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## **Celebrating 175: Artist File, Marisol, 1961-1965**

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The New York Times Book Review  
October 7, 1962 1962, by The New York Times Company Section 7

## IF THE PLAY'S ABSURD, SO IS LIFE

The Outcry of Avant-Garde Dramatists Is Based on the Facts of Our Times

AVANT-GARDE; The Experimental Theater in France. By Leonard Cabell Pronko. Illustrated. 255 pp. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. \$4.75.

FOUR PLAYWRIGHTS AND A POSTSCRIPT; Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, Genet. By David I. Grossvogel. 209 pp. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. \$4.  
By HAROLD CLURMAN

Today one must know the avant-garde dramatists to know the modern theater. Both books under review are part of the growing literature on that avant-garde movement, which has also been called "experimental" and, in an important book by Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd." These labels have been widely bandied about in innumerable periodicals. Thus the ordinary playgoer has acquired a general notion that he might become acquainted with the "school" these designations refer to if he ventured off-Broadway, but he has little concrete knowledge of it. The contradiction between the importance of this new theater and our comparative ignorance of its vital work and significance was summed up in a quip made by the scene-designer, Boris Aronson, when he declared, "The only thing 'experimental' about the experimental theater is that it doesn't pay!"

The first of these two books, written by Leonard Cabell Pronko, an assistant professor of Romance languages at Pomona College (California), is the best introduction to the avant-garde playwrights of France we have in English. The second (and more difficult) book, by David I. Grossvogel, an associate professor of Romance literature at Cornell University, treats Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet. It will be chiefly valuable to those who are already familiar with their plays or with previous commentaries on the subject.

It hardly helps to point out that this theater-which from 1950 to 1960 was centered in Paris -has influenced our native Edward Albee-particularly in "The American Dream"-nad more markedly the Englishman, Harold Pinter, whose "The Caretaker" was warmly greeted by most of our reviewers. Even "Rhinoceros," by the French dramatist Ionesco, won a possibly greater measure of success on Broadway than in France.

The avant-garde (or vanguard) theater is, as Mr. Pronko tells us, what the beat generation would call "way out." What makes any strict definition of it tricky is that Brecht, while certainly "avant-garde" and "experimental," is in one sense antithetical in his method and direction to such a playwright as Ionesco-to whom Brecht represents a sort of Nemesis. All these playwrights are anti-naturalistic; most of them strike a fundamental note of despair, though their despair wears an ironic grimace. All of them couch their plays in more or less abstract terms in



which the depiction of individual characters and the psychology of particular persons are minimized or entirely absent. Thus these plays take on a mythlike character-emblematic of a general human condition in modern society, perhaps even "universal."

The language they employ-though always in prose-is akin to poetry in its attempt to achieve greater concentration and essential meaning (or meaninglessness!) than ordinary speech. Running through many of these plays-particularly Ionesco's-we find a secondary theme which demonstrates that men today can no longer communicate with one another in any but the most desultory manner. For all values beyond self-preservation have become nebulous or hypocritical to the point of atrophy. What governs our lives are automatic reflexes and the rote of bare utility.

None of these plays (except those of Brecht) can be regarded or presented as "propaganda." Many lend themselves to so wide a variety of interpretations (Often contradictory) that sympathetic critics emphasize-and enjoy-what is called their "ambiguity." They are nearly all highly theatrical in the same sense that they are "poetic"; they make their points through striking often grotesque images and patterns of action that are effectively apparent only when seen on the stage.

An epigraph that might be inscribed on the collected works of all these playwrights (one must again except Brecht) is the line Mr. Grossvogel applies to Samuel Beckett (about whom he writes especially well): "From the wastes, a poem is born." Less friendly critics might say with Prince Henry in Shakespeare's chronicle that these playwrights "so offend or make offence a skill"-if skill is granted. On that, as William Hazlitt said of Edmund Kean, their "moral constitution digests only poison." It still seems to this reviewer that these avant-garde dramatists do create a mood and a meaning that compose a kind of music-poignant, pervasive and real. For all their mockery, their outcry is based on the facts and atmosphere of our time-a time of trembling. Nowadays, like the tramps in Beckett's plays, we are all "waiting for Godot": for surcease to our anguish, a response to the riddle of our existence.

Brecht and the Frenchmen under discussion are often viewed as men at opposite poles, and in basic attitudes they are. Yet there is one respect in which they are closer than either Pronko (who mentions but does not deal with Brecht) or Grossvogel realizes. Though Grossvogel specifically says of Genet that "no social protest enters his outrage" and Ionesco constantly jibes at Brecht for his didacticism, the truth is that all these playwrights decry modern society. Ionesco, quoted in Pronko's book, says "For ten years I have been fighting against the bourgeois spirit and political tyrannies."

All these playwrights-including Brecht-find our world "absurd" (for different reasons and in different ways); nearly all blas- (Continued on Page 35)

(photo) Wood sculpture by Marisol. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Stable Gallery.

[[image]]

Wood sculpture by Marisol. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Stable Gallery.

"A response to the riddle of our existence."



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