



Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

Absurd Elements in Anthony Neilson's Realism and The Wonderful World of Dissocia Plays

Anthony Neilson'nun Realism ve The Wonderful World of Dissocia oyunlarındaki Absürd Temalar

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ÖZ

İkinci dünya savaşından sonra İngiliz tiyatrosu genel olarak insanların anlamsız davranışlarını ve amaçsız yaşamlarını ele almıştır. 1950'lerde değişen toplumu yansıtan tiyatro, geleneksel tiyatroya da yapı ve konu açısından karşı çıkmıştır. 1950'lerde ki bu süreç Martin Esslin tarafından Absürd Tiyatro olarak adlandırılmış ve günümüze kadar birçok yazarı etkilemiştir. 1990'larda ise söylenmeyenleri açık seçik ortaya koyan ve insanların içindeki vahşeti yüzlerine vuran tiyatro Alex Sierz tarafından Yüzüne Tiyatro olarak adlandırılır. Yüzüne Tiyatro yazarlarından biri olan Anthony Neilson, Realism (2006) oyununda depresif başkarakter olan Stuart'ın, dış dünyadan soyutlanmış kişiliğini, boş vermişliğini ve hayatın içinde kayboluşunu ortaya koyar. The Wonderful World of Dissocia (2004) adlı oyununda ise Lisa'nın, başkarakter, sürekli bir saat geri kalan saatinin onarılmasını konu alan ve hayaller dünyasında gerçekleşen absürd olaylarla karşılaşırız. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Neilson'nun Realism ve The Wonderful World of Dissocia adlı oyunlarında ki absürd temaları Esslin'in ışığı altında incelemektir.

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ABSTRACT

After World War II, British theatre generally dealt with people's meaningless actions and aimless lives. During the 1950s theatre reflecting the changing society opposed to the traditional theatre in terms of pattern and plot. The period in 1950s was named as Absurd Theatre by Martin Esslin and it has affected many writers until today. In 1990s theatre which reveals the untold explicitly and throws the violence in them to their face was coined by Alex Sierz. In Realism (2006), Anthony Neilson, one of In-yer-face playwrights, presents us with the melancholy protagonist Stuart, who is distant from the outside world, and who is lost amidst both his own sense of disinterest as well as life. The Wonderful World of Dissocia (2004), takes a look at the protagonist Lisa's watch- which is consistently one hour behind- being fixed, as well as at the absurd events unfolding within Lisa's imagination. The aim of this paper is to analyze the theme of absurdity in Anthony Neilson's Realism and The Wonderful World of Dissocia through the lens of Esslin.

1. Introduction

British theatre has, over time, adapted with the times in order to reflect the gradual changes in societal traditions, viewpoints, and lifestyles brought about by important social, political, and economic developments in British and European society such as the Industrial Revolution, The Reform Act of 1832, and World Wars I and II. From the 1950s onwards, playwrights challenge classical sense by successfully lifting the barrier between the stage and the audience.

In the 1990s, British playwrights wanted to hang the increasing violence and cruelty, brought about by suppressed societal realities out into the open. Alex Sierz coins this dramatic shift, which is aimed at having audience members come face-to-face with their own inner beasts, as in-yer-face theatre. This wave including playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson, Matrin Crimp, and Philip Ridley, is "so powerful, so visceral, that it forces audiences to react." (Sierz, 2001: 5). Sierz, in comparing In-yer-face theatre to classical theatre, notes that:

"If a well-made play has to have a good plot, much provocative drama prefers to have a strong sense of experiential confrontation; if a well-made play has to have

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complex characters, much new drama has types rather than individuals; if a well-made play has to have long theatrical speeches, nineties drama usually has curt televisual dialogue” (Sierz, 2001: 243).

Hence, in-her-face theatre differs from traditional theatre in terms of both structure as well as approach to language. Moreover, in-her-face favours using run-of-the-mill individuals that exist within society rather than elaborately described, complex characters, in order to close the gap between the audience and the theatre. In-her-face theatre is not, however, the first theatrical movement to challenge the conventions of traditional theatre. Absurd theatre, which emerged in the 1950s, and which Martin Esslin had examined in great detail, is completely detached from traditional theatre, for example. According to Esslin (2001: 22):

“If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these [absurdist plays] have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end.”

In this sense, both In-her-face as well as Absurd theatre appear to share many similarities. Both theatrical forms enable the audience to become integrated into the performance, and moreover enable audience members to identify themselves with the play through the mise-en-scene, mediocre dialogues, and characters. Anges Maria Kitzer, analyzing Jez Butterworth and Philip Ridley’s two in-her-face plays *Mojo* and *The Pitchfork Disney*, alongside Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet’s two absurd plays *Waiting For Godot* and *The Balcony*, is the one arguing that “there is a link between in-her-face and absurdist theatre” (Kitzler, 2010: 10). In other words, it is possible to mention the influence of absurd theatre on in-her-face theatre.

1.1. Absurd Theatre

The word *absurd* was first used by Albert Camus in 1942 in order to emphasize the meaninglessness of life. Furthermore, in 1961, Martin Esslin penned a book titled *The Theatre of the Absurd*, mapping out the evolution and general characteristics of absurd theatre by examining the works of a great number of avant-garde playwrights from various angles (e.g. theme, structure, etc.). When one considers the years of publications of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1950), Eugène Ionesco’s *The Bold Soprano* (1950), Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* (1957), and Jean Genet’s *The Balcony* (1957), we can infer that absurd theatre emerged during the mid-twentieth century. Then, What is the reason behind this emergence?

It is clear that the playwrights no longer believe in the possibility of such neatness of resolution. Indeed, they are chiefly concerned with expressing a sense of wonder, incomprehension, and, at times, despair, at the lack of cohesion and meaning that they have in the world. “*If they could believe in clearly defined motivations, acceptable solutions, settlements of conflict in properly tidily tied up endings, these dramatists would certainly not eschew them. But, quite obviously, they have no faith in the existence of so rational and well ordered a universe”*. (Esslin, 1965: iii)

Neither the world nor humanity was the same after World War II. People are forced to live amidst the chaos of economic, political, and social change caused by this war. Hence, people had to become strange to one another, and face with loneliness. People fell into conflict with themselves, and started to gloomily question the point of their existence. Hopelessness and meaninglessness dominated post-war society. People now had left their utopic dreams behind, and instead they adapted themselves to the struggle of staying alive in a dystopic world. In this light, on the one hand, one sees man trying to distance himself from his past in order to stay afloat within a pointless existence, on the other hand one observes theatre being unable to conform to tradition due to its context. Esslin claims;

Inevitably plays written in this new convention will when judged by the standards and criteria of another be regarded as impertinent and outrageous impostures. If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanic puppets; is a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play has to hold the mirror up to the nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; is a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings” (Esslin, 2001: 19).

Absurd theatre lacks the conventional structure of traditional theatre in terms of focusing on a specific subject or story, or having a traditional setting Rather than solving a problem or conveying a moral, absurd theatre wants the audience to ‘draw his own conclusions, make his own errors’ (Esslin, 2001: 18). The strong and brave characters were found in traditional theatre instead become run-of-the-mill and avoid of origin in absurd theatre. Characters often feel alone, are failed, and do not fit with the world in one way or another. This, therefore, is why the dialogues observed in absurd theatre lack any sense of rhyme or reason. Incomplete sentences, word and sentence repetition, and the lack of a definite plot make absurd plays difficult to both follow and comprehend. In addition, “*the element of language still plays an important part in this conception”* (Esslin, 2001: 24). Absurd playwrights intentionally aim to render their work nonsensical by creating a conflict between words, sentences, and the actions observed on the stage. At times, playwrights choose to hide their actual thoughts through word play. Word repetition prompts the use of poetic language, as well as prompts interrupting the flow of the play—thus making it difficult for the audience to follow. In traditional theatre, the concept of time is important so that it is able to reflect the cultural and politics of a particular era. Absurd theatre, in contrast, only reflects ‘dreams and nightmares’. In other words, it reflects mankind’s sense of disinterest, aimlessness, and hopeless—that is, the negative disposition it holds towards life. Absurd theatre “*activates psychological forces, releases and liberates hidden fears and repressed aggressions, and, above all, by confronting the audience with a picture of disintegration”* (Esslin, 2001:347), at the same time that it deals with man’s sense of isolation. In this context, absurd theatre accepts cruelty and fear as being instinctual within man. Absurd playwrights do not hesitate

exhibiting hidden desire and violence on stage. However, unlike their in-her-face counterparts, they neither openly stage that obscenity, nor do they use uncensored language. On the contrary, they prefer to use comedy in order to convey that darkness.

Lastly, according to Esslin (2001:367): “*The Theatre of the Absurd ... a response to the cultural and social changes of our epoch*”. In this sense, absurd theatre bears no resemblance to traditional theatre in terms of either structure, theme, or language—akin to post-war society’s being starkly different from pre-war society. Absurd theatre, which heavily worked with themes such as loneliness and the meaninglessness of life, began to make a heavy presence after 1950.

1.2. Anthony Neilson

Anthony Neilson is an avant-garde, enchanting, and entertaining playwright and director who has contributed many a play to contemporary British theatre. He was born into a family of artists in 1967 in Edinburgh, Scotland. Anthony was immersed in theatre from infancy, together with his parents Beth Robens and Sandy Neilson. Even though he wrote, as well as won an award for his first play, *The Colours of the Kings Rose* in 1988, he earned a name for himself with his play *Normal*, which he wrote in 1991. Neilson, who holds great importance both in English as well as in Scottish theatre, claims that “*we must be accessible, yet still bold in form and content*” (Neilson 2007: n.p.). In this sense, Neilson has taken claim of plain language, and has placed great emphasis on ensuring that his plays appeal to a society in a general, overall sense. Critic Alex Sierz classes some plays and writers such as Martin Crimp, Moira Buffini, and Philip Riddley, under the in-her-face theatrical wave. According to Sierz, Neilson, alongside playwrights such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, have succeeded in echoing their voices across Europe, and moreover Sierz praises them as being in-her-face theatre’s “*most provocative new writers of the decade*” (Sierz, 2000: xii).

Neilson, who has directed most of his own plays, has also written for television as well, including *Spooks* (2010) and *The Debt Collector* (1999). He has many distinctive plays. For example, *Normal* (1991), talks about a rapist who has been sentenced to death, and his lawyer. *Penetrator* (1993) concern about the impact of war which has had on someone reliving their past. *The Censor* (1997) deals with bans put in place by people and institutions, and *Stitching* (2002) portrays a woman who sews her own vagina shut on stage. Although each of these four works fall under the wing of in-her-face theatre, his twenty first century pieces, including *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004), *Realism* (2006), and *Unreachable* (2016) all exhibit a change in style. According to Sierz, the reason behind this transition is Neilson’s emphasis on ‘Scottishness’, noting that “*the dynamics of identity and representation were to become key themes across the whole of Scottish culture in the years immediately before and after devolution in 1999*” (2012:162). Trish Reid, who has also taken note of Neilson’s shift, is of the opinion that ‘Neilson has moved beyond the naturalist dramaturgy... towards expressionistic and absurdist strategies’ (Reid, 2017:17). At the same time, the majority of Neilson’s post-millennium plays employ a comedic overtone. But, considering that the plays make one

think as much as they make one laugh, what is common to all is the elements of farce and satire. When Neilson’s plays are examined, one does not encounter a direct political message. For example, in *Realism*, although the characters; Stuart, the protagonist, and his mother, talk about bombs raining from the sky, Neilson states that “*At the time of writing, in 2006, Israel had invaded Lebanon. Substitute a more topical/ timeless reference if necessary*” (Neilson, 2014:139). There is no doubt that Neilson has masterfully reflected the term he lives, however avoids relaying any open political statements.

2. Realism

In 2006, *Realism* was staged first at the National Theatre of Scotland, and then at Edinburgh’s Royal Lyceum Theatre. The play has become a hit among Neilson fans and, moreover, it was acclaimed by critics. Mark Fisher commented on the play as having successfully portrayed the human sub-consciousness in a way that is accessible to just about everyone by writing that “*The writer-director’s aim in Realism is to make us alive to the vivid subconscious landscape that we inhabit even on the most dreary of days*” (Fisher, 2006: n.p.). Lynn Gardner praises the play’s successful drifting between reality and fantasy, as well as its successfully breaking down of the barrier between the stage and the audience: “*Anthony Neilson’s surprisingly moving musings on mundanity, the absurdities of modern life and ‘the accumulation of losses’ that we must carry with us as we age is a sparky and often scurrilous 80 minutes that, in worming inside one’s head, worms inside our own*” (Gardner, 2011:n.p.).

Realism focuses on the character of Stuart, his temper of outbursts, his relationship with his family and his girlfriends, and his drifting away from his social circle. Like other absurd plays, *Realism* too is composed of a beginning, middle, and end. Neilson nevertheless clarifies at the play’s onset that “*it should be presented without an interval*” (Neilson, 2014:136). At the beginning of each act, he provides extra information within ‘square brackets’ (Neilson, 2014:136) which “*describe what is actually occurring in the play’s real time-line*” (Neilson, 2014:136). What lies outside of those brackets is Stuart’s dream world. In absurd theatre, the main hero or character talks to himself/ herself. In *Realism*, Neilson’s main character both talks as well as narrates. Throughout the play, Stuart is seen wearing pajamas, and is constantly in a state of exhaustion and fatigue. Paul, a friend of Stuart’s, tries to get him out of the house, but fails. The dialogue between Paul and Stuart, however, is rather obscure:

Stuart I’m not going to be mopping.

Paul You are - you’re going to mope.

Stuart I’m not going to mope.

Paul Mope, mope, mope; that’ll be you.

Stuart Right, well, so if I want to mope I can fucking mope, can’t I? I mean, I’m not planning on moping but I reserve the right to mope in my own fucking house. (Neilson, 20014:138)

Stuart’s lack of stepping out of the house, alongside his lack of overall movement is a sign of his disconnection from the

outside world. Özden (2016: 306) claims that “*The Theatre of the Absurd... combines characteristics such as silences, repetitions, unconventional dialogue*”. Neilson’s use of word repetition in order to disrupt the fluidity of the dialogues between characters is also observably obvious. Stuart’s friend Paul continuously repeats the word *mope* as a means of describing Stuart’s not wanting to play soccer with him. In fact, all Stuart does throughout the entire play is mope around.

During the play the absurd behaviour of the other characters is also absorbing. Stuart is not the only person whose acts are absurd. Stuart’s mother, who puts the kettle on to make herself a cup of tea, unexpectedly begins to describe the tea cup.

Mother Can you see it? There – a castle, look. The tea leaves make a turret, and the tea’s like a moat at the bottom.

Stuart What’s a moat?

Mother It’s the water round a castle, to keep the folk from getting in. (Neilson, 2014: 140)

Immediately following her blurb, both Stuart and his mother break out in song, thus interrupting the audience’s ability to follow along. At this point, Neilson once again shifts tactics by having Stuart’s seven-year-old brother Mullet come up to Stuart. Mullet makes fun of Stuart for burning his toast. Then, out of the blue, Stuart’s girlfriend Angie appears, scolds Stuart for scraping off the burnt bits of the toast in the sink rather than the garbage can, and then disappears. Stuart, who once again is left alone with Mullet, makes a confession about himself:

Mullet What’s happened to you, man? You were going to be a choo-choo driver. You were going to be an astronaut. What’s happened to that guy? That’s happened to the guy who was going to build a rocket and fly to fucking Mars? I mean, look at yourself. What do you see?

Stuart A fat fucking shite. (Neilson, 2014:141)

As Mullet questions Stuart, Stuart goes on to talk about his (own) hopes and dreams, as well as about his needing to wake up from his trance-like state. However, Stuart is not ready for that, nor does he have any sense of purpose whatsoever. According to Esslin (2001:197), absurd theatre “*explores the human condition, the alienation of man, his solitude*”. Neilson’s absurd character, Stuart, sulks around emptily, feels hopeless, and is crossed with the world. Throughout the play, Stuart repeatedly brings up his girlfriend’s having dumped him, and this causes his sense of resentment towards life. But, as the play continues, we find out that Stuart’s girlfriend was the one who was in fact dumped. Neilson, through Mullet, emphasises that Stuart was once nothing but a blank couch potato, and at the same time he talks about Stuart’s loneliness, and his going astray from society. In the third scene, Stuart, whilst listening to a radio program about banning smoking, imagines himself as appearing on that program, whereupon he begins to speak absurdly and argue with himself. He lectures on about how the state ought to ban the sale of cigarettes rather than banning smoking at bus stops, as well as about how such situation will never come to conclusion given that the

problem stems from the tax money earned off of cigarettes, and thus weighs the problem as being two faced. After receiving a huge round of applause, those appearing on the program are heckled at by the audience. Just before the (imaginary) program ends, Stuart enters into verse, reading a poem that talks about how selfish humanity—described as being a “*Jewish guy or possibly a German—is, and about how humanity will die alone*” (Neilson, 2014:146). Stuart then phones Laura:

Stuart... I’ve got something of yours.

You’ve got somethings of mine.

You should come and get them.

I should come and collect them...

But we need to talk.

I’d like to talk.

It’d be good to talk... (Neilson, 2014:146-147)

Upon closer inspection of Stuart’s monolog, one gets a sense of Neilson’s effective use of poetic language through word repetition. However, even if lyrical quality that Neilson creates through repetition carries meaning, within the context of the play, it comes off as being nothing more than absurd, meaningless dialogue.

For Neilson not only language but love concept is also meaningless. Love has no value for the characters in the play, even if for Stuart who believes that he suffers the pangs of love. In the fourth scene, Stuart walks in on his ex-girlfriend Laura, who is sitting on the toilet:

Stuart Number twos?

Laura No

Stuart Number trees?

Laura What’s number threes?

Stuart Both

Laura No, just number ones. (Neilson, 2014:147)

Laura, who is disturbed by Stuart watching her, and thus who wants him to leave:

Stuart Do you not love me?

Laura Yes. What’s that got to do with it?

Stuart What’s love got to do, got to do with it?

Laura What’s love but a second-hand emotion? (Neilson, 2014:147)

Stuart, in putting these events into his head, as well as in replying to his own question, in fact radiates his negative stance towards love. In fact, Neilson, who underscores love as being overused, implies that a society, which is void of love, is the root of cruelty. As the play progresses, Stuart, his mother, Laura-his first love, and Angie, spank one another. Here, Neilson makes use of unrestricted, smutty language—a characteristic belonging more to in-her-face theatre. Towards the middle of the dialogue, Stuart apologizes to his mother; at which point, his mother asks him what he would like for New Year. Stuart expresses that he would once again like the ‘cheap aftershave’ (149) that she had bought him last year, however:

Mother Don't be silly. If there's a fire you just get on with saving yourself.

Stuart ...It's funny that, isn't it? Of all the really nice things you gave me- it's the cheap shite that means the most. (Neilson, 2014:149).

The present that Stuart will receive for New Year, is as aimless and absurd as Stuart himself. Neilson, uses mother in order to underscore humanity's materialistic taste. Mother, by herself, is not the one who can make sense of why Stuart does not want an expensive present. Later on, in the play, Stuart finds a bill, crumples it up, utters to himself "*What a bunch of cunts, what a bunch of cunts...*" (Neilson, 2014:149) and starts to sing a meaning ditty to the tune of the same words in order to express his frustration. While he is singing, a group of dancers come out suddenly and absurdly. In the meantime, Stuart enters into a dialogue with Minstrels, the dancers, and goes on talking about meaningless relationships, and how insignificant life is. At first, Stuart mentions that each relationship left behind great anguish and he loved each person for a reason. Then he claims that break ups are exhausting. He likens relationships to the pointlessness of life through the words "*the accumulated losses of life*" (Neilson, 2014:151). For Esslin (2001:60), absurd theatre is about "the tragic nature of all love relationships". Moreover, Neilson, through the absurd character Stuart, points to love as nothing which causes only grief.

In the second act, Stuart, who opens the washing machine, is boggled at his mother's voice coming from inside the machine, and telling him to check his pockets. Neilson makes his audience laugh through this scene, as well as puts forth Stuart's mother's negative influence over him. After Stuart controls his pockets and starts up the washing machine, the hypnotic sound of the machine causes him to lose consciousness. It is only when the telephone rings that he comes to. The absurdity of this act, on the one hand, causes the audience to burst out in laughter; on the other hand, it is also thought-provoking in that it shows the audience Stuart's mother's dominance over him. A salesman calling to inform Stuart about a telephone offer slams the phone in Stuart's ear, leading him to feel awful. Meanwhile, his brother Mullet crawls out from under the bed and rants at Stuart about how poorly the salesman treated Stuart. What is more, he tells Stuart that he needs to call the salesman back, and give him a taste of his own medicine. Stuart finds his brother's advice to be logical, calls the salesman back, calls him a "*subhuman piece of shit*" (Neilson, 2014: 154), and then feels content about telling the person what he *really* thinks about people. However, Stuart then feels embarrassed upon learning that the salesman is disabled, and that he is ashamed of the fact that he has to call people in order to scrape a living together.

Another absurd characteristic about Neilson's theatre is animals' absurd ability to talk. For example, whenever Stuart encounters his cat, the two try to harm one another. The cat responds by insulting Stuart using profane slang including fuck.. In fact, those who degrade Stuart do not just include his cat, sibling, and mother—his ex-girlfriend, Angie, also accuses Stuart of being racist and homophobic. The audience yet again loses track as the scene takes another dramatic turn: this time, Stuart's parents walk in on him and see having sex with Laura. His mother forces Stuart to make a decision and

marry Laura, however Stuart does not comply. Since for Stuart marriage means subduing another person.

Just as the washing machine is near the end Stuart's mother gazing at the sun is seen on the beach. Upon the completion of the cycle, the mother figure faints to the ground, thus marking the end of the second act. In the third act, as Stuart eats 'a prawn curry' (Neilson, 2014:160), Laura—like Stuart's mother—reads off to Stuart the number of harmful ingredients present in ready-made meals, and exclaims that she does not want him to die, because:

Laura Who'll look after all the animals if you die?

Stuart Oh I don't know...

Laura Oh, oh – I've thought of another one! Koala bears! We've got to have some koala bears!

Stuart Aren't they vicious?

Laura But we'll have to grow eucalyptus trees because that's all they eat.

Stuart Yeah, well- we're growing bamboo for the pandas anyway... (Neilson, 2014:160).

Laura's absurd imagination ultimately frustrates Stuart. Even though Laura indicates that she thinks and dreams about a future with Stuart, Stuart prefers to stay out of her predicted picture. Nevertheless, Laura dreams of a life, both for herself and for Stuart, and that dreamy life is distant from people, and therefore distant from savagery and chaos. Laura, out of frustration, abandons Stuart—at which point, Paul enters with a bag filled with bottles of booze. Stuart, who is poisoned by chips that he ate, asks Paul as his final request that he tells Angie how much he loves her. Paul presses a pillow over Stuart's face and suffocates him. All of sudden, Paul gets caught off guard by a knock at the door, hides Stuart's corpse, and comes face-to-face with Mullet, who has been watching him the whole time. Angie then suddenly appears and becomes suspicious of Paul's sketchy actions; however, she begins to search around for Stuart with him. Mullet crawls out from where he was hiding, eats the chips that are scattered across the floor, and utters "*from everywhere come the mourners, all moving slowly*" (Neilson, 2014:163). Laura, Angie, Stuart's father and mother, and Stuart's cat (who is carrying a dead bird in its mouth) are among the mourners at Galloway. Stuart's parents reminisce his running home in the snow in his school uniform in order to drink soup, and his being late for the school. Laura recalls Stuart getting up early one morning, and scrawling the words "*I love you*" (Neilson, 2014: 67) in the snow. Angie remembers Stuart waking up before her every morning, and placing a teddy bear next to her head. The talking cat, on the other hand, remembers Stuart as being merely a 'prick' (Neilson, 2014:164). When everyone raises their glasses for a toast in Stuart's name, Stuart absurdly enters on stage with his arms wide open, and he greets everyone individually. His parents prepare his bed, Stuart lays down and says:

Stuart And now I lay me down to sleep

I pray the Lord my soul to keep

And if I die before I wake

I pray my soul the Lord to take. (Neilson, 2017:165)

At this point—in fact, following the meaningless funeral—it becomes apparent that he did not die, but rather that he fell asleep. Jiang Zhu mentions (2013:1462) that “*absurd theatre expresses tragic theme with a comic form*”. Here, Neilson also makes the audience laugh at a tragic event like death by having Stuart re-appear on stage, alive, right in the middle of a death ritual. Stuart, who awakens to the sound of Angie phoning him, pleads with Angie in order for their relationship not to come to end. Even though Angie points to Stuart being the one who wanted to break up, Stuart absurdly states that “*I’m not saying I regret it. I think it was the right thing to do, for both of our sakes. But I didn’t do it because I don’t love you*” (Neilson, 2017:166), and pleads not to leave him. Neilson shows us, through Stuart, that even romance is meaningless. Finally, when Angie asks Stuart what he has done today, Stuart responds by saying ‘fuck all’, implying that he has no sense of expectation whatsoever from life, and that he views life as being meaningless, and closes the phone. During the epilogue, one observes a neat and tidy kitchen in the background. Stuart sips his tea; Angie takes the laundry out of the machine. When Angie sees that her red socks have dyed the rest of the laundry red, she abandons the stage. Stuart, however, continues to sip tea, and the audience leaves the theatre. The play closes with no morale nor advice.

3. The Wonderful World of Dissocia

The Wonderful World of Dissocia, one of Neilson’s most prized plays, took to the stage at the Tron Theatre in 2004. Although his previous play *The Lying Kind* (2002) was regarded as being unsuccessful, *Dissocia* gained great success throughout the theatrical world, and it was staged numerous times in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, and won an award. Dominic Cavendish praises Neilson for his masterful use of comic and absurd elements, writing that he is “*inspired by reading Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and watching The Wizard of Oz, Dissocia will run in a far more comical, absurdist vein than most of his other work*” (Cavendish, 2004: n.p.). Trish Reid feels that the play is avant-garde, exclaiming that “*Dissocia is among Neilson’s most formally daring works*” (2017: 91). John Bull also underlines Neilson’s use of absurd elements, declaring that “*with Dissocia Neilson really established himself in the broader European surrealist/absurdist tradition*” (2011: 355). *Dissocia* is comprised of two acts: the first portraying the colourful world of the character of Lisa, the heroine of play, her imagination, and her sub-conscious; the second being rather pallid, and which depicts Lisa’s actual world. Lisa’s strangeness is detected by the audience right from the very onset of the play.

At the beginning of the first act, Lisa Jones is seen strumming the guitar. As the act continues, even though the sound of the guitar gets louder and louder, Lisa stays motionless. Finally, one of the guitar strings breaks, however, Lisa shows no reaction. Lisa gets caught off guard by Victor Hesse’s voice radiating from the mail box, and shoos him off. However, when Victor tells Lisa that he came to see her about her ‘1972 Sekonda’ (Neilson, 2014:96) model watch that’s consistency one hour behind, she allows him in. Lisa is unable to repair her watch due to the repairman wanting too much money for it. But, an opportunity arises right at that moment. Neilson describes Victor “*he bears more than a passing resemblance*

to how we imagine Sigmund Freud: goatee beard, long coat, gloves, walking stick, hat, pocket watch” (Neilson, 2014: 96). Victor, resembling Freud, hints at another clue about the subject of the play. The world of Dissocia in which Victor has sent Lisa too is full of comical aspects, and is the only place where Lisa herself feels free. “*Delight in Nonsense*” says Freud in his study of the sources of the comic, “*has its root in the feeling of freedom we enjoy when we are able to abandon the straightjacket of logic*” (Esslin, 2001: 286). Freud argues that people only enjoy comedy when they free and are not forced to act logical. Neilson fittingly reflects Freud’s stance through Victor, who presents a different world to Lisa and to the audience.

Victor explains to Lisa that it would not be expensive to fix her watch, and that there is more to the situation than just that. He tells her that an event that she had once lived through was the reason why the watch was an hour behind, upon which he cites an example from his own past:

“Victor When I was a child, my mother told me that he had once made a watch so small, so ephemeral... that only a butterfly could wear it. The notion delighted me but I did not truly believe it. Until the day we found ourselves lost in the woods and I saw him, Lisa- with these eyes that see you now – I saw my father ... take apart a spider... unspool its silk... and reassemble the creature as a timepiece... powered by its own tiny heart.” (Neilson, 2017:97).

This absurd and illogical anecdote of Victor’s makes Lisa complicated. What is more, even though Lisa is, at first, taken aback by Victor’s asking for a “*glass of urine*” which is “*good for the system*” (Neilson, 2014:96) in order to drink, she nevertheless willingly believes whatever exits his mouth. Victor goes on telling Lisa that the plane that she took to New York last October’s being delayed by two hours was the reason why her watch was malfunctioning and, consequently, that that lost hour was an hour stolen from her life. Lisa, in response, tells Victor that she never felt quite the same again following that trip, that she was chronically late for work and for meeting up with her friends, and that this was the reason why her others dubbed her to be dronish and lazy. In this sense, Lisa, is lonely and marginalized by society—just like the other absurd characters. The only way in order to correct this is for Lisa to travel to Dissocia, and for her to fulfill a role there.

Victor warns Lisa that she needs to be careful when she travels to Dissocia, adding that his own personal agents will help her, and that she will encounter a slew of people who will try and divert her. Victor calls the number printed on the back of a card that he gave by himself in order for Lisa to reembrace the sense of balance lacking in her life. It is at that point that Lisa finds herself in Victor’s private elevator with four different passengers who are oblivious of her presence. Upon getting off the elevator, Lisa spots and approaches two security guards. In this section of the play, Neilson—like all other absurd playwrights—both plays with words, as well as uses tragicomic elements in order to present Lisa. Neilson claims that the two guards are in fact ‘insecurity’ guards, whose job it is to see to it that Lisa is not carrying any “*feathers, “pants with clouds or rabbits on them*” (Neilson, 2014:103), heart-shaped pebbles, “*stick insects, gum shields, buckaroo, donkey eggs*” (Neilson, 2014:103-104) with her, which could potentially cause the plane to crash. Finally,

given that “*all new arrivals to Dissocia have to pledge allegiance to the Queen*” (Neilson, 2014:104), the same is also requested of Lisa as well. The guards, upon hearing the sound of drums, announce the arrival of [the] Oathtaker, who “*appears grim, in robes and a ridiculous ceremonial wig*” (Neilson, 2014:104). The Oathtaker, who is accompanied by four attendants, takes a bite of the biscuit in his hand, thereby leading the attendants to call him the “Oatcake-eater”. They break out in song for Lisa, who has just pledged oath of loyalty to Dissocia, as well as who has sworn that she accepts “The Black Dog King” as being the enemy. The sound of sirens are then heard, causing everyone to quiver in fear. The deafeningly loud sirens, upon announce that the Black Dog King has attacked. In the meantime, the guards and the others tell Lisa to lay on the ground and stuff a piece of cloth in her mouth. Shortly thereafter, another announcement is read stating that the coast is clear—thus, allowing everybody to get back up. The Oathtaker then hears the guards being questioned by the queen as to why they did not seek her out for protection. She then walks away, saying that has long as there is a queen, there is also the hope of being saved from the enemy. Lisa then explains to the guards that she has lost an hour. The guards, in turn, forward her to the Lost & Found Department; however, upon asking the department’s whereabouts, the guards absurdly point towards the sun, telling her that she needs to follow it. Lisa heads off, begins to sing and flail her hands around, and then notices that she is making music as she moves. Meanwhile, “*a flurry of petals falls around her*” (Neilson, 2014:110) from the sky, and the pedals turn into flies who begin to circle around the lower half of her body, thus causing her to become uncomfortable. It is at this point that the character of a goat enters onto the stage in order to calm Lisa down.

Esslin (2001:144) claims that “*word games have much in common with the Theatre of the Absurd*”. Neilson, too, is deft when it comes to word games within his own works. For example, Goat asserts that the flies surround Lisa are *timeflies*.

Goat Timeflies. Haven’t you heard of them?

Lisa Timeflies? Not really.

Goat Never?

Lisa Well, apart from as part of a phrase – ‘Time flies when you’re having fun’. I’ve heard that.

Goat There you are, then. (Neilson, 2014:110).

The goat alleges that timeflies are harmless and amusing, whilst Lisa states that time is quickly flying as the timeflies have fun. Here, Nielson’s use of wordplay interrupts the flow of the play. The goat refers to himself as a ‘scapegoat’, and says that the only way for him to be happy is if Lisa puts the blame on him, just as others normally do. Lisa begins to shout and accuse scapegoat of stealing her purse at the movie theater, exclaiming that the single one possession that she had in that purse was a photograph of her aunt. As the play progresses, we learn in fact that Lisa’s mother, sister, and aunt, like herself, were also estranged from the real world, and that they were all treated for depression due to loneliness. In this sense, Lisa, in seeing herself as being close to her aunt, indicates that she is the single one precious person in her life.

Finally, Lisa puts forth that it was the scapegoat who stole the hour that she had lost. The scapegoat, who is certain that Lisa’s accusation is true, has her fall into a trap, and then ties her up. Just as the goat is about to rape Lisa, a character by name of Jane, who has bandages on her legs as well as one of her eyes, enters on stage “*a child’s pedal car*”, and claims that she is from the “*Community Crime Initiative*” (Neilson, 2014:114), as well as claims that she herself will take on Lisa’s torture. Esslin (2001:310) mentions that “*nonsense and violence ... characterize The Theatre of the Absurd*”. Neilson follows an absurd path in bringing the audience face to face with the perception of violence. Lisa, unable to tolerate the sound Jane’s bloodcurdling screams as Jane exists the stage with the goat, “*lies down and curls up, in a foetal position, her ears covered*” (Neilson,2014:115), and sings to herself. Just then, polar bear appears from a shroud of fog and salutes Lisa—who, given her having had a happy childhood, greets the bear back. The bear sings her “*who’ll hold your paw when you die?*” (Neilson, 2014:116), a song about loneliness, which in turn causes Lisa to regain her joy. When the goat finishes torturing Jane, she comes up to Lisa and tells her that her lost hour is to be found at the Lost Property Office, upon which the two-board flying car bound in the direction. As the plane takes a surprising shift westwards, Jane and Lisa fall under attack by the Black Dog King. Jane responds by bombing them as well. However, the bombs absurdly only “*leave a scorch mark in the shape of a cat*” (Neilson, 2014:118) and pose no harm to people whatsoever. Lisa, who is aware of this, wants to throw more bombs, and does so with tremendous glee. Jane ultimately drops Lisa off in the vicinity of the Lost Property Office, and the two-part ways. As Lisa heads towards the bureau, she hears her boyfriend Vince’s voice; Vince asks, moreover, why Lisa had not come her appointments. Lisa, on the contrary, does not give in and asks Vince to get off her back. Upon her arrival at the bureau, she spots the character of Britney, who is making hotdogs for everyone there. Here, Neilson yet again uses absurd names: in the waiting area are four additional characters by the names of Laughter, Ticket, Argument, and Inhibitions. Lisa asks Britney, who is all but oblivious of her, whether she has arrived at the correct address or not. Britney, on the other had argues that where Lisa is at is not Lost Property:

Lisa Where’s that?

Britney We lost it.

Lisa you lost the Lost Property Office?

Britney There’s no need to rub it in! We’re obviously embarrassed about it (Neilson, 2014:120).

It is possible to witness the Neilson’s successful use of wordplay in this dialogue. Britney, who implies that she herself is lost in Lost Property, at the same instance changes the sign of the bureau to “Lost Lost Property”. Lisa ultimately becomes frustrated both with everybody’s nonsensical conversations, as well as with every body’s continuously of hotdogs to the point that she exclaims that everyone is mad. Britney, right around that point, confesses that the reason why everybody is at the bureau is in order to prevent Lisa’s lost hour from being found, and proceeds to thank everybody for their participation. Lisa herself loses her temper over what she hears. Britney responds by saying that

Lisa's lost hour is a major source of energy that lights up the whole of Dissocia, adding that were that lost hour to be found, Dissocia become forever lost.

Like the other absurdist playwrights such as Pinter, Neilson effectively manages to play with words. Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* also involves wordplay. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that *The Birthday Party* in fact is not just a basic birthday party either, but rather the celebration of the character of Stanley's unknown future. Neilson, in essence, follows the same path as Pinter. In other words, finding Lisa's lost hour would mean Lisa returning back to some sense of normalcy, as well as her being rescued from loneliness. It also means that Dissocia, the place where Lisa is rescued from alienation, and where her imagination is free to run wild, would thus cease to exist. For Lisa, even if she has made it clear that she does not want Dissocia to disappear, she also clarifies that she needs that lost hour in order to return to that place of normalcy. However, those in the waiting room suddenly break out in song, and sing about "how nobody else but they themselves love her" (Neilson, 2014:126). During that point, a siren warning that The Black Dog King is about to attack causes everyone to duck to the ground and stuff something in their mouths. Yet, Lisa does not conform. The Dissocians, who look up and see remaining on her feet, suddenly proclaim her to be Queen Sarah. They get ready to fight upon finding their long-lost queen, and enter into battle. Just then, the Black Dog King appears out of the darkness like a mysterious wind, and taps Lisa on the shoulder. The man that Lisa sees standing before her sends her into shock—her boyfriend, Vince. Neilson's portrayal of Vince as the Black Dog King is a mindful move. The reason being is that Vince is a member of the world that Lisa finds meaningless, and that she feels she does not belong to. Vince's presence is a threat to Lisa's wonderful world of Dissocia.

The second act of Neilson's play is just as has he has described it: a world that is distant from the imagination and void of colour; a world that, contrary to act one, takes place in a psychiatric asylum. The sounds of the footsteps of the nurses who feed the now sluggish Lisa pills can be heard rather clearly. In the third section of this act, Lisa is caught attempting to break out of the hospital. She claims that she had stepped out in order to use the telephone and smoke a cigarette, she later admits that she wants to return home. The nurse consoles her in saying that she will return home soon, feeds her more pills, and leaves her to fall asleep. Lisa, who views the nurses as her enemies, nevertheless is forced every time into swallowing down her pills for the sake of her treatment. Lisa plugs herself into her Walkman and dances crazily, but then becomes frustrated when the nurses confiscate it. Once again, she takes her zombifying pills and nods off to sleep. In the eleventh section, Dot, Lisa's sister, comes to visit... and scorn her, saying:

Dot You know what happened to Auntie Liz. You want to end up like that? How d'you think that'd make Mum feel? (Neilson, 2014:133).

Dot explains to Lisa how sad it is for her mother and brother Mark to watch Lisa deteriorate like her aunt had, and then up and leaves in frustration when Lisa states that she really is ill, and that she wants to rest. Lisa later on finishes a book that she had struggled trying to focus on. Vince also enters into Lisa's room with a bag in his hand containing her

belongings. Vince conveys to Lisa that he now no longer is convinced that she is trying to help herself get better given the fact that she has dropped her treatment half way so many times; he, too, then ups and leaves. When Lisa opens the bag, she sees her polar bear, snuggles it, and falls to sleep with it. "Coloured lights play on her face, swirling around her head. Dissocia still exists, caged within her head. There is little doubt that she will return to her kingdom" (Neilson, 2014:135). Neilson's play closes off with music, all the while Lisa appears curled up with her polar bear and fast asleep. Even if remains unable to find the lost hour she needs in order to re-establish her life and to give her life meaning, when she is in the world of Dissocia, she is a queen.

4. Conclusion

Trish mentions that "Neilson's work is varied and eclectic and imposing any kind of meaningful pattern on it is consequently difficult" (Reid, 2017:20). Even though Neilson's plays from the 1990s can be interpreted as falling within the in-her-face movement due to their violent nature, his post-millennial plays show a dramatic shift. Neilson explains his motive behind his writing of both *Realism* and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* as being "to find a way of writing what somehow moves the way the mind moves" (Neilson, 2014:X). Per contra, "the Theatre of the Absurd speaks to a deeper level of the audience's mind." (Esslin, 2001: 347). The aim of absurd theatre is to have the art of illusion affect the toy with the mind of the viewer. Neilson's intention is to project the inner workings of the mind onto the stage, thus having an impact on the mind of the viewer. In this sense, the goals of each bear a stark resemblance to one another.

Esslin delineates that "in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger... This divorce between man and his life... truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity" (2001: 22). In this regard, Neilson's two main characters—Stuart and Lisa—are both detached from life and weak. What's more is that they are neither brave nor successful. Neilson, moreover, does not provide any information about either the characters' pasts or their futures. In this sense, the two are thus anti-heroes. Alienation and isolation from the society are crucial traits of absurd theatre. In both plays, even though both Stuart and Lisa are surrounded by family and friends, they nevertheless are disconnected from them and isolated. Hence, loneliness/seclusion is the common theme shared between plays. Stuart, for example, has no desire to leave the house to hang out with his friends. What is more, Stuart indicates countless times that he has no expectations anything from life. In fact, he is waiting around for his ex-girlfriend who has zero intention of coming back—similar two the meaningless pouting of the characters of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Lisa, too, is deserted in her hospital room by her family and boyfriend due to a lack of mutual understanding. Although she is lost in the real world, she is as happy as a clam in her imaginary world of Dissocia. In both plays, it is also possible to bear witness to Neilson's use of absurd elements as well: talking animals such as Stuart's cat and the (scape)goat, bombs that leave behind cat-shaped traces.

Neilson's mesmerising and adroit use of language is also very much visible in both plays. He plays with words in a

way similar to Ionesco, Pinter, and Beckett. The security guards in *Dissocia* are addressed to as *insecurity* guards—which, considering how they wrongfully directed Lisa, as well as wasted her time, they are, in fact, not to be trusted. The Oathtaker character is absurdly addressed to as the *Oath-eater*, given his constantly nibbling on a biscuit in his hand. In *Realism*, words such as *fuck* and *love* are repeated over and over throughout the play. One example of this is Stuart's suddenly singing of a song comprised of *fuck* and *love* every time he loses his cool. In *Dissocia*, the words like *lost*, *fool*, and *asleep* appear in repetition. On the one hand, while word repetition and nonsensical dialogues throw the audience off, on the other hand, they also at times can render the plays themselves irrational. Another important element is Nielson's emphasis on music and song, which is the means through which the characters emotions are expressed. One instance of is Stuart's choice to express his emotions through a poetic musical or sorts—both upon blowing a gasket at the bills, and upon getting ticked off at the radio program he has tuned in on. Lisa sings in order to express her happiness when she arrives at Lost Property. *Dissocia*, moreover, has its own song or anthem of sorts as well. Nielson, in line with absurd theatre, reflects violence, as well as the tragic reality of death, through comedy. As a case in point, Stuart's live entrance into this own funeral with his arms wide open—this, after he has died and remembered by his parents—leaves the realm of the tragic and enters into the realm of the comic. The scapegoat mentioning that it will rape Jane—who sacrifices herself—instead of Lisa, followed by a teddy polar bear coming out of the woodwork and making Lisa laugh, also leaves the realm of the violent behind. In conclusion, even if *Realism* and *Wonderful World of Dissocia* are twenty-first century theatrical pieces, linguistically and thematically speaking, they seem to show great similarity to the tradition of the theatre of the absurd.

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