‘To move or wither’: Edward Albee and the neo-Absurd

By Benjamin Williams

In June 2004 a new play by Edward Albee premiered on the Hartford stage. The play was produced as Peter and Jerry, four years before being published under a different name, At Home at the Zoo. What marked this production as unique - an exciting first for modern theatre - is that only the first act of the play was brand new: the second was Albee’s first ever produced one-act play. Albee took The Zoo Story (1958) - a play that had been performed thousands of times on stages around the world in many different languages, a play that put him on the map of theatrical history - and added an entirely new first act, Homelife. Not a prequel, as others have done before (for example Ray Lawler's Doll Trilogy, or David Rabe’s Those River Keeps), but a first act to an already established play, which creates an entirely new theatrical experience.

Peter and Jerry was first produced by Hartford Stage Company, directed by Pam McKinnon and starring Johanna Day (Ann), Frank Wood (Peter), and Frederick Weller (Jerry) on 6th of June, 2004. It was then produced in November 2007 by Second Stage Theatre, again directed by Pam McKinnon and starring Johanna Day with Bill Pullman as Peter and Dallas Roberts as Jerry. In the following year it was published by the Dramatists Play Service as At Home at the Zoo.

The publishing of At Home at the Zoo in 2008, coinciding with Albee’s 80th birthday celebrations and the 50th anniversary of the writing of The Zoo Story offers an unprecedented opportunity for theatrical scholarly study. Not only does the revision of The Zoo Story present a more focused view of Albee’s intention for the play - as a communication device for a lazy and apathetic audience - but the new play reveals changes he has made to his form over the 50 years of his career as a playwright. In an introduction to the plays Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tze-Tsung, Albee wrote:

A playwright - unless he is creating escapist romances (an honourable occupation of course) - has two obligations: first, to make some statement about the condition of “man” (as it is put) and, second, to make some statement about the nature of the art form with which he is working. In both instances he must attempt change. In the first instance - since very few serious plays are written to glorify the status quo - the playwright must try to alter his society; in the second instance - since art must move or wither - the playwright must try to alter the forms within which his precursors
have had to work.¹

The extent to which At Home at the Zoo can be seen to represent an alteration of the forms of Albee's precursors (and his own form since writing The Zoo Story) is the subject of this study.

Critical interpretation of The Zoo Story has varied greatly over its performance history, but with the publishing of At Home at the Zoo, the debate takes on a new perspective. Not only does At Home at the Zoo give a clearer perspective of Albee’s comment about the “condition of man”, but it introduces new ideas about the theatrical form Albee uses to make his comment. This study will initially focus on discussions of the inclusion of The Zoo Story in the canon of the Theatre of the Absurd, before detailing changes to this established mode of theatre through which At Home at the Zoo may be viewed.

Clearly there is evidence in The Zoo Story to merit previous studies which define it as an Absurd text - Esslin’s inclusion of it in his edition of Absurd Plays and mention of it in his definitive work, The Theatre of the Absurd, as well as its partnering with Samuel Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape for its New York premiere are just a few examples of its consideration in such a light. Albee uses the Theatre of the Absurd as a vehicle for his comment on the "condition of man". Homelife adds to this debate by outlining Albee's manipulation of this vehicle - recognising the Absurd, and by evolving and changing it, he is able to augment what is being said in The Zoo Story.

When told that he was considered “a member in good standing”² of the Theatre of the Absurd, Edward Albee said that he “was deeply offended…because I had never heard the term before, and I immediately assumed that it applied to the theatre uptown - Broadway.”³

The apparent absurdity of the condition of Broadway theatre aside, Albee’s essay Which theatre is the Absurd one? attempts to briefly define what was at the time a recent phenomenon of theatre and justify the need for such experimental theatre to ensure the “health of the nation.”⁴ Albee’s confusion and subsequent offence in 1962, when he

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³ Ibid. 145.
encountered the then relatively new term “Theatre of the Absurd” is perhaps understandable, especially considering the difficulty which is often faced when defining it.

Esslin objects to a ‘label’ being applied to the dramatists involved in this form of theatre: “By its very nature the Theatre of the Absurd is not and can never be, a literary movement or school, for its essence lies in the free, unfettered exploration by each of these writers concerned, of his own individual vision.”\(^5\) Having offered his disclaimer on the subject and registered his objections, Albee offers a succinct and in a broad sense, accurate working definition for the Absurd:

> The Theatre of the Absurd is an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts, having to do, in the main, with man’s attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense - which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to ‘illusion’ himself have collapsed.\(^6\)

The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd explore man’s senseless existence in a universe devoid of meaning - where everything that suggests or signifies meaning is an illusion, a created fiction designed to disguise the meaninglessness of human life. Albert Camus, the French philosopher and novelist who is credited with coining the phrase used by Esslin to name this form of theatre, puts it this way:

> A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.”\(^7\)

According to Eugene Ionesco, “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose…Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendent roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”\(^8\) For Esslin however, Absurdism is more than a simple exploration of the futility of the human existence. In his definitive work on the subject, he highlights two distinct elements of Absurdism that may serve as self-defining features in any Absurd play. “On one hand,” Esslin suggests, “[the Theatre of the Absurd] castigates

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\(^5\) Martin Esslin, _The Theatre of the Absurd_, Eyre & Spottiswoode, Great Britain, 1962, p.177.
\(^8\) Eugene Ionesco, as quoted by Martin Esslin, _The Theatre of the Absurd_, Eyre & Spottiswoode, Great Britain, 1962, p.17.
satirically the absurdity of lives lived unaware and unconscious of ultimate reality.” Absurdism therefore, acts as a social exposure, revealing the “feeling of deadness” and the “mechanical senselessness of half consciousness of lives” that are lived under the illusions of meaning.

The dramatists of the Absurd become social instructors forming “…part of the unceasing endeavor of the true artists of our time to breach this dead wall of complacency and automatism and to re-establish an awareness of man’s situation when confronted with the ultimate reality of his condition.” The characters in the plays of Samuel Beckett: homeless tramps or legless, parasitic parents (in the case of Waiting for Godot and Endgame) or Ionesco’s illogical drawing room conversations in The Bald Prima Donna seem absurd, but their main purpose is to hold a mirror in front of the audience who, through their recognition of the absurdity on stage, may glean from it the intended lesson.

“Behind this satirical exposure of the absurdity of inauthentic ways of life” adds Esslin, “The Theatre of the Absurd is facing up to a deeper layer of absurdity - the absurdity of the human condition itself, in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties.” Thus, in addition to educating the audience about the absurdity of their existences, Absurdism, by its very nature, must reveal an understanding or perhaps an awareness of the ultimate futility of man’s struggle and uncertainty of his place in the universe.

Why then, in 1962 - in the same year that Esslin’s quintessential work on the subject was published, was Albee moved to quote his “theatre going acquaintance” who said to him; “The theatre of the Absurd has had it; it’s on its way out; it’s through.” Why did this ground-breaking form of philosophic theatre have such a short - albeit significant - chapter in theatre history and why do many people now look at it as a past movement, confined to a specific era in theatrical history? Certainly the works of Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco are still performed, but why does this often seem to be a hearkening back to the period of the Absurd? What is it about this timeless, universal art form that is no longer relevant for playwrights and directors

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10 Ibid. 291.
11 Ibid 292.
in the twenty-first century? Is it, as Albee suggests, because audiences say “This sort of stuff is too depressing, too…too mixed up; I go to the theatre to relax and have a good time.”¹³? Have we learnt what we can from Absurd and have moved on? Or has it simply changed, as Albee suggested it might:

I suspect my theatre-going friend with the infallible intuition is probably right when he suggests that The Theatre of the Absurd…as it now stands is on its way out. Or at least undergoing change. All living organisms undergo constant change. And while it is certain that the nature of this theatre will remain constant, its forms, its methods - its devices, if you will - most certainly will undergo mutation.¹⁴

Is it possible then, that in the decades following Albee’s apparently prophetic claim, the nature of Absurdism has survived - not as an ex-theatrical movement; a washed-up relic of the 50s and 60s, but as a “mutation” - as a further evolved form of theatre? Whether or not he knew it at the time, Albee’s quote can form the basis for a new framework for theatrical analysis, a new form of theatre, one which has its foundations within Absurdism but has become a richer, multi-layered exploration of the same philosophic ideas, as it were, a neo-Absurdism. Evidence of such a new and advancing form of theatre can be found in Albee’s first adult play, The Zoo Story and becomes highlighted by the addition of Homelife written 50 years later.

The evolution of Albee's dramatic form as made manifest in At Home at the Zoo necessitates an evolution of the term used to define this form. As such, this study proposes that At Home at the Zoo constitutes a new theatrical form which can be used in the analysis of dramatic texts - a new form of The Theatre of the Absurd. While evidence of the development of this form can be seen in The Zoo Story, it is not until the new play is read as a whole that the extent of Albee's alterations to Absurdism are fully realised. For the purposes of this discussion, this new form will be referred to as 'neo-Absurdism'. Neo-Absurdism accepts the constructs of an 'absurd world' as set down by the dramatists of the Absurd, but places these conventions within a setting that is recognisable as the world of the audience. Unlike the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, neo-Absurdism then offers an apparent solution to the problems of this absurd world – however one that is both paradoxical and unattainable - a suggestion that the seeking of a solution to an absurd world is in itself, an absurd pursuit.

In the fifty years since it was penned, *The Zoo Story* has enjoyed a vast amount of critical attention. A wide-ranging variety of interpretations of the play have been proposed: from socio-political to religiously symbolic, from nihilistic, existential or Absurd readings of a cold, bleak, dark world, to internal dialogues of a troubled mind, to primitive and innate human ritual and initiation. To attempt to reduce this breadth of critical approaches into one definitive reading would be to grossly undermine the depth of meaning available within the play. It would also undermine the impact it has had on modern American theatre and indeed, theatre in general. *The Zoo Story* is a play that employs naturalism and symbolism, impressionism and realism, hilarious absurdist and serious philosophic discourse; it is a play about human isolation in an Absurd world, but it is also a play about the real potential of human relationships.

C.W.E Bigsby, in a chapter on Albee in his book “A critical introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama” argues that *The Zoo Story* is not an example of Absurdism, “but an urgent plea for human contact”:\(^{15}\)

…not the Absurdist account which many critics assumed it to be, but an articulate assertion of the need to break out of an isolation which is socially rather than metaphysically derived, which is self imposed rather than determined, *The Zoo Story* is concerned with Jerry’s attempts to convert Peter to his new religion of man.\(^{16}\)

Bigsby suggests that rather than portraying the universe as absurd and life as inherently meaningless, *The Zoo Story* is a piece of social criticism, outlining the isolation within society which is the result of the deterioration of human relationships. According to Bigsby, Albee “proposes a revivified human relationship as lying at the core of a reconstituted society.”\(^{17}\) Brian Way, alternatively, in his essay entitled “Albee and the Absurd: *The American Dream* and *The Zoo Story*” recognises the foundation of Absurdism in Albee’s writing. He says that *The Zoo Story* “on the face of it” is an Absurd play, but that when it is compared with the plays of Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco, it “retreats from the full implications of the Absurd when a certain point is reached.”\(^{18}\) Like Bigsby, Way suggests that Albee is “scarcely touched by the sense of living in an absurd universe”\(^{19}\) and that his plays, and *The

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\(^{16}\) *Ibid.* 258.


\(^{19}\) *Ibid.* 194.
Zoo Story in particular are closer akin to social commentary than the avant-garde of the
Theatre of the Absurd:

For the playwright who accepts without reservations that he is living in an absurd
universe, the loss of faith in reason is at the heart of this vision... In terms of formal
experiment, then, the theatre of the Absurd represents a search for images of non-
reason... Albee has used these images of non-reason without, as I have said, accepting
the underlying vision which generated them.20

Way maintains that Albee, while using devices and experimentation that are recognisably
Absurd, “retreats from the full implications” of an absurd universe, choosing rather to attack
realistic social structures. Both these critics - though their approaches differ - are accurate in
their summation, that The Zoo Story, while it contains many elements of the Absurd, cannot
ultimately be read as an Absurd play. It is a play about human isolation, about the dislocation
of human relationships. As Bigsby and Way agree, it contains an attack on conventional
society, and as such it fulfils Esslin’s first requirement of the Theatre of the Absurd, in that it
acts as a satiric castigation of social structures within the world of the play.

At the outset of the play, Peter is a social success: a man with a family, an occupation - the
model of modern American middle class society. Anderson suggests that “inherent in the
structure of Albee’s plays is the idea that all patterns are created fictions [and] …because
humans create their fictions they can both change and control them.”21 Rather than
empowering the characters in Absurd plays however – and indeed Albee’s plays, (whether
they are to be classified as Absurd or not) – this success serves only to prove the
meaninglessness of their actions, created fictions that only give the impression of meaning.

Peter’s life is ‘meaningful’ only in the sense that it is full of the meaning he has created for
himself. These ‘fictions’ present themselves most obviously in the relationships he has, with
his wife and family, with his work and his bench. Albee highlights the collapse of Peter’s
illusions and inevitable meaninglessness of these social structures - of the patriarchal
American nuclear family and the occupational and leisure activities of middle class citizens -
by introducing to this scenario someone for whom these banal social trivialities are literally
meaningless. Jerry’s purpose is to enlighten Peter not only about his personal and emotional

21 Mary Castiglie Anderson, “Ritual and Initiation in The Zoo Story”, Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays,
isolation, but also the meaninglessness of his very existence, undermining each aspect of society that Peter clings to.

Jerry’s awareness of his own separation is conveyed to the audience by his complete lack of relationships of any kind. He lists in unemotional monologues the details of his existence, describing it in terms of the ‘things’ he possesses. Each item he owns has no meaning: empty picture frames that reflect his empty life - devoid of relationships, a strong box, completely redundant without a lock, a pack of pornographic playing cards that only serve as a substitute for real sexual experiences which he cannot have, letters which lie un-answered and unanswerable weighed down by sea-rounded rocks picked up for no particular reason.

Any relationships Jerry has or has had appear to be empty and loveless - his adulterous mother, alcoholic father and a God-fearing aunt are now all dead, leaving his life devoid of familial ties. The relationships he does see as meaningful – or at least describe with enthusiasm – are an adolescent homosexual experience and the “little ladies” he meets with. He is painted as a man who derives meaning neither from his relationships with other people or from any material or external items – and therefore is free of the societal burdens and illusions of meaning to which Peter is subject.

By placing these two characters side by side, Albee enacts the disintegration of each element of society to the point where the park bench becomes the sole object of meaning that Peter irrationally clings to. He tries in vain to describe why it means so much to him, but can’t even effectively justify it to himself: “I come here almost every Sunday afternoon, in good weather. It’s secluded here, there’s never anyone sitting here, so I have it all to myself.”

Jerry uses the bench as an example of the absurdity of the human condition - the meaning humans give to actions and interactions and to things, so that they may have some sort of meaning in their lives. “Tell me Peter, is this bench, this iron and this wood, this bench, is this your honour? Is this the one thing in the world you’d fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd?”

On the surface this play could be considered to sit within the framework of Absurdist theatre,

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23 Ibid. 41.
24 Ibid. 44.
however two distinct points, made by both Way and Bigsby, suggest otherwise and illuminate the fundamental differences between neo-Absurdism and its predecessor. Rather than presenting an Absurd world to the audiences, neo-Absurdist drama presents real-life situations and draws attention to the absurdities within them. Where the theatre of the Absurd portrays an unrecognisable absurd universe and projects that universe onto humanity, the neo-Absurd reveals recognisable situations and interactions to be part of an absurd universe. Albee takes an interaction between two men in a park in the middle of New York City and through a dramatization of their lives, their histories and their philosophies, reveals the senselessness of human existence: the absurdity of the human condition.

The second fundamental difference between the Absurd and the neo-Absurd is the presence of an outcome within the play: the illusion of hope or a solution to the problems of an absurd world. Both Way and Bigsby draw attention to this aspect of Albee’s writing. Way suggests that his plays are “tightly wrapped up, where the best absurd plays leave us with an extended sense of the uncertainties of our condition.”25 To a certain extent this is true - the conclusion of The Zoo Story lacks the inertia apparent at the end of Waiting for Godot, or the grim feel of the end of the Caretaker “where Davies and Aston look ahead into their bleak future, a future in which Davies will never get ‘settled down and fixed up’ and in which Aston will never build his shed…”26

The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are distinct in that there is no hope or resolution available to their characters, there is no meaning in life - nor in death – (although death can lead to the end of this monotonous existence). Without an afterlife death is just as meaningless as life and therefore just as devoid of hope. To offer a solution - an escape from the absurdity of the universe - seems contrary to the ideas and philosophies of the Absurd. The neo-Absurd, however, does exactly that. It offers a solution, not as a vision of hope however, but as an illusion of hope. While Absurdism concerns itself with the ‘illusions of meaning’ with which humans fill their lives, the neo-Absurd, in addition to this preoccupation with meaning, concerns itself with illusions of hope.

To create illusions of hope, Albee offers solutions to the problems of the absurdity in the

26 Ibid. 207.
play, but these solutions are paradoxical by nature and therefore unattainable due to the constraints of the Absurd world of the play. Thus, when Bigsby claims that *The Zoo Story* “is not an Absurd abstract, but an urgent plea for human contact” he is ultimately correct. If Jerry is able to make a connection with Peter, his life will have meaning. Alternatively, if he can impact Peter’s life irrevocably via this connection, Jerry will have shaken Peter out of his apathetic complacency and thus given his own life meaning through Peter. Both these alternatives appear to be possible solutions to the dislocation and disconnectedness exposed in the play. Significantly however, these potential solutions are paradoxes - realisation or fulfillment of them in the play is impossible - and as such they only magnify the message of meaninglessness of the play.

Many scholars, including Zimbardo and Bigsby, suggest that Jerry ‘saves’ Peter in the play’s climax. In such a reading, Jerry’s self-sacrifice (as well as name parallels linking Jerry with Jesus and Peter with Simon Peter) and the religious supplication “oh my God” at Jerry’s death symbolise Peter’s redemption through this act. This religious symbolism itself creates a paradox in the clearly atheistic world of the play, as Jerry sees it “with God, who I’m told turned his back on this whole thing some time ago.” Beneath this theory of Jerry’s redemptive act however, lies a series of paradoxes all of which reflect not only the neo-absurdist concept of an unattainable solution, but a darkly Absurd view of the futility of life.

Jerry’s scheme to wake Peter from his apathy through cruelty and kindness is a paradox that can be traced easily throughout the entire play. He explains “I have learned that neither kindness nor cruelty by themselves can have any effect beyond themselves, and I have learnt that the two of them, together, at the same time are the teaching emotion.” This resonates in the act of Jerry’s death, where for the sake of kindness (changing Peter’s complacent meaningless existence to an enlightened and meaningful one) in a moment of cruelty (goading Peter into picking up a knife and becoming an accomplice to his suicide) Jerry will sacrifice himself, to ‘save’ Peter.

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Jerry’s sacrificial suicide establishes *The Zoo Story* as a perfect example of the neo-Absurd. The idea that cruelty and kindness can be administered simultaneously is paradoxical in itself. This contradiction in terms repeatedly reveals itself in moments of Jerry’s behaviour leading up to this moment. In order to stop Peter from leaving the park before his lesson is complete, Jerry tickles Peter, the first invasion of Peter’s physical privacy:

PETER: I should really get home soon; you see…
JERRY (tickles Peter’s ribs with his fingers): Oh come on.  

(*Peter is very ticklish; as JERRY continues to tickle him his voice becomes falsetto.*)

PETER: No, I…OHHHHH! Don’t do that. Stop, stop. Ohhh, no, no.

As Zimbardo relates, tickling is a uniquely paradoxical pleasure/pain sensation. It acts as a literal example of Jerry’s “teaching emotion” combining cruelty and kindness in physical form. The tickling unbalances Peter (“Oh, my. I don’t know what came over me”) and leaves him vulnerable to Jerry’s final assault.

Jerry’s horrific fate has been labeled by many scholars - including Brooks Atkinson in his review of the first American staging of *The Zoo Story*[^31] - as a melodramatic and sentimental device used by a first time playwright. Far from neatly “tying” everything up however, Jerry’s final act reveals the paradox of the entire play. Jerry does manage to escape from the Absurd world of the play, but only through his own suicide - an escape that won’t create any meaning, and is as such, absurd.

Jerry’s death cannot save Peter either. Albee himself in an interview with Matthew Roundané suggests that “Peter has become Jerry to a certain extent.”[^32] Roundané maintains that “Jerry’s death gives way, in brief, to nothing less than Peter’s rebirth, a recharging of the spirit.”[^33] If Peter becomes Jerry, as Albee suggests he will, the only meaning he can create for himself is to pass on the enlightenment, to “recharge the spirit” himself. The only way this will be possible is, as Jerry has demonstrated, through his own self-destruction and the initiation of someone else into the endless cycle of hopeless self-sacrifice. Just as Jerry’s suicide is a

paradoxical act - escaping the meaningless life into the meaninglessness of death - it has both saved and doomed Peter. It has saved him from a life ignorant of the truth of his situation, but doomed him to living out this meaningless existence or taking Jerry’s path of meaningless meaning through death.

Having placed *The Zoo Story* in the framework of the neo-Absurd, it is necessary to examine *Homelife* in the same way, before looking at the whole play in this light in order to come to a conclusion as to whether *At Home at the Zoo* in its entirety can be considered part of this new form of theatre.

As in *The Zoo Story*, the nature of human relationships is of foremost concern of *Homelife* - it is the story of Peter’s relationship with his wife, Ann. As Albee’s title suggests, Peter and Ann’s “homelife” is the world of the play, as all of the action in the play takes place within their relationship. In addition to this, all of the action takes place entirely within their living room, containing their relationship and the world within this one domestic setting on stage.

Albee depicts the perfect middle-class American marriage: a husband and wife who have been together for years, who know each other so well that they needn’t talk, in a comfortable and safe, domestic environment. The relationship that they share is the only meaningful thing in their lives, however the apparently enviable elements of the relationship are precisely what reveal its meaninglessness. This relationship is the Absurd world in which Peter and Ann are living. It is a relationship where emotion is highlighted by the lack of it; love is implied and never explicit, where everything that’s is relevant has already been talked about, where communication gives way to clichés and illogical meaningless tangents. The relationship is static and so close to meaningless that it becomes cold and bleak, rather than warm and comfortable as one would expect it to be.

Peter and Ann’s lives as individuals are characterised by meaningless pursuits on which they become fixated, reflecting the absurdity of their individual situations. These obsessions with the ordinary or mundane are examples of the Absurd world that Albee establishes – where lives are filled with trivialities to create the illusion of meaning in a meaningless world. At the beginning of the play the audience is immediately introduced to both characters’ absurdities: Ann is hard-boiling spinach and Peter is reading.
From her first entrance, Ann is intent on cooking “hard-boiled spinach”\textsuperscript{34}. This very pursuit itself is absurd: surely spinach, when boiled can only get softer, making ‘hard-boiling’ this vegetable a culinary impossibility. Ann’s fixation upon this task is contradicted by her lack of concentration on it; she seems unable to focus on the spinach as it is outside the frame of the relationship. Rather than being a meaningful pursuit, her cooking is a distraction from the hopelessness of the relationship. At the conclusion of the act, when Peter and Ann’s relationship has been revealed as an absurdly meaningless world and all hope of connectedness and true communication is extinguished, Ann returns to her spinach, to the mundane routine that disguises the meaninglessness of her life with a sense of purpose.

Peter has similarly absurd obsessions that ground him also firmly within the Absurd world of the play - from the very beginning of the play he is reading. The books Peter reads as part of his work at the publishing house are revealed early on as “very important and very boring”\textsuperscript{35} text books. In fact the one he is reading at the outset of the play is, as he states “Probably the most boring book we’ve ever done.”\textsuperscript{36} Regardless of the unexciting nature of these books however, Peter is fascinated by them, hypnotised almost. Ann says, “you get so involved - reading - more all the time.”\textsuperscript{37} Peter himself describes it as “deepening concentration”\textsuperscript{38}, which in itself implies an exponentially growing problem, as if Peter is getting more and more involved in this mundane exercise. The contradiction between the apparent lack of the book’s appeal and Peter’s fixation with it reveals the absurdity of his pursuit. This juxtaposition between hypnotic obsession and meaninglessness is an ironic signifier of the absurd: much like Ann’s obsession with the perpetually sooty andirons, Peter’s “deepening concentration” reflects humanity’s deliberate ignorance of the futility of the human condition.

Through spinach and sleep-inducing text books, Albee paints the backdrop to the Absurd world of the play. Peter and Ann as individuals fill their lives with the illogically irrelevant, the impossibly irrational. The last bastion of ‘meaning’ for them as individuals, therefore, is their relationship with one another.

Albee creates his Absurd world through the relationship between these two absurd characters.

\textsuperscript{34} Edward Albee, \textit{At Home at the Zoo}, Dramatists Play Service Inc., New York, 2008, p.6.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid}. 6.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid}. 6.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid}. 5.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid}. 5.
During the course of the act, everything inside this relationship is stripped of meaning, their actions and obsessions are revealed as mundane and ordinary and are therefore fruitless, they are unable to communicate, unable to love, unable to feel. They have been stuck in the cyclic revolutions of everyday life, ‘cruising’ on the smooth waters of middle-class apathy. Ann recognizes the root of their problems: their love is safe, secure, expected, orthodox and therefore impotent:

…stay away from the ice-bergs; avoid the Bermuda triangle; remember where the lifeboats are, knowing of course, that most of them don’t work - no need. Yes that’s what we’ve wanted…and that’s what we’ve had - for the most part. And it isn’t frightening.\(^{39}\)

Their is a relationship with no warmth, as there is no physical intimacy explicitly demonstrated in the relationship. They speak of intimacy which suggests an open and loving relationship, but never in the action of the play do they show it. In fact, the only time they touch is when Ann slaps Peter hard on the cheek, and then kisses him. These two contrary actions are the only moments in the play where they touch each other. For the entirety of this relationship that the audience witnesses - a relationship the audience are led to believe is an iconic American marriage - the only points of physical human contact are this violent slap, followed by a gentle kiss. A direct parallel to Jerry’s school of cruelty and kindness, this shock brutality and equally shocking tenderness stands out as a powerful moment in the play.

Ann’s desire to “astonish”\(^{40}\) Peter with this confusing action reveals not only her own solution to their relationship, and thus an escape from their absurd situation, but also Albee’s need to act as the social conductor and make people ‘participants’ in their own lives by waking them from their apathetic and ignorant state. As a social castigator Albee sees his primary role as

Getting people to participate in their own lives, rather than sliding through them.
Getting people to involve themselves in every way possible, …to put themselves in other people’s places. To not skid their way through life.\(^{41}\)

Ann slaps Peter, because it’s something she has never done before, a new experience that combines kindness and cruelty to form what Jerry later calls, “The teaching emotion”\(^{42}\).


\(^{40}\) \textit{Ibid.25}.


Ann, having recognised the futility of their situation, suggests changes to their situation that may offer a solution. The solution for her is, in order to shake them out of their apathetic rut, Peter and Ann need to change the nature of their relationship, in essence to deny their love, in order to love one another more directly. Her solution is three-fold: she wants to change the nature of their sexual relationship, she wants Peter to change and ultimately she wants “a little…chaos.”

“You’re very good at lovemaking,” she tells Peter, “But you’re lousy at fucking.”

…All the things fucking entails, or can entail - aggressive, brutal maybe, two people who’ve known each other for years - slept together for years - suddenly behaving like strangers, like people who’ve just met in a bar and gone to the motel next door to hammer it all out, to fuck for the sake of fucking. There are people who’ve lived together for years, who love one another deeply. Who sometimes go at each other like strangers - a regular one shot deal, like you’ll never see each other again…or want to. The moment! Two strangers! The moment! 43

Everything contained in the relationship between Ann and Peter echoes in Ann’s words “is it that we love each other too safely maybe? That we’re secure? That we’re too… civilised?”

Their relationship is so safe, so secure, so civilised that it has become ordinary and everyday - as Ann says, “it isn’t frightening”44. This predictability and security is the world that the Absurdists were trying to break their audience out of - the world of safe ‘illusions of meaning’ that prevents any awareness of the true nature of the universe.

Ann suggests that the solution to their predicament can be found in stripping back what makes their relationship absurd: the mundane orthodoxy of their familiarity with one another. In this case the solution however, is an absurd paradox - if they truly became what Ann requires of them, “strangers”, then their relationship would become irrelevant and the need to become strangers to each other in the first place would be negated. To deny their relationship for the sake of their relationship is on a fundamental level, a paradoxical solution. To the audience it seems to present a remedy for their problem, as it does for Ann, but they, like she, must come to recognise the contradictory nature of the solution.

Directly related to this suggestion that to combat the monotony of their relationship they should become strangers, Ann suggests that their love-making lacks the primal and

44Ibid. 20.
instinctive urges that comes from being animals. “We’re animals!” she says, “Why don’t we behave like that…like beasts?!" More than the excitement of the unknown and the unpredictable, Ann recognises the need to forget all the things that separate humans from “beasts” - the safety, the security, the civilised nature of their relationship - stripping the meaninglessness from their lives until they become simple animals “fucking for the sake of fucking”\(^5\). Her solution - denying one’s humanity, becoming animals - as an escape from the absurdities of life - is the quintessential theme of the neo-Absurdist reading of the whole play *At home at the Zoo*.

Ultimately what Ann is searching for as a solution to their mundane marriage is an unknown element, some sort of surprise, “…That must be what I wanted - a little disorder around here, a little…chaos.”\(^7\) Chaos is uncontrollable, unpredictable and total. On the surface, Ann’s solution seems logical - their lives are too ordered, too controlled, and therefore disorder would be the logical solution. But Ann and Peter both want ordered chaos, controllable chaos: a *little* disorder, a *little* chaos. The concept of controlled chaos reinforces the neo-Absurd idea of a paradoxical solution - chaos cannot be administered in quantities: a little chaos is like saying a “little dead”, or a “little bankrupt”.

Not only do Peter and Ann seek to control the magnitude of the chaos, but they desire to control the chaos through an ordered and systematic approach to disorder which defeats the purpose of chaos in the first place. Peter asks, “How would we go about it?”\(^8\) implying that the power to initiate such chaos lies in their hands. From this point their ‘chaos’ follows a system of cause and effect - the birds fly out of their cages and so are eaten by the cats. The daughters, because they see this, eat the cats and then are eaten by Peter and Ann in what Peter describes as “fearful symmetry”\(^9\) (in itself a paradoxical statement - the fearful in this case is that which is unknown, where symmetry is simply a mirror or recreation of the known.) The chain of events is heavily influenced by a logical sort of a food chain, the birds aren’t eating cats or people, but the whole scenario is ordered, structured and logical - even if a little absurd - but it is completely antithetical to the chaos and disorder Ann requires.

\(^7\) *Ibid*. 25.
\(^8\) *Ibid*.25.
Homelife, although only the first act of a two act play, clearly establishes the basic fundamental elements of neo-Absurdism. Albee uses a realistic domestic setting - the relationship between a husband and a wife - as his absurd universe. Peter and Ann are trapped in this universe, just as Vladimir and Estragon are trapped in the wasteland that is theirs. But to this Albee adds the illusion of hope - the solution, a means of escaping their absurd existence; a solution that is revealed to be a paradoxical impossibility.

Each of the solutions that Ann mentions as an escape from their absurd existence ultimately end in destroying that which they are trying to save. To become strangers Peter and Ann would be forced to forget their relationship with each other, the very thing Ann is trying to reinvigorate. To become animals is to beget violence and not love, and ultimately to cease to be human; and chaos - while being uncontrollable, unpredictable and impossible to stop, also proves to be self-destructive - rather than disrupting their ordered lives, it will destroy them. Peter and Ann recognise the paradoxically unattainable nature of these solutions, their impossibility and their impracticality, before returning to their absurd and meaningless existences - Peter returns to his book and Ann returns to her spinach.

In a review of At Home at the Zoo for the New York Times, Ben Brantley wrote: “If Homelife is an open-handed slap, then The Zoo Story is a gut punch with a closed fist.”\(^{50}\) This use of violent, even savage descriptors to assess Albee’s new play explores more than just the experience had by the actors or even the audience - it reveals the crucial theme that emerges when the two texts - the first act and the second - are placed side by side as one play.
Violence is the key to the absurd universe portrayed in the At Home at the Zoo - Peter is released from the mundane orthodoxy of his home life by the violent and horrific act Jerry forces upon him in the park. Violence, as well as being integral to Albee’s solution of the play, unlocks the possibility for humans to transform into animals, rejecting their humanity, and what makes their condition absurd.

The solution to the absurd world in which Peter finds himself in At Home at the Zoo, is for humans to become animals – a transition that Jerry so triumphantly points out in the final moments of the play: “It’s alright, you’re an animal. You’re an animal too.”\(^{51}\) Animals do


not cling to illusions of meaning as humans do and as such they are free to live, to simply exist – free “to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions.”\textsuperscript{52} What separates man from beast in the “zoo” of the play therefore - rather than bars as in the literal zoo of Jerry’s story - is the ultimately futile quest for meaning in a meaningless world. A quest that is in essence, absurd. If humans transformed into animals - animals that are not reliant on meaning to exist they accomplish the ultimate goal of the Absurdist.

Both Ann and Jerry point to the transformation into an animal as the solution to the problems of Peter’s Absurd world. Rather than the “smooth voyage on a safe ship”\textsuperscript{53} or the “quiet, orderly, predictable, deeply pleasurable joy”\textsuperscript{54} that characterises their relationship, Ann wants Peter to become chaotic, unpredictable and essentially, an animal: “where’s the rage, the…animal? We’re animals! Why don’t we behave like that…like beasts?? Is it…that we’re too…civilized?”\textsuperscript{55} Being human in their relationship is associated with the order and predictability - everything that Ann considers wrong with it. By contrast, being “animal” implies chaos, the unpredictable, spontaneous excitement, as well as an element of simplicity which is reflected by Ann’s line: “nothing less than impure, simple lust for one another.”\textsuperscript{56} During Peter’s meeting with Jerry the distinction becomes more apparent. Each aspect of Peter’s life that he associates with being human - honour, self-respect, manhood, as well as his relationships and everything he gives meaning to in his life - Jerry describes as akin to being a vegetable. Peter’s position in the absurd world of his own making is summed up by Jerry:

“You have everything in the world you want; you’ve told me about your home, and your family, and your own little zoo. You have everything, and now you want this bench. Are these the things men fight for? Tell me Peter, is this bench, this iron and this wood, is this your honour? Is this the thing in the world you’d fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd?”\textsuperscript{57}

All of these things, the things that Peter “would fight for” - the absurdities of his existence to which he clings - are what Jerry is attempting to strip him of. He does so by equating these things with being a vegetable: - “…fight for that bench; fight for your manhood; you pathetic

\textsuperscript{52} Martin Esslin, \textit{The Theatre of the Absurd}, Eyre & Spottiswoode, Great Britain, 1962, p.314.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid}. 21.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid}. 21.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid}. 21.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid}. 44.
little vegetable”\textsuperscript{58} By debasing their meaning, Jerry attempts to transform Peter into an animal. As he strips Peter of his ‘created fictions’ - the illusions of meaning that man creates for himself in this “humiliating excuse for a jail”\textsuperscript{59} - Jerry strips him of everything that separates animals from humans. As such the transformation from human to animal becomes the neo-Absurd solution for the play.

Through \textit{At Home at the Zoo}, Albee has not only created a new work which may stand alone as an impressive testament to his legacy as one of “America’s greatest living playwrights”, but has shown his ability to mould and adapt the modes of theatre with which he works. Using the form of his precursors – the dramatists of the Absurd – as a springboard, Albee manipulates and augments this form to create theatre which attempts to “alter” a “society” cogniscent of – and perhaps even fatigued by – the methods of the Absurdists. Neo-Absurd drama takes the concept of an absurd or meaningless universe as a given, and locates that absurdity within a recognisable setting. Having established this connection with the previous form, neo-Absurdism offers an apparent solution or ‘anti-solution’ to the problems faced in this world. These solutions, while they seem to generate hope within the play are paradoxical, and therefore unattainable due to the absurdity of the universe portrayed.

Albee, through neo-Absurdism, urges his audience - having shed the “comfortable illusions” of their realities - to simply exist; to exist in the moment - as animals do - content with the meaninglessness and irrespective of past or future implications of this moment. To live, to be, to participate in one’s life regardless of its eternal or universal consequences. Albee insists that we must embrace our senseless existence, reject our purely human impulse to search for hope or meaning, and therefore: to make ourselves \textit{At Home at the Zoo}.

\textsuperscript{58} Edward Albee, \textit{At Home at the Zoo}, Dramatists Play Service Inc., New York, 2008, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. 40.
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