

## The Musician Dropped Dead, Is the Show Over?: Exploring Audience and Text Interaction

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When thinking about composition, we often think about the way in which an author creates their text, but rarely consider the audience as co-creator. Can an audience create a text? Can a text create an audience? Abby Palmisano's article explores the complex relationship between text and audience through the exaggerated lens of Theatre of the Absurd.

We've all had instances where some writing has changed us. It may have been a poem, or a play, or a song, or a novel. Maybe it changed the course of your career; maybe it changed your outlook on life in a particular hour on a particular day. Some instances will stand out strong in our minds—I remember watching a play that ended up changing my major—and others will be minute, so much so, that they almost fade into the background. Most of the time, we remain unaware of the way that writing rewrites us, but the fact that such a thing does occur is undeniable. It is an interesting phenomenon and somewhat difficult to examine considering its subtlety in our lives. But, there *are* ways to examine it. If you are a scientist, and you want to examine something very, very small, so small that it cannot be seen by the naked eye, you place it under a microscope. In other words, you add something that will expand it in your vision. So, in order to examine this minute phenomenon, we, the writing-researchers, must place it under a textual microscope that will enlarge it. We must view it through the lens of a genre that will exaggerate this interaction. Let me describe to you a clarinet recital that I attended a few years ago—now, I know that to many this may not sound so exciting, or relevant, but just hold on, you might be surprised.

I was sitting in an auditorium amidst community members and fellow students. We had just witnessed a very typical, run of the mill clarinet recital given by one of the music professors. The music and performance had all been very good, and we were down to the last song. After the penultimate song had ended, I took a quick glance down at my program, which was a bit hard to see in the dark, and saw that the next song was titled “Fidelio.” I assumed that it must be an excerpt from Beethoven’s opera by the same name and turned my attention back to the stage.

Now before I go on, I want to take a minute to examine the genre of a clarinet recital. One definition of **genre**, according to ISU’s writing program website, can refer to “kinds of texts that can be produced.” When we’re studying genres in this way, there are typically conventions that accompany each type of text. So, in the case of a clarinet recital, the genre would include:

- a musician playing upon a clarinet while sitting or standing upon a stage, possibly accompanied by another musician
- clarinet music played on a clarinet
- the musician is well-practiced and well-trained, and thus will play the clarinet in its traditional, downward position
- an audience who sits quietly and listens
- a clear end to the piece followed by a bow from the musician
- applause from the audience.

These all probably seem so obvious that they are not worth mentioning. Those of us who’ve been to (or participated in) recitals have seen it so many times that we take each of these conventions of the recital genre for granted. How could it be a clarinet recital if it consisted of anything else? We also take our own participation in the event for granted. How could the audience be anything other than the silent observer? I’ll just leave these questions for the moment. Now back to the recital.

The music professor came back out on the stage, bowed, and then took his seat in the middle of the stage and began to play, as he had done for every song thus far. But then something rather unusual happened. In the middle of the song, a man dressed all in black entered from the wing carrying a small, black suitcase and a clipboard.

What?

The man made the musician sign for the suitcase, set it down next to the chair, and exited back into the wings. The musician continued to play.

All around, people began to mutter—“What was that about?” “Is this man a part of the performance?” “What does it mean?” The musician just continued to play his piece as if nothing had happened, and soon enough the muttering ceased and all attention was back on the recital. And then the suitcase began to play everything the musician played back at him.

At this point, we were thoroughly confused, as, it seemed, was the musician. He would play a few bars, and then the suitcase would echo the exact line of music. But the whole affair was interrupted by a second entrance of the man in black, who had yet another suitcase. Again, the musician signed for the suitcase, the man left, and he resumed his song. This time, both suitcases echoed the tune. The playing and echoing continued as the man in black returned time and time again, with more and more suitcases, until there was large barricade of black suitcases all playing against the musician. The musician had to angle his clarinet upwards in order to be seen and heard over the mountain of suitcases. Now, the musician was no longer confused, he was angry. Clearly these suitcases were ruining his performance. Livid, he thrust the clarinet back onto its stand, walked around the suitcase mountain so that he was facing its front, and began to scream at it. The suitcase mountain screamed back. Mountain and man screamed at each other for a whole minute.

And then the musician dropped dead.

The man in black entered again, this time with a large wooden coffin. He dragged the musician into the coffin, closed him in, and pushed it through the central isle out through the back of the auditorium. The lights went up. For a few moments, the entire audience sat in silent shock. Then one by one, the buzz of concerned muttering began. “What just happened?” “Is it over?” “Are we supposed to leave now?” “Okay, that was NOT Beethoven.”

Audience members debated about whether or not the piece was over for about three minutes. Finally, some began to grab their coats and were ready to leave. Just then, the man in black reentered through the wings, pushing the coffin in front of him. There was an audible gasp from the audience. He stopped right in front the suitcase mountain and stood facing the audience with his arms crossed. Then, the musician, from inside the coffin, began to kick and scream and the suitcases played cacophonously over him while the man in black just stood there. The lights went down. In a moment, the musician stood next to the man in black, and both took a bow. After exchanging glances, the audience began to clap.

Now the recital was over. Of course, nobody was any less confused. We had expected to see a clarinet recital where the musician simply played music,

simply bowed, and the audience simply clapped. Instead, we got whatever this thing was. And what was it? While my friends and I discussed the issue after the concert, I was finally able to put a name to this thing—*absurdism*. This was an absurdist clarinet piece. It is not often that you see an absurdist musical piece—it's really not often that you see an absurdist anything, but when you do, it will certainly leave you stunned and confused. But why?

It undermines our definitions of the genres that we expect to be met with. Absurdism characteristically disrupts the confines of the genres they are found in. In this case, the characteristic elements of the clarinet recital genre were each disrupted: a man who was not a musician came on stage with items that were not clarinets that played clarinet music. The audience did not sit in silence, but talked and got up and almost left. The musician did not even stay onstage the whole piece; he dropped dead and was dragged off in a coffin. Every one of the genre conventions that we accept without question was undermined, and, yet, it was somehow still a clarinet recital. At the same time, since there are numerous examples of absurdism that disrupt the conventions of the genres they are found in, absurdism has become a genre of its own.

### **Texts and Audiences**

Now let us return to our microscopic area of interest: how the text changes the audience. When we placed the clarinet recital under the microscope of absurdism, we saw that the way in which we consumed the recital had changed. The audience was not silent, but felt that they must talk. Some even felt that they must *leave*. We did so because the recital forced us to react in some way, as all recitals do. Since it was absurdist, and the recital genre was disrupted, so were our typical reactions. In absurdism, the audience enters a phase of meta-reaction. They become hyper-aware of what it is that the performer is doing and how they, the audience, fit into the performance. If the player is continuously playing, the continuous music elicits silence from the audience. They must be silent in order to hear, and in this way audience creates the recital as much as the musician. It is the goal of the recital for music to be heard. The silence of the audience allows this to happen. In the same way, disruption in the music produces audible confusion and disorder, which is the goal of absurdism. The audience is a necessary component in the attainment of that goal. They must participate in the disorder, thus co-creating the text.

I had first encountered the absurdist genre about year before the occurrence of the clarinet player episode. My friend was preparing to start

her senior project—directing a play. She was directing a set of one act, *The Chairs* and *The Lesson*, both by playwright Eugene Ionesco. My friend asked me if I would act the part of the Old Woman in *The Chairs* and gave me the script to read before the read through. Now, I consider myself to be a pretty good reader, and until that point I had never really come across a text that managed to stump me, but this one did. The whole play consisted of this Old Man and Old Woman who kept on welcoming invisible guests into their home. It made no sense. At all. “Am I stupid?” I thought. But soon enough, I was given a word for the show that explained why I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. It was Theatre of the Absurd. It directly and purposefully undermines the key characteristics of the theatrical genre. There are certain things that we expect from a play, and it may be helpful to list some of the traditional characteristics of a play as we did for a recital:

- There is a clear and definite plot with a beginning middle and end. There is a clear point of conflict which the play centers around.
- There are physical actors on stage, playing the roles of the characters of the play and audibly speaking their dialogue.
- The play captures some moments in time; there is a reality existing before, after, and during the course of the play that interacts with the actual matter of the play.
- The dialogue and physical actions made by the characters and their surroundings of the play work together to construct a reality. That reality is self-consistent.
- An audience is present and are silent observers of the play.

Ok, so we began with these characteristics that can be found in many, if not most plays, but let’s move on to the play itself, *The Chairs*. Here’s how it goes. The curtain comes up on an Old Man and Old Woman each looking out of a pair of windows. The Old Woman asks the Old Man to step away from the window. He is worried because he has message to communicate (apparently of the upmost importance), and an Orator will be arriving along with an audience. They begin to list the various people—and objects—that will be invited to hear the message. The couple begin to reflect on their life, which may or may not have included visiting Paris, which may or may not have burned down hundreds of years ago. The Old Man gets upset and the Old Woman comforts him by rocking him back and forth on her lap, saying that since she is his wife, she is also his mother. Yes, this play is very, very strange. The couple hear boats and start to retrieve chairs for the guests who are about to arrive. They open the door to greet the first guest—but there is no one there. Still, they greet the guest and begin to converse with

her, as they do for each and every invisible guest that arrives. Throughout, they continue to bring out more and more chairs for the guests. The Old Couple keep interacting with the copious amounts of invisible guests and discussing the importance of the message that is to be relayed. Finally, the room is so filled with immaterial guests that the Old Man and Old Woman must stand on stools and shout over the crowd in order to hear and see one another. Standing on these stools, they see that the Grand Monarch himself has entered. Now they must await the arrival of the Orator. In the high excitement and anticipation of the event, the Old Man and Woman jump out of their windows, never to be seen again. All is quiet for a few moments—and then someone arrives—the Orator (who is, by the way, *not* invisible). The Orator goes to the front and begins to speak in gibberish, and then leaves. The show is now over.

### Playing with the Genre

So, how does *The Chairs* disrupt the traditional theatrical genre? For one, there is not exactly a clear plotline. There is no rising and falling action. If anything, the action just rises. There is also no real point of conflict for The Old Couple. There is, however, a conflict for the audience. What is going on with these invisible guests? Are they real or just imagined by The Old Couple? But these questions are never answered. This connects to the next disrupted genre convention—not all parts are played by physical actors with audible speech. If they are played by anything, it is your own imagination. Furthermore, the reality presented in the play is not self-consistent. It is full of contradictions—both verbal and physical in nature. And finally, the audience is not a silent observer. Besides laughter (which is an accepted type of audience reaction) the audience gasps, audibly cringes, and groans. The most interesting (and I must say, entertaining) of the audience reactions were the comments. At various points during the performance, people would exclaim “What is happening!?!” or “Is any of this real?” or “What a minute, are they DEAD?”

Now we’ve examined two different examples of absurdism, both of which are called absurd because they undermine the conventions of the genres that they are working within. And since we now know that there are multiple texts out there that push back against genre, we can see a new genre forming. An absurdist genre, a genre defined by its subversive traits. Let’s look under our microscope of the absurdist genre to see how the text creates the audience—and the actor.

Initially, I didn’t mind that I couldn’t make sense of the show. As you may have noticed, I tend to like weird things. What did prove to be a particular

challenge, however, was discovering how I, as the actor, worked within an absurdist play. When we began the rehearsal process, I tried to treat my character as you would with any other play. Typically, an actor will try and figure out exactly who their character is, what they have been doing thus far in life, what they were doing before the curtain goes up, how they relate to all of the other characters in the show, what they desire, etc. And, typically, those answers are readily found within in the text of the play, and if they are not, the actor can make reasonable guesses as to what those answers might be. Not so with *Theatre of the Absurd*. I could not construct any one definite fact about this character. I, as the actor, was forced to accept disorder and contradiction in place of reality, just as the audience of the Absurd must do.

For example, in conversing with the invisible Offset lithographer, the Old Woman states, “We had a son . . . very much alive, yes . . . he left us . . . a common enough story . . . well, actually quite strange . . . he deserted his parents” (27). Meanwhile, the Old Man tells the Fabled Beauty, “I’m afraid we never had any children . . . I would’ve liked a son . . . So would Sémiramis” (27). No concrete answer as to whether or not the Couple had a son is ever provided. The audience is simply left with a contradiction of speech, preventing them from creating a coherent history for the Couple. The same sort of contradiction is found in regard to the Old Man’s mother. The Old Woman claims that her husband was “a man who so dearly loved his parents. Who never left their sides” and goes on to say that “They died in his arms saying: You’ve been the perfect son. May God reward you” (28). This statement stands in direct opposition to the tale related by the Old Man, in which he states: “I can still see her lying in the ditch, with lilies in her hand, crying out: Don’t forget me, don’t forget me. . . When I returned she was already long buried” (28). The contradictory language of their dialogue forces an acceptance of the absurd upon the audience, leaving them no option but to take what is given to them—the present situation of the Man and Woman—and nothing more. The play itself, by providing nothing but contradiction, changes the way that the audience and actor consume the play as a genre.

And it goes further. Not only must the audience accept the disorder presented to them—they must help to create it. The Absurd genre is in a sense truly created by the audience. The audience is a necessary ingredient in absurdity and disorder of the play. The Old Man and Old Woman will not recognize that the people who they are speaking to are not visible—that is the job of audience. The Old Man and Old Woman will not find impossible contradiction in their own speech. The audience must recognize that as well. It is the audience’s duty to recognize and label this impossible reality as absurdity.

In such a state of contradiction, the audience is asked to participate in the active creation of the text. By placing a fair amount of the dialogue between the Old couple and the unseen, unheard guests, the audience must fill in the gaps of the inaudible dialogue based on the surrounding context of the discussion. One situation where this invitation to participate in the absurd appears is in invisible interaction between the Field Marshal and the Lady. The only clues as to what this interaction might entail are provided by the reactions of the Old Man and the Old Woman, who in shock cries, “(to *Field Marshal*) In all the long years I’ve known you, I would never have believed he could stoop so low. (to *Lady as more boats are heard*) I would never have believed he could stoop so low. There is such a thing as dignity—and self-respect” (21). The speech provided by the Old Woman implies that something terribly inappropriate is taking place between the invisible couple. However, it is left to the imagination of the audience to determine just what this inappropriate action might entail. And, of course, when the situation is presented, we don’t tend to imagine that the Field Marshal has merely insulted the Lady’s hat or cheated while playing Go Fish. We imagine that he has done something a little more PG-13 in nature. We supply the most disordered and absurd thing that we can think of. The invitation to imagine makes the audience active participants in the absurdity of the Old Couple. We don’t expect this kind of participation when we enter the show, and yet the genre has changed the audience.

Let’s return to idea of the genre microscope. We’ve seen through the lens of absurdism how the audience of a text co-creates the text and how the text rewrites their own roles as audience members. We know that it happens and is necessary in absurdism, but does it happen in a more traditional form of text?

YES.

Just as these absurdist performances wrote a particular kind of audience, a non-absurdist text writes or rewrites their audience. Our expectations for audience interaction with a text are determined and shaped by the genres we typically encounter. Take, for example, the fact that we tend to trust the characters we that we are met with on the stage. The characters may lie to one another, but they cannot lie to us. Even a scoundrel like Richard III is forthright with his audience, admitting at the beginning of the play that he is evil and a murderer. An audience trusts that they have been given the best view of reality that the characters can present, and that they have not been fooled. That is what makes the contradiction of Absurdism so confusing: the characters are saying different things, and we have no reason to believe that either one is a liar. Furthermore, our role as audience members has



been shaped by our past encounters with the genre (of a traditional play) to make us believe that we will be presented with truth and cannot be readily deceived. Absurdism, as a genre, relies on a pre-shaped audience that can be rewritten.

Here's another example. Take the play *Romeo and Juliet*. Most audience members come into the show knowing exactly what happens. From the time that we sit down in our seats we know that in about three hours, three of the characters are going to kill themselves. So, while we watch, we color the entire show with the sad irony realized within our own minds. We see the increasing desperation (and heightened hormones) of the young lovers and wish that we could stop them because we know just where it's headed. The audience helps to make the show what it is. Sophocles knew that his audience was very familiar with this story; he knew that their knowing would only add to the tragedy. With the knowledge that his audience could help create the show, Sophocles chose to dramatize a story that his audience already knew. The play itself creates an audience that possesses a retrospective awareness of the play. We call it dramatic irony.

Each and every encounter with a text shapes us as text consumers. We consume a novel, and we expect that the next one that we pick up will have chapters. We consume a murder mystery movie or TV show and expect that the next will use red-herrings and withhold information to create suspense. We consume an improvisational sketch and assume that the next one we see will make us laugh. We prepare ourselves for our own text consumption, and if our expectations are unmet, we are met with cognitive dissonance—the old genre must either be amended to contain the new text or else a new genre must be created for it. As genre composes its own audience; we, the audience compose genre.

## Works Cited

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