Postal Service* the audience slides into Ivan's world, peering into the mind of a man who has been cast out by circumstance and the misfortunes of the times. Unable to find someone or even something to connect to, he performs a pantomime of communication and finds himself in a parody of a birthday party. Though the table is empty he sets it for the beings he has imagined to be his friends, desiring, perhaps above all else, the simple joy of being wished a happy birthday. Only at the end of the play the reality of Ivan's loneliness has only been pushed away and he is left standing amongst the scattered papers he has tried to imagine were a community of good friends and admirers. He is a paradox, not wanting to die but having nothing to live for, having nothing to do or anything to entertain himself. At the core of this lies the absurd. The absurd is what lingers in Ivan every time his fantasy is broken by some outside noise or stimuli and he is reminded of what his life is.

Kurochkin in some ways takes the ideas that Bogaev has put out into the world and reflects on them to come to his own ideas about absurdity and the individual. The Hero of *Vodka, Fucking, and Television* is an introspective one. Unlike Ivan he does not reject the reality that he lives in but he does find it to be unbearable, a constant cycle of vices which offer stimulation but lack meaning. The problem in that play is not one of community, but of the individual and how they see themselves and relate to their world. The Hero's initial resolve to cut back on what he perceives to be his greatest vices is essentially naive, a desperate attempt to change the core nature of his personality through willpower, because he does not understand what these things do to keep him going. Through his long self introspection looking at each vice and considering how they represent an escape from his absurd reality, he comes to the conclusion that ultimately these things are what bring his day some joy. In the stark cold absurd reality the Hero is able to find himself amidst the meaninglessness of his world and accepts it. He becomes satisfied with who he is.

Danilov's *Man from Podolsk* is the most recent of the three plays that this essay looks at by nearly a decade, showing that the absurdist line has carried through the New Drama movement strong and undiluted. In fact, this play shows that it remains a core part of the dramaturgical period. The eponymous man from Podolsk represents an everyman character. From a mid-sized city in the greater Moscow region, he has a degree in a field he does not particularly enjoy to do a career he does not care for. He has hobbies but is not going anywhere with them in his life. He is already divorced once and dating a woman he does not really love. All of this adds up to a man who is depressed and no longer looks for meaning in life, so he stopped paying attention to all the things around him. With some help he is able to come to this realization and make plans on improving himself, but it comes under the threat of the hand of the

state, in a form that the audience knows is not the reality of the situation. In this way it too has a fantasy in it, one that presumes that the police, or more generally the state, would ever use their tools of oppression to aid in the mental development of its citizens, that it would lift them out of the absurd drudgery of their lives and aid them in developing into the Absurd Hero that Camus writes about.

Taken all together it is not difficult to see how each of these plays relates to the absurdist philosophy that Camus writes about, which would later be taken into the work of the Theater of the Absurd. Each of the plays features a main character who is struggling with living the day to day of their lives and finds it difficult or even unbearable. Though the protagonists are not all able to make the leap towards becoming an absurd hero, they do all in one form or another examine themselves and try to find a way to relate to their environment, whether that is through a search for a more present form of living, a close examination of one's faults, or a break from their reality.

These three plays are just a small fraction of the total works that fall under New Drama. Both *Russian National Postal Service* and *Vodka, Fucking, and Television* are texts which are part of its foundations, while *Man from Podolsk* represents more current work in an ongoing stylistic period for Russian Drama. These provide a good overview and basis for examining the movement stylistically but they are far from the only plays which show the movement's relation to the absurd. New Russian Drama continues to evolve and pushes the limits of what theatre can do or be. The works of Mikhail Durnenkov, Ivan Vyrypaev, Olga Mukhina all push forward the medium and the style itself, but remain grounded in a framework that seeks to explore the role of the absurd in life. Any of these authors and their plays, as well as new works such as *Satellites*

and Comets by Roman Kozyrchikov, *A City Flower* by Elizaveta Letter and others would be excellent material for looking further into the absurdist themes present in New Drama.

This essay revealed the connection between the Absurd and New Russian drama that has largely been overlooked as a foundational element in the available academic literature on the subject. While most have examined elements that have more to do with the writing style and subject matter, up till now there has been less scholarly work on the deeper philosophical themes that connect the movement beyond the realism, profanity, and violence which acts as its stylistic core. This paper hopefully will spark further writing on the relationship between New Drama and the Absurd that goes beyond what is contained here and looks at an even wider variety of plays by an even more diverse number of playwrights. Writing about the Absurd requires deep self examination and thought as Camus clearly showed in his foundational essay. Connecting New Drama and the absurd will help to foster a greater understanding of what the playwrights have done with these works and possibly where they will be going in the future.

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