

The Appearance of Reality

by

Mark E. Granahan

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When one interrogates one's personal engagement with the world, a theoretical approach in the field of communication, phenomenology, introduces individual consciousness from the standpoint of one's personal presence to his/her reality at any given moment in time. Developed in the field of philosophy, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre have been its contributors. In the field of literary criticism, Gaston Bachelard has also added pieces to the theoretical puzzle.

Phenomenology, which has found a resting place in critical theory within the field of communication, claims to be concerned with "truth"—no matter how mediated, provisional, or revisable. Language is a concern of phenomenology from the standpoint that written and spoken words affect an individual's engagement with his/her world. However, language is thought of more as an instrument for getting at truth instead of as a component of ideology. Likewise, there is less interest in the specifics of history as developed in materialist thought as opposed to in a more general and personal idea of time.

According to Bruce Wilshire, "it is easy to know what appears to be the case, but hard to know what really is so; hence, any discipline that concerns itself with appearances is unnecessary" (11). Thus, phenomena (appearances) are difficult to grasp, human reality cannot be understood independently of understanding them (appearances) in their fullness of meaning. Moreover, phenomenology recognizes the "meaning-giving" context in any given unrehearsed life situation.

In the end, phenomenology engages the imagination—the very enemy of the human tendency to distance, to discriminate, and to objectify any given experience. Phenomenology asserts that the fundamental element of a human experience is one’s dialectical relationship with that event. Therefore, phenomenology allows one to observe the many-sidedness of one’s relationship with any given experience.

The phenomenologist inquires how cultural institutions determine how an individual looks at things. S/he asks us to stay in tune with our own involvement in a given event—a world encountered in perception and reflection rather than a world comprised of objective realities. In this way, the emphasis is on the “presence” or unraveling of the world for human consciousness rather than on its absence of language. However, although phenomenology posits the possibility of an authentic or fully human relationship to the world, it also acknowledges the temporality and unrepeatability of such an experience.

Existentialist thought posits that a work of art has a special relation to truth. Unlike objects of utility trapped in day-to-day mundane existence, works of art endure without being used up. In the field of communication, the disciplines associated with the performing arts which cooperate to produce a live theatrical event (the performance of a written play) explicate this “meaning-giving” context most substantially.

In this essay, I intend to explicate this “meaning-giving” context from three different phenomenological perspectives evident in the world of theatre: the perspective of the director, the perspective of the playwright, and the perspective of the performer.

In this application of phenomenology to stage drama, I will be exploring several aesthetic viewpoints as they apply to these three perspectives—incorporating acting theory, dramatic literature, and theatre history.

Whether one examines the aesthetics of “method acting” or absurdist drama, it is apparent that these disparate viewpoints operationalize many of the advancements which have informed Western theatre in the twentieth century. And, most importantly, these disparate viewpoints explicate the phenomenological experience in daily life.

To begin with, a director’s approach to the meaning-giving context of a theatrical event encompasses the director’s vision of what art actually is. According to Mark Fortier, “the art of the actor is to recreate--which is not the same as repetition which, if mechanical, is deadening; repetition of a moment of truth is impossible....A work of art is born on the stage only for a moment; and, no matter how beautiful, it may be it cannot be commanded to stay with us (33).

In explicating the work of director Constantine Stanislavski, Fortier cites Stanislavski the following way:

I cannot will my heirs my labors, my quests, my losses, my joys, and my disappointments....Nothing can fix and pass on to our descendants those inner paths of feeling, that conscious road to the gates of the unconscious, which, which alone, are the true foundation of the art of the theatre. (34)

That conscious road to the gates of the unconscious informed Stanislavski’s conception of an acting system. This conception is often delineated by theatre historians within four

works by Stanislavski: My Life in Art (1924), An Actor Prepares (1936), Building A Character (1949), and Creating A Role (1961).

This system was based on a number of philosophical assumptions regarding one's presence within an environment. Like many directors of his time, Stanislavsky assumed that the actor's body and voice should be so well trained that s/he could respond efficiently to the demands made on him/her. Yet, unlike many directors of his time, Stanislavski insisted that actors schooled in stage techniques would project their characterizations to audiences without any sense of contrivance. Thus, Stanislavski posited that an actor must always find an inner justification for whatever s/he does in order to avoid the appearance of insecurity or artificiality. And, this inner justification unlocked the door for the actor allowing him/herself to experience his/her character in the moment—in a present rather than past tense.

This conception was not completely adopted by his American disciples for a variety of reasons. However, one must recall that, throughout most of the twentieth century, American theatre was still engulfed in the performance of the melodrama—an art form which was typified by its artificial nature. In its detachment in its concern for truth, appearance itself became a grand game of vocal and physical gyrations on the part of the actor without any regard for “reality.”

In search for ways to impart his concept of performance, Stanislavski designed many exercises with the sole purpose of allowing actors to discover inner justification(s). For example, his “circle of attention” asked actors to draw an imaginary circle around themselves and to shut out all distractions so they may concentrate wholly upon entering

the world of the play (Brockett and Findlay 62). Likewise, actors could employ “the magic if” by saying “If I were this character in this situation, I would...” (Brockett and Findlay 62). In this way, the actor’s personal life truth was transposed to the truth of art. And, authentic motivations (as people experience them in actual life) became part of the stage.

Stanislavski introduced his concept of “memory of emotion” to be used in instances where actors had difficulty developing appropriate and sincere emotional responses to dramatic situations (Brockett and Findlay 63). Using this device, actors recalled and constructed an analogous situation from their own lives which they were to re-create until the proper emotional response was evoked for the dramatic situation.

Stanislavski employed these exercises to remind his actors that, on one level of performance, they were merely playing themselves. Yet, this was only partially truth. Each actor needed to be aware of the “given circumstances” of the production—discovered through detailed analysis of the play, the role, the directorial concept, the setting, the costumes, and other limitations under which s/he worked. Lastly, each actor needed to be a skilled observer of reality as a basis for building a role.

In this process, actors became aware of their character’s “objective” in each scene and in the play as a whole. They became aware of the play’s major lines of action in determining the “through line” of the work—around which every structural element in the play was built (Brockett and Findlay 63). This sense of focus on the unfolding rather than the contrived action of the play created “the illusion of the first time” in the performance of the work (Brockett 401). And, every actor could contribute to the

ensemble nature of the piece. Rather than serving oneself, the actor was called upon to serve the dramatic action of the playwright. And, this service could only be rendered through acute attention to the particular circumstances of a dramatic work.

Throughout the twentieth century, the importance as well as the interpretation of Stanislavski's system for acting was hotly contested in both scholarly and artistic circles. While some cited the unreliability of the translation of his writings, others simply observed that this system was not all encompassing toward disparate world cultures. For instance, American scholars note that the inner psychological aspects of the system were emphasized in the U.S. at the expense of technical facility. However, Stanislavski himself, up to the time of his death, asserted that his system was incomplete. Hence, he warned against improper applications of his system with regard to performance situations encompassing disparate artistic needs and cultural backgrounds.

From a phenomenological point of view, Stanislavski's exhortations regarding the actor's motivations, his/her knowledge of the given circumstances of the text, and, most of all, his/her ability to allow the action of the play to unfold as if for the first time all indicate Stanislavski's desire for the actor to attend to the unrepeatable "present"--the phenomena s/he enters into when making an entrance to the stage.

Next, a playwright's approach to the meaning-giving context of a theatrical event also encompasses a vision of what art actually is. Such playwrights as Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, and Eugene Ionesco represented such visions which incorporated the principles of phenomenology. First, Brecht is known for (what he termed) his "alienation effect." This phenomenon, which took place within the observer of a Brecht play, sought

to alienate familiar life circumstances. Based on Marxist theory, Brecht asserted that illusions in the theatre (as in life) dissembled and distorted the phenomenological event of a production. And, in providing illusions within of a theatrical event, one gained illusions of the life experience which distorted one's ability to participate effectively in communal life.

Brecht's "alienation effect" operated within both the text and oral/visual structures of his works. For instance, an audience member's aesthetic detachment from the performance of the play would become immediately evident upon his/her entrance into the theatre space; all the mechanistic elements of the theatre (the lighting instruments, backstage areas, and technical personnel) were often exposed to the audience. When the performance began, actors often delivered lines in the third person—not allowing themselves to be consumed by a character—drawing a distinction between "a collection of individuals and a collective individual....The actor modeled modeling, enacting enactment, and revealing it" (Wilshire 14, 16).

Wilshire defines Brechtian theatre as a "fictive variation on existence, conducted by a community of participants, in which each may surprise every other" (17). According to Wilshire, the "tendencies of interaction between persons...can be discovered only when they are in each others' physical presence...These...tendencies must be experienced muscularly and viscerally to be know at all" (17). Thus, Brecht's "alienation effect" allowed the audience to experience the means of production associated with the play—an illusion of reality—and made no attempt to dissemble the nature of the present experience to the audience. Thus, in this phenomenological experience, Brecht

removed all distractions which compromised a live performance—leaving the audience to interpret the event through their experience with the phenomena (the play) rather than with the illusion of reality.

Brecht's Mother Courage and her Children (1938) explicates this “alienation effect” in a number of ways. Set during the Thirty Years' War, the work focuses on the life of an itinerant trader, Anna Fierling, who, with her three children, follows both the imperial and the Swedish armies to sell liquor and other goods to the soldiers. One by one, her children are killed; Swiss Cheese is executed when he will not reveal the hiding place of the regimental cash box entrusted to him; Eilif (a braggart), after being treated as a hero for stealing cattle, is shot as a looter; Katrina, who is deaf and mute, is killed as she beats a drum to warn a nearby town of an impending massacre. Hence, Mother Courage pulls wagon (which during the surrounding action has symbolically become ever more dilapidated) alone.

She never, however, connects the loss of her children with the life she has made them lead and, indeed, declares that she has taken up her trade for the sake of her children. On the one hand, Brecht's protagonist is a powerful figure; she faces life's horrors with dogged courage. However, Brecht's own intention is that she be viewed unsympathetically because she thinks she can profit from war without paying the price. Hence, “alienation” in this work is predicated on the following notion: Mother Courage is not economically (or otherwise) paralyzed by the realities of war even when she has lost all three of her children. This reality “makes the familiar strange” in the context of war as the ultimate expression of capitalism. And, this alienating experience invites the

audience members to focus their faculties on the phenomenon taking place on stage—not simply the play being performed.

Second, Beckett explicates the phenomenological theatrical experience from an absurdist context. In a movement which rejected logic and rationalism within artistic composition, the absurdist's radically restructured both the meaning and construction of a written play. To begin with, the traditional linear pattern of cause and effect relationships among incidents—exposition, complication, and denouement—was abandoned and reduced to a minimum. Action tended to be circular—concentrating on exploring the nature of a human condition rather than telling a connected story. Thus, problems or situations were seldom resolved.

Characters were constructed toward the typical or archetypal rather than the specific and the individual. Actors exchanged roles or metamorphosed into other characters. Some characters were given only generic or numerical designations. And, most plays occurred in some symbolic location--in a void or limbo cut off from the concrete world where time and place were generalized. Also, time was flexible as in dreams.

Language, for the most part, was downgraded. Unlike traditional drama, the characters usually recognized that they were indulging in a game. And, language was frequently ridiculed by distorting or exaggerating its mechanical aspects. Consequently, spectacle was used symbolically or metaphorically to compensate, in part, for the demotion of language. Therefore, traditional distinctions among dramatic forms disappeared.

Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1953) appears to be set in a world that has already undergone a disaster in which human existence has been brought into question. Written during a decade which was characterized by the threat of a cold war and the total destruction of the earth in an atomic holocaust, the form of the work is circular in nature—no revelations, no true climaxes, and no resolutions. Rather than telling a story, the play explores a condition. Thus, the two acts are identical in structure and content.

Beckett's work posits the notion that human existence is taken for granted in the living world. His principle characters, two tramps named Vladimir and Estragon, wait in a desolate wasteland (where the only sign of life is one single tree) for a gentleman named Godot. However, although the anticipation of the tramps never wanes, Godot never arrives—only a boy who relates Godot's apologies to the tramps for his absence and the promise of a visit in the near future.

In a one-act radio play titled Embers (1959), Beckett offered an insight into the significance of his particular type of dramatic language. Talking about the sea, a man (Henry) addresses his wife (Ada):

HENRY

Listen to it!....It's not so bad when you get out on it....Perhaps, I should have gone into the merchant navy.

ADA

It's only on the surface, you know. Underneath it all, it is as quiet as the grave. Not a sound. All, day, all night, not a sound.

(Cohn and Dukore 689)

In Waiting for Godot, Estragon observes, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.” (10). And, even when the two tramps encounter visitors in their space, Pozzo and Lucky, these visitations are dissolved by suffocating, futile exchanges:

Pozzo: I’d very much like to sit down, but I don’t
quite know how to go about it.

Estragon: Could I be of any help?

Pozzo: If you asked me perhaps.

Estragon: What?

Pozzo: If you asked me to sit down.

Estragon: Would that be of any help?

Pozzo: I fancy so.

Estragon: Here we go. Be seated, sir, I beg of you.

Pozzo: No, no, I wouldn’t think of it! Ask me again.

(quoted in Natanson 68)

Hence, the simple invitation to “have a seat” is not enough for an the emergence of a empathic human connection.

In Act I, Pozzo is in fine health while Lucky, his slave, is weakening. However, Lucky still retains his ability to display intellectual tricks—his skill for survival. As Lucky performs a grotesque dance, he illustrates his power to think as he rattles off a stream of erudite, but ultimately meaningless, disconnected words and phrases.

In Act II, Pozzo is now blind and Lucky’s intellectual senses have decayed. However, as these situations change, Vladimir’s continual answer to Estragon’s repeated

question of “what shall we do?” is to ‘wait for Godot..” Consequently, Vladimir and Estragon improvise diversions to pass the time—debating theology, engaging in games, and discussing the futility of suicide. Yet, the space they inhabit remains motionless.

Maurice Nantanson posits that Beckett’s work depicts a world upon which time has stopped—rather than consummating a changing reality (67). This description illustrates the phenomenological nature of the work; reality is the sum of what we were—not simply what we are given. In essence, Estragon and Vladimir aren’t anything. In being themselves, they are beyond labels. In fact, one wonders what might become of the two tramps if Godot does arrive—restoring the static void to the thick, mundane world of motion permeated by absence.

Most interpretations of the play suffer from being over-specific and gravitate toward the religious or philosophical realm. In summarizing the work, one recognizes a human search for that something or that someone who will give meaning to life. However, those who rush about in this search fare no better than those who remain stationary. Thus, humans are adrift in an impersonal, barren universe. They must seek solutions to this dilemma that encourage human connection rather than religious, philosophical, or materialistic solutions that prolong the isolation.

All in all, Beckett’s encapsulation of the world of experiential existence incorporates the phenomenological experience in, yet, another way within the realm of the theatre experience. While Vladimir and Estragon locate their concealed humanity within their everyday existence while they wait for life to begin, the phenomenological life experience is revealed. In an experience which is characterized by non-linearity,

Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait—wait for Godot without realizing the phenomenological adventures they are already having.

Third, Ionesco also explicates the phenomenological experience from an absurdist standpoint. However, he is more hybrid in nature—incorporating many theatrical genres. In his work The Chairs (1952), Ionesco employs elements of farce, pantomime, and tragedy in a work about, once again, human isolation. Ionesco refers to this combination of dramatic genre(s) as a “tragic farce” (Cirella 168).

When one peruses the visual design requirements for the play, one discovers a pictorial realism common to most nineteenth century French and British farces: a box set with a multitude of doors and windows meant to welcome the unexpected visitor and anticipate audience surprise. At the same time, the farce set becomes for Ionesco a medium to present his bourgeois audience with a totally different kind of situation from that of a typical farce.

When the play opens, the audience is immediately immersed in a rather familiar farce set:

Circular walls with a recess upstage center. A large, very sparsely furnished room. To the right, going upstage from the proscenium, three doors. Then, a window with a stool in front of it; then, another door. In the center of the back door of the recess, a large double door, and two other doors facing each other and bracketing the main door; these last two doors, or at least one of them, are almost hidden from the audience. To

the left, going upstage from the proscenium, there are three doors, a window with a stool in front of it, an opposite the window on the right, then a blackboard and a dais....Downstage are two chairs, side by side. A gas lamp hangs from the ceiling. (The Bald Soprano 42)

From this very symmetrical indoor set, Ionesco sets up the atmosphere of an anti-farce. Nobody actually appears or disappears except an elderly couple. This elderly couple entertains imaginary, invisible guests.

The work embodies social critiques about the emptiness of human conventions. In his work Notes and Counter Notes, Ionesco explains the use of a farce set to stage an absurdist play:

What is needed is plenty of gesture, almost pantomime, light, sound, moving objects, doors that open and close and open again. In order to create this emptiness so that it grows and devours everything, absence can only be created in opposition to things present. And, none of this will damage the movement; all those dynamic objects are the very movement of the play, though this may not as yet be movement as you see it. (189)

The farce set and the stage properties become real agents of this anti-farce, not the actors; the void is the only thing alive. There is no life outside the set; the world is full of ghosts.

As the play opens, we meet an elderly couple seemingly trapped in this space. The Old Man demonstrates a childlike, adventurous nature to journey beyond the space. However, his wife, the Old Woman, tames her husband's enthusiasm with trepidation: "You shouldn't lean out, you might fall in the water" (Cirella 172). Not unlike Beckett's

Waiting for Godot, the play presents an “end of the world atmosphere in the image of two wretched heroes” (Mendelson 65).

Ionesco constructs a scenario opposite to that of a typical farce. Rather than the space containing many escapes for the couple, they are trapped in this “semi-spheric materiality” (Cirella 173). Living in isolation, the couple projects to the audience a state of infantilization. They fill the stage with chairs, purportedly waiting for the guests to arrive, who, in fact, will never come. They invent a world of fantasy and perform successive comical roles that are acted out in a mimetic style; they “play house” rather than being at home—a feature common in most pantomimes. Hence, instead of a love story, we get a tragedy.

While expecting many guests to show up at any moment, the couple engages in a never ending trial of anticipation that underscores their tragic condition—their isolation and their hope of being saved by the outside world. Indeed, this situation reverses the dramatic conventions of traditional farces in which a central character is victimized by an outside agent. In contrast, an old man and an old woman exist in isolation behind circular walls. Beyond those walls lies their boat—suggesting their conscious attempt to avoid victimization as well as the inability of the world to reach them.

After the first knock at the door, one realizes the true tragedy of the situation. The couple conducts their imaginary visitor to a seat while carrying on an irrelevant, everyday conversation—which is as empty as the chair the visitor sits in. More guests arrive. The couple welcomes them. The chairs remain empty. The sound of a boat gliding on the

water is heard off in the distance. The couple's world remains stationary. Thus, the farce proceeds in empty form.

While the couple seems to believe that others control their fate(s), their habitual actions (their meaningless conversational duets) are what actually control them. This kind of dialogue is symptomatic of the couple's inability to reconcile with and establish true communication with an outside world. Ironically, the couple acts as both agents of the farce and victims of the anti-farce. The materiality they create for their fantastic world, their world of ghostly visitors, is the very weapon that invokes their (dual) suicide. And, when the only outside character, the Orator, enters the space, he simply witnesses the couple's death. His arrival is ineffective in initiating a change in the couple's fate. More than that, he speaks for them, not to them—acting as an erasure of their lives. In some ways, Ionesco's Orator is Beckett's Godot—arriving on the scene only to seal, to consummate the death of the couple.

In a work which depicts two people caught up in a game of fantasy, Ionesco insists on the following:

The performance must not minimize its effects, whether it be the large number of chairs, the large number of bells that announce the arrival of the invisible guests, or the lamentations of the old woman, who should be like a weeping woman in Corsica or Jerusalem; everything should be exaggerated, excessive, painful, childish, and a caricature without finesse.

(Notes and Counter Notes 187)

The Orator's speech is incomprehensible; the audience soon realizes the link between the farce language and the couple's life tragedy. In a critique of bourgeois social forms, the drama is almost burlesque in content. In employing the American burlesque theatre's manipulation and play upon language, Ionesco causes a fake world to collapse.

The tragedy of what was and what might have been is all too clear. On the one hand, the couple creates a fantasy world out of their isolation from humanity. And, for a period of time, this world protects them from the pain of this isolation—a phenomenological reality. On the other hand, the couple's isolation literally kills them; this isolation conceals alternatives the couple may have in how they choose to relate to the world around them—a denial of another phenomenological reality. Moreover, Ionesco interrogates the phenomenological experience as both an element of life and an element of death.

Lastly, a performer's approach to the meaning-giving context of a theatrical event often encompasses a unique perspective of the life experience. Bert Lahr, known for his role of the Cowardly Lion in MGM's The Wizard of Oz (1939), created the role of Estragon in Beckett's Waiting for Godot in the U. S. premiere of the work. Lahr, whose background as a robust burlesque clown engendered a dedication to making people laugh at the painful sides of themselves, set the stage for a phenomenological experience which encompassed the liminal nature of comedy and tragedy.

When Michael Myerberg offered Lahr the role of Estragon in the U. S. premiere of Beckett's work in 1956, his initial reaction was one of trepidation coupled with

curiosity: “When I first read the play, I realized that this was not stark tragedy, Beneath it was tremendous humor” (Lahr 255). While friends and the press reacted to the low comic entering the intellectual arena with amusement, Lahr addressed the work not from a literary point of view but, rather, from a theatrical one.

This initial approach by Lahr both interfaced and created friction with the philosophical basis of the work. Lahr talked about playing Beckett instinctively. According to Lahr, Beckett spoke to his own immediate and intense private experience. Lahr understood the pathos as well as the comic texture hidden within the work without ever having read any of Beckett’s plays or novels.

Throughout his life, Lahr had lived with the loneliness that plagued Vladimir and Estragon’s existence. He had also lived with the silences that were so inherent in Beckett’s precise, philosophical use of language. At the same time, Lahr had developed an ability to discover the playful potential of Beckett’s words. Yet, Lahr was conscious of his own inability to make words convey his precise intentions. He didn’t like to talk merely to pass the time. He would rather remain silent. This awareness on the part of Lahr to identify his own struggle to communicate his thoughts and feelings in an accurate and meaningful way informed his creation of the role of Estragon.

Myerberg selected Alan Schneider to direct the production—presenting the play for the first time in Miami, Florida. During this time, Beckett’s significance in America was limited to a small coterie of intellectuals. Hence, in an attempt to market the play to U. S. audiences, Myerberg advertised Beckett’s play as a performance “in the finest tradition of P. T. Barnum” (Lahr 262).

Myerberg's ignorance of the intents of the work unsettled middle-class audiences— who treated the production with aggressive dislike. One local critic reports, "The audience was more in the mood for Guys and Dolls. It was openly hostile to the event" (Lahr 269).

Plans to take the production to other major cities never materialized. In the end, Myerberg resigned to folding the show in Miami. At the same time, Myerberg remained committed to staging Beckett's work on the American commercial stage. Myerberg enlisted the directorial talent of Herbert Berghof. In the meantime, Lahr's colleagues encouraged him to scrap his association with the production. Yet, Lahr found himself defending the work without being able to verbalize its special force.

What did Lahr know? Questions of philosophy and social organization that the play raised never crossed his mind. However, some of the basic human phenomenological elements that comprised the work are apparent to Lahr:

Everybody has their own interpretation of Godot. At one point in the play, you thought the tramps were waiting for God. But, Beckett would then go off on another tangent. Then, you knew it wasn't God. At the finish, they were still waiting. It was waiting. Hopelessness. It was waiting for the best in life and it never came. I think he meant for the two characters to represent both sides of man. Estragon, my part, was the animal: sex, hunger, eating, and sleeping. The other, Vladimir, was suspicion and inquiry. He was always examining everything. Intellect. Estragon had a

kind of an animal's love for Vladimir. He cared for him almost like a baby. (Lahr 272)

Lahr's identification with the basic human skeletal elements of the work received validation from Beckett himself. In the London Sunday Times on December 20, 1964, Beckett states his play is "full of implications and every important statement can be taken three or four ways. But, the actor has only to find the dominant one. And, if he does so, it does not mean that the other levels will be lost" (Lahr 272).

Berghof speaks of Beckett's work in these terms: "My complete conviction is that the play is affirmative. There is nothing fanciful or strange in it. There is no raised finger. To me, it doesn't have the false significance of an arty play." (Lahr 273).

Berghof goes on to observe that "in comedy, what matters is that you truly see" (Lahr 273).

One large opportunity Berghof believed Beckett's text offered was the ability on the part of the actor to capture an absurd moment of a human being with precise understanding. In fact, Berghof characterizes Estragon and Vladimir's exploration of their stark existence the following way:

A sublime clown's act....There is no negation in Beckett's text, but a kind of affirmation you get when you love someone and see all their faults....Only somebody who loves life strongly can see all the flaws and weaknesses in an attempt to find out what it is all about. (Lahr 273)

According to Berghof, the paradox about Estragon and Vladimir's search for meaning to their existence was that although life has all these absurd aspects, one remains on the search because one loves life. Thus, it was this love for life that made Estragon and Vladimir's seemingly meaningless gestures meaningful.

Berghof pinpoints his conception of Beckett's work:

If it's not comic, it's nothing. What matters is that something is true and human—that you get true sensations. It becomes completely dry if it is played with all kinds of symbolic overtones which do not communicate the meaninglessness to an audience. (Lahr 274)

Berghof describes the experience of acting:

A game of make-believe, like children's play. Bert Lahr plays that game. He goes into a rehearsal like a child going to the park. Everything Bert does comes from an experience and makes a form. He doesn't find a style at first. Rather, the experience makes a form. (Lahr 277)

Berghof was amazed to see how Lahr could convey insight without extraneous gesture: "He ate a carrot with hungry joy. He took off a shoe with a peace beyond satisfaction" (Lahr 277).

Lahr's ability to execute these actions with a sense of freedom and ease was directly connected to phenomenological world. For example, Estragon's hunger is both physical and emotional. Both fall short of being completely met. At the same time,

Estragon's hunger is desperate and fulfills itself through whatever meager means it finds.

These experiences are phenomenological in nature.

Alvin's Epstein, who worked with Marcel Marceau and studied with Etienne Decroux, critiques Lahr's performance of Estragon in Berghof's production: "The idea of his movement, the physical feel of it, seemed to me the perfect Beckettian tragicomic gestures. It wasn't campy. It was absolutely right within the framework of the play—sluggish and sloppy, but precise" (Lahr 278). Berghof tells a New York newspaper reporter, "Lahr's a primitive. God bless him" (Lahr 278).

Richard Watts of the New York Post comments:

Mr. Lahr, in addition to being enormously funny and touching in the role, somehow managed to seem like a kind of liaison between the narrative and the audience—a sort of spiritual interpreter whose warmth and humanity extended across the footlights and caught up every spectator in a shared experience. (Lahr 280)

The experience was cathartic as the audience shared Lahr's struggle as their own. And, this experience was directly tied, once again, to Lahr's ability to exist in the phenomenological world.

Many people looked upon the production as an event of crucial importance to the theatre. William Saroyan comments, "it will make it easier for me and everyone else to write freely in the theater" (Lahr 279). Panel discussions about the play were held on the stage after each performance. Lahr and the other actors took part. Literary personalities and critics attended and offered analysis.

As such practices were unheard of on Broadway, debate fermented both inside commercial theatre circles and beyond. And, although the run of the play lasted only ten weeks due to economic confusion between the cast and the producer, Beckett was established in America as an important intellectual force.

Kenneth Tynan, in his work Curtains, speaks of Lahr's contribution to the production:

Without him (Lahr), the Broadway production of Mr. Beckett's play would be admirable. With him, it is transfigured. It is as if we, the audience, had elected him to represent our reactions, resentful and confused, to the lonely universe into which the author plunges us. 'I'm going,' says Mr. Lahr. 'We can't go,' snaps his partner. 'Why not?,' pleads Mr. Lahr. 'We're waiting for Godot,' comes the reply. Then, Mr. Lahr raises one finger with the 'ah!' of comprehension which betokens its exact opposite—a totality of blankest ignorance. Mr. Lahr's beleaguered simpleton, a draughts player lost in a universe of chaos, is one of the noblest performances I have ever seen. (272)

Berghof describes Lahr's performance in these terms: "Everybody was there waiting for the actor to send the laughs out and he wasn't doing it. I'd never seen him as clear, simple, and to the point" (Lahr 279). Once again, tragedy met comedy in the phenomenological world. And, Lahr, with all his tragic awareness and burlesque madness, took his audience by the hand into that world.

In conclusion, in explicating a theory in the field of communication which emphasizes the “present truth(s)” of everyday unrehearsed human interactions, the performing arts disciplines of directing, playwrighting, and acting offer some unique gateways into the phenomenological event. And, with these gateways come possibilities—not answers.

These possibilities illuminate the central principle of phenomenology itself—truth derived from sometimes abstract, unrehearsed, mundane human experiences which encompass very few expectations. For the communication theorist, this principle is essential to explicating phenomenological theory. The merit of penetrating this mendacity, the hopelessness of everyday life as a human phenomenon lies in the possibility of the lived individual experience becoming a rhetorical artifact onto itself—untainted by the assumptions that encompass human expectations. The appearance of reality becomes more significant than one’s ability to define reality. And, it is in this appearance that experiential learning for the communication theorist becomes a possibility—a possibility rather than a probability.

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