

## **N.F. Simpson and “The Theatre of the Absurd”**

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In 1958, in the *Observer*, Kenneth Tynan wrote of “a dazzling new playwright,” with his inimitable enthusiasm he declared: “I am ready to burn my boats and promise [that] N.F. Simpson [is] the most gifted comic writer the English stage has discovered since the war” (Tynan 210). Now, in 2008, despite a recent West End revival,<sup>1</sup> few critics would cite Simpson at all and debates regarding the “most gifted comic writer” of the English stage would invariably be centred on Tom Stoppard, Joe Orton, Samuel Beckett or, for those with a more morose sense of humour, Harold Pinter. Part of the reason for Simpson’s critical decline can be put down to protracted periods of silence; after his run of critically and commercially successful plays with The English Stage Company,<sup>2</sup> Simpson only produced two further full length plays: *The Cresta Run* (1965) and *Was He Anyone?* (1972). Of these, the former was poorly received and the latter only reached the fringe theatre.<sup>3</sup> As Stephen Pile recently put it, “in 1983, Simpson himself vanished” with no apparent fixed address. The other reason that may be cited is that, more than any other British writer of his time, Simpson was associated with “The Theatre of the Absurd.” As the vogue for the style died out in London, Simpson’s brand of Absurdism simply went out of fashion. John Russell Taylor offers perhaps the most scathing version of that argument: “whether one likes or dislikes N.F. Simpson’s work, it seems to me, there is little to be said about it. It is uniquely all of a piece, all written in pretty well the same style, and all based on one principle, the *non-sequitur*” (Taylor 66). Whereas, for example, Harold Pinter developed and

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<sup>1</sup> For details of this revival see

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/07/25/btsimpson125.xml>.

<sup>2</sup> Under William Gaskhill at the West End’s Royal Court, these plays were: *A Resounding Tinkle* (1957), *The Hole* (1958), *One Way Pendulum* (1959) and *The Form* (1961).

<sup>3</sup> At The Theatre Upstairs, London, 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1972.

changed his style (and so went on to be considered in a class unto himself),<sup>4</sup> Simpson continued writing plays in the vein of his late 1950s successes.

These arguments against Simpson are not insurmountable: when his plays are considered alongside other plays of the time – for example, John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) – they appear far less “dated” by particular social contexts. There is nothing in the suburban settings of *A Resounding Tinkle* or *One Way Pendulum* that binds them to the late 1950s and arguably both plays would work in contemporary suburbia. What is more, Simpson, like Pinter, might be said to belong to a class unto himself because his plays are without parallel on the English stage. Their legacy is seen on the small screen: in the sketches and cartoons of *Monty Python*, the logic-twisting tales of *Ripping Yarns* or the dislocated lunacy of Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer. Simpson’s status as an exponent of “The Theatre of the Absurd” is not without its problems. There are very few immediate similarities with Samuel Beckett or Aruthur Adamov and the plays lack the socio-political concerns that underpin Eugène Ionesco’s most famous work; Arthur P. Hinchcliffe has gone as far as to argue that “it is doubtful whether he ought to be considered as an Absurd dramatist at all” (Hinchcliffe 84).

This essay will seek to answer the question of whether it is still helpful to label Simpson an “Absurd dramatist” in the tradition of Ionesco or Beckett. In order to answer this question, I will consider Simpson’s work in relation to its three most immediate contexts: first, the Theatre of the Absurd; second, English surrealism; and third, Pinter’s “Comedy of Menace.” I will then re-examine, through close reading, *One Way Pendulum*, which is generally considered Simpson’s best work. In doing so,

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<sup>4</sup> Roughly speaking, Pinter started his career by writing terse “comedies of menace,” such as *The Birthday Party* (1957) or *The Caretaker* (1959), then he wrote ambiguous, minimalist plays ‘without plot’, such as *Landscape* (1967) and *Silence* (1968), before writing the more overtly political plays of his late career, such as *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988).

I hope to clarify Simpson's position qua Absurdism whilst putting forward an argument for why his plays are still worth reading and performing today.

In his landmark study, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin names five chief proponents of "French Absurd Drama": Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Fernando Arrabal. What binds these writers is not a unified world vision, but rather that each playwright "seeks to express no more and no less than his own personal vision of the world" (7). For Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* is first and foremost a question of *style*. He states:

These plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries; they must therefore appear as a provocation to people who have come into the theatre expecting to find what they would recognise as a well-made play... these plays often contain hardly any recognisable human beings and present completely unmotivated actions. (7)

However, it is clear that this would not serve as an accurate gauge for what constitutes the "Absurd." A play like Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well* is guilty on all counts but, presumably, neither Shakespeare nor his play warrant the label "Absurd." Whilst dramaturgical experimentalism is undoubtedly a central tenet of Absurdism – all of these playwrights share a disregard for the traditional structures of drama – it cannot serve as its only criterion. Although Esslin insists upon the ultimate heterogeneity of *The Theatre of the Absurd* there *is* a broad philosophical and political underpinning that runs through all of the plays that he champions. As J.L. Styan argues:

French Absurdism may in part be explained as a nihilistic reaction to the recent atrocities, the gas chambers and the nuclear bombs of war... *Theatre of the Absurd* revealed the negative side of Sartre's existentialism, and expressed the helplessness and futility of a world which seemed to have no purpose. (Styan 125)

Hence, *The Theatre of the Absurd* is specifically a post-World War Two phenomenon. All of the writers are, broadly speaking, anti-Fascist. For example, we

see overt opposition to Fascism in Pozzo's oppression of Lucky in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (e.g. "up pig!" [Beckett 24]) and Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* in which, famously, everybody except its protagonist Berenger is transformed into an unthinking rhinoceros. *Rhinoceros* culminates with Berenger's remarkable speech for individual freedom: "people who try to hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end! Oh well, too bad! I'll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating" (Ionesco, *Rhinoceros* 124). Even if it stands for nothing else, Absurdism has at its core the principle of individual liberty.

Another key influence in the formation of Absurdism is the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Sartre's ideas are often given direct purchase in Absurdist plays. For example, in Beckett's *Act Without Words I*, a man finds himself on stage and continually attempts to escape it only to find himself "flung back" there (Beckett 203). Here, the man is ostensibly trapped in existence: he does not have the freedom to leave the stage but he has agency to "act" (or refrain from acting) on and with the items upon it. In this reading, Beckett's *Act Without Words I* engages with Sartre's most famous argument that man is "condemned to be free" (Sartre, *Being* 553), and that there is no hiding from this freedom. Camus' bleaker vision of humanity also finds its reflection in Beckett. *Endgame*, for example, has Hamm declaring "you're on earth, there's no cure for that" and Clov telling himself "Clov, you must learn to suffer better" (Beckett 215, 132). Just as in Camus, the suffering of everyday existence is seen simply as a condition of being that is redeemed because of the "wholly human origins of all that is human" (Camus 315), which ultimately means, in Hamm's words, that "we are obliged to each other" (Beckett 132). To

summarise, the “Theatre of the Absurd” can be characterised as being broadly anti-Fascist in terms of its politics and Existentialist in terms of its philosophy.

When we turn to N.F. Simpson, it is more difficult to make statements about his political or philosophical affiliations. When Esslin considers Simpson in *The Theatre of the Absurd* he starts with a series of comparisons:

[His plays] lack the dark obsessiveness of Adamov, the manic proliferation of things in Ionesco, or the anxiety and menace of Pinter... [they] lack the formal discipline of Beckett. (Esslin 304)

Interestingly, Esslin neglects to mention Fernando Arrabal whose logical twisting of morality surely shares an affinity with Simpson’s similar games of logic. However, nowhere in Simpson is there the sort of narrative linearity or pseudo-realist emotion found in Arrabal’s plays *The Automobile Graveyard* and *The Two Executioners*. Essentially, Esslin defines Simpson’s theatre by what it lacks, a trend quite common among commentators of the time who almost always make the comparison with Ionesco. For Phillip Hope-Wallace, writing for the *Guardian*, “the humour is far less savage [than Ionesco’s]”. The *Times* claimed that “N.F. Simpson is interested only in the comic possibilities of a method that has been used to graver purpose, notably by M. Ionesco” (“Royal Court Theatre: *A Resounding Tinkle*”). Patrick Gibbs described *The Hole* as “being a parody in the Ionesco style of the conversation of married couples in suburbia” (“Play”). Finally, Martin Shulman, in the *Evening Post*, declared that it is Simpson’s “ability to catch nuances of conversation and reduce them to hilarious *non-sequiturs* that makes Simpson the only valid Anglo-Saxon heir to the linguistic anarchy already spawned by Eugène Ionesco” (“Surely”).

The most obvious Ionesco play to cite in relation to Simpson is *The Bald Primadonna*. Its suburban setting and focus on a middle-class couple – Mr. and Mrs. Smith – can almost be seen as a prototype for the home of Mr. and Mrs. Paradock in *A*

*Resounding Tinkle*. However, *The Bald Primadonna* is not indicative of Ionesco's dramatic style, as its manic degeneration into apparent lunacy is an anomaly in his oeuvre. When Simpson is read against something like *The Chairs* or *Amédée*, divergences in both style and subject matter become quickly apparent. Let us consider an exchange from *The Chairs*:

OLD MAN: I'm so tired.  
OLD WOMAN: You were more cheerful when you were looking at the water... Just to cheer you up, let's pretend as we did the other night.  
OLD MAN: Pretend yourself, it's your turn.  
OLD WOMAN: It isn't, it's yours.  
OLD MAN: It isn't.  
OLD WOMAN: It is.  
OLD MAN: It isn't.  
OLD WOMAN: It is.  
OLD MAN: Semiramis, drink your tea. [*Naturally, there is no tea*]  
OLD WOMAN: Imitate February, then.  
OLD MAN: I don't like the months of the year.  
OLD WOMAN: There's no other kind at the moment. Go on, just to please me...  
OLD MAN: All right, then. This is February. [*He scratches his head like Stan Laurel*] (Ionesco, 2000 129)

This takes place before the invisible guests start arriving and, if one treats the invisible characters as real ones (as Ionesco and his characters do), it is one of the few instances of the *non-sequitur* in the play. The apparent arbitrariness of the old woman's requests is later explained as habit when the old man reveals, "every evening, every evening without exception, through seventy-five years of married life, you make me tell you the same story, imitate the same people, the same months ... always the same" (130). Ionesco employs a series of recurring motifs in his characterisation of the two old people: the old woman constantly reiterates "I'm your wife, so now, I'm your mummy, too" (133) and the old man "might have become a President General, a General director, or even a General Physician, or a Post-master General", "a General Decorator, a General in the Navy, or a General Factotum ... an Orator-General", "a General editor, a Director-General ... or a Generalissimo" (129, 135, 167). We learn

that the old woman never had children and that the old man witnessed the traumatic death of his mother. The old man complains that he “has suffered greatly” and “suffered humiliation” (162, 166) and the old woman throws herself at the invisible photographer “like an old whore” suggesting something in her “character that normally remains hidden” (147). It is clear then that *The Chairs* is a dark and overtly psychological portrait of two rather desolate and unfilled people who can only look back on their own lives in terms of failure and who commit suicide on the false premise that the old man’s “message is to be revealed to the world” (173) (the Orator they have entrusted to deliver this message to the world turns out to be deaf and dumb). The “absurdity” of hosting a party of invisible guests only serves to heighten the tragic reality of the couple’s situation, just as the surreal growing corpse in *Amédée* metaphorically suggests something manifestly rotten (literally a skeleton in the closet) in the history of the couple in that play. Ionesco’s drama hence functions as a sort of psychological realism – making manifest on the stage the hidden fears, the “dreams and nightmares” of his characters (Esslin, “Introduction” 10) – spliced with a brutal honesty that confronts head on Sartre’s “totality of freedom.”

Simpson’s theatre can not be said to function in the same way. Let us examine a similar exchange between the couple from the truncated version of *A Resounding Tinkle*, Bro and Middie Paradock:

*(Both relapse into silence. BRO reads his paper. After a few moments he looks up)*

BRO: If we’re going to change the name [of the elephant] at all, I can’t see what you’ve got against “Hodge” for that matter.

MIDDIE: “Hodge” is all right for a monkey.

BRO: We’ll go through some names and see what we can agree on. “Hodge”.

MIDDIE: “Hodge” for a monkey. “Gush” for an elephant.

BRO: “Admiral Benbow”.

MIDDIE: “Hiram B. Larkspur”.

BRO: “Playboy”.

MIDDIE: “Killed-with-kindness Corcoran”.

BRO: “New-wine-into-old-bottles Backhouse”.

MIDDIE: "'Tis-pity-she's-a-whore Hignett".

BRO: "Lucifer".

MIDDE: "Stonehenge".

BRO: "Haunch".

*(there is a pause)*

BOTH: *(almost simultaneously)* "Splinter".

BRO: Thank goodness we can agree on something. Now I can ring Eddie.  
(Simpson, *Tinkle* [short] 6)

This is a more obvious example of the *non-sequitur* than the passage of Ionesco's *The Chairs* quoted above. There is no explanation for why this couple have ordered an elephant, very little that associates one name that they suggest to the next, and no further elucidation as to why, for example, it is "'Hodge' for a monkey." Unlike the exchanges between the old man and old woman, there are no references to the past and no hints at an inner psyche that is "tired" or "suffering." The exchanges between the Paradocks are almost wholly discursive and concerned with fairly parochial, domestic matters or else external or abstract matters. There is no sense of ordering to events, they simply occur as random phenomena. It might be said that people turning into rhinoceroses, or corpses growing to fill a whole house, constitute "random phenomena," but these can always be reconciled by revealing something of the nature of society or of individual characters: it is possible to apply the associative logic of "dreams and nightmares" to Ionesco's poetic fantasies. In *A Resounding Tinkle*, on the other hand, nothing can prepare the audience for its random events:

BRO: There was somebody at the door.

MIDDIE: Who?

BRO: I told him he better wait. *(he pauses)* He wants me to form a government. (Simpson, *Tinkle* [short] 17)

Much of the humour comes not only from the randomness of how events unfurl but from the fact that the Paradocks are unshakably calm no matter how strange these events might get. Perhaps the oddest of these unpredictable "events" is when their

Uncle Ted appears as “a young woman, elegantly dressed”;<sup>5</sup> after momentary shock, Middie simply asks, “you look lovely – doesn’t he Bro? But why ever didn’t you let us know?” (Simpson, *Tinkle* [short] 17).

Simpson shares neither the dark psychological concerns of Ionesco’s best work nor the sense of existential crisis found in Beckett’s drama. Simpson’s “Theatre of the Absurd,” if it must be given that label, is plainly distinct from that of Ionesco or Beckett. Kenneth Tynan came closest to recognising this when he said, “the highest tribute I can pay N.F. Simpson’s *A Resounding Tinkle* ... is to say that it does not belong in the English theatrical tradition at all. It derives from the best Benchley lectures, the wildest Thurber cartoons, and the cream of the Goon shows” (198). Shulman too made a claim for Simpson’s influences outside drama, “[Simpson] brings to the stage Lewis Carroll’s logical lunacy, S.J. Perelman’s hilarious ability to pulverise linguistic clichés and Beachamber’s deadpan reporting of a mad world” (“Funny?”). Other critics also picked up on “a temperamental affinity with Lewis Carroll” (Taylor 207) or, as one critic put it, “the nearest likeness [to Simpson’s plays] is to the higher flights of simple lunacy in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*” (Hope-Wallace). It cannot be denied that Simpson does take something from the twisted logic at play in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* novels. To take Alice’s confrontation with the Red Queen as an example:

“Where did you come from”, said the Red Queen.

“And where are you going? Look up, speak nicely, and don’t twiddle your fingers all the time.”

Alice attended to all these directions, and explained, as well she could, that she had lost her way.

“I don’t know what you mean by *your* way”, said the Queen: “all ways about here belong to *me* – but why did you come out here at all?” she added in a kinder tone.

“Curtsey while you’re thinking what to say. It saves time.” (Carroll 148)

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<sup>5</sup> Note: in the first, longer, version of the play this character was called ‘Don’ and was the Paradocks’ son.

This is exactly the sort of spurious logic at play in Simpson's work. Conversations and events develop unpredictably. The irrational reasoning of lines like "curtsey while you're thinking what to say. It saves time," is echoed in Middie Paradock's reasoning. When she hears that the man at the door is wearing "an old rain coat," she says, "he was very likely trying it on for size," and when she argues, "if it's eighteen eighty-six it makes precious little difference whether you're Gladstone or not" (Simpson, *Tinkle* [short] 14, 17). However, we must not confuse Absurdism with Surrealism. Aside from the singing "Speak Your Weight" machines in *One Way Pendulum* there is very little in Simpson that can be said to be *impossible*. Simpson's plays are always, as Esslin notes, "firmly based in the English class system" (Esslin 302). Men ringing front door bells asking to form governments or the unexpected appearance of elephants in suburban gardens might sound absurd in the context of British social norms, but they are far more likely to occur in reality than, for example, the talking flowers or animated chess pieces found in *Through the Looking Glass*.

Thus, whilst the events in Simpson's plays are seemingly random, they always take place in the context of "real life," which is a statement that could also be applied to the early plays of Harold Pinter. When critics speak of *British Absurdism*, "often mentioned in the same sentence" are "Harold Pinter and N.F. Simpson" (Hinchcliffe 82) and, less frequently, David Campton (almost solely on the basis of 1957's *The Lunatic View*) and James Saunders. Simpson and Pinter both wrote their breakthrough plays in 1957, and of the two it was Simpson who garnered most of the early critical acclaim and commercial success whereas Pinter received mixed reviews. Controversy did not produce the *succès de scandale* for Pinter that it had for Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and *The Birthday Party*'s first run at the Lyric Opera House in 1958 was cut short. In 1959, both playwrights contributed sketches (along with John Mortimer) to

the successful West End revue *One to Another*, leading one newspaper reviewer to ask, “how ... did Mr. Pinter, the little understood author of *The Birthday Party*, briefly seen and patchily received by puzzled critics last year, come to write successful revue material?” (“Mr. Harold Pinter”). As well as being associated with “The Theatre of the Absurd,” Pinter was, and always has been since, closely associated with the term “Comedy of Menace” (taken from the subtitle of Campton’s *The Lunatic View*), which led most theatre critics of the time to conflate the two labels. One article in the *Times* discusses Simpson as a writer of menace alongside Pinter and Campton, saying “menace is more implicit than revealed” in Simpson’s plays and asserting that *A Resounding Tinkle* “exhibits characters in a state of mental attrition” (“Enter the Comedy of Menace”). It points to the Paradocks’ nonchalant acceptance of random events as supporting evidence and goes on to claim that they “would have greeted ... the declaration of an atomic war with similar unconcern.” Thus, the “menace” lies in the passivity of the characters rather than in the fear of the unknown or the discursive games of power found in Pinter. Although it seems a stretch to label Simpson a writer of “Comedies of Menace,” the comparison to Pinter is not totally unwarranted. Like Pinter’s, Simpson’s characters are total enigmas, we are told nothing of their background or why they happen to be in the places they are, and, of course, there is also the phenomena of random events. But Simpson’s drama ultimately lacks Pinter’s intense preoccupation with power relations whilst Pinter’s drama lacks Simpson’s disregard for the straightforward logic of cause and effect: they are ultimately different beasts.

Thus far, we have seen a series of things that Simpson is not: he is not an absurdist in the mould of Ionesco or Beckett; he is not surrealist in the tradition of English nonsense verse; and he is not a writer of the “comedies of menace.” Perhaps it

is the right moment to turn to Simpson's most celebrated play, *One Way Pendulum*. At the time of its first production in 1959 it was hailed "as mad, marvellous, chaotic and irrelevant a play as London has seen for years" (Shulman, "Surely"). However, most critics were unanimous in claiming that it is largely a nonsense play about "nine characters who give insanity gentle rein" ("Sameness of Jokes Relieved by Resourceful Acting") but who are "utterly logical according to their idiosyncrasies" (Slater). One reviewer claimed that "*One Way Pendulum* is a superb collection of [gags] ... But they do not really add up to a play" (Action-Bond). Only Martin Esslin picks up on the deeper point being made about what suburban life has become: "*One Way Pendulum* portrays a society that has become absurd because routine and tradition have turned human beings into Pavlovian automata" (Esslin 310). Each of the Groomkirbys are narrowly focused on a single obsession: Sylvia with the length of her arms; Mabel, as with Middie Paradock and Mrs. Brandywine before her, with house cleaning ("something else for me to dust, I expect, whatever it is," [Simpson, *Pendulum* 17]); Arthur with his dual obsession with the British legal system and with do-it-yourself carpentry; and, more disturbingly, Kirby, whose need to find a logical pretext to wear black has led him to killing people with an iron bar (after telling them a joke) so that he can wear it in mourning. Because of this single mindedness, the characters are totally dislocated from one another. Penelope Gilliat comments that, "the root of N.F. Simpson's comic style is the excessive difficulty any two people have in speaking to one another ... Any duologue might equally well be a hand-shake or gibberish: the need for contact is what impels it, nothing more." There is then some form of human need to communicate, but this is made impossible or at least difficult because the characters lose themselves in their attempts to give purpose to their arbitrary existences. This is perhaps the wider social point at stake: the attempt to

impose an artificial order on what is essentially chaotic is not only absurd but it leads to profound emptiness and, in Kirby's case, to murder.

Kirby's current scheme is to train five hundred "Speak Your Weight" machines to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's *Messiah*, in order to use them as sirens on the North Pole, which will draw flocks of people to the area. Once the people are in place, Kirby plans to persuade them all to jump simultaneously; thus, ever so slightly, tilting the earth's axis and triggering a new Ice Age. This will provide a constant supply of dead people to mourn for, which *of course*, provides Kirby with a permanent pretext to wear black. This is Simpson at his logic-twisting funniest, but Kirby's plan takes on wider significance if one considers how governments have used similarly self-justifying logical pretexts as a means to go to war. Kirby's need to wear black is purely arbitrary but so too, one could argue, is a person's allegiance to a particular country, religion or cause. Esslin concludes that "Kirby's Pavlovian self-conditioning is a key image of the play; it stands for the automation induced by habit on which the suburban commuting world rests" (Esslin, *Theatre* 309) and might be extended to include all people who exist in self-justifying systems of thought, especially those who would inflict that self-justifying system onto others.<sup>6</sup>

The courtroom scene, heralded as "a wondrous satire of forensic logicalities" (Hope-Wallace) that displays "Mr. Simpson's comic observation at its keenest" (Gibbs, "Surrealism"), led one critic to remark that it "reminds one more of the real thing than fictional trial scenes usually do" ("Music Hall Style of Burlesque"). In the interrogation of Arthur Groomkirby, society is seen as exercising the same spurious and dangerous logic as the man it seeks to convict: Kirby. It makes a deeper

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<sup>6</sup> On this point, as well as the prayer from *A Resounding Tinkle* (discussed above), consider also the visionary in *The Hole* whose "ambition" it "was to have a queue stretching away from [him] in every possible direction known to the compass" so that the world could indulge in his "private vision" (Simpson, *The Hole* 2, 11).

existential point when Arthur refuses to swear on the Bible but instead insists on

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

JUDGE: I thought the issue of slavery on the American plantations had been settled by Abraham Lincoln?

...

USHER: He said, “Not in my world it isn’t”. Those were his words m’lord.

JUDGE: Which world is he referring to?

CLERK: I understand he has one of his own, m’lord. (Simpson, 1960 59)

This is more than a mere linguistic trick, for the entirety of the play leading to this moment, Arthur Groomkirby has been entirely self-obsessed; Simpson even describes him as “an ineffectually self-important man” living literally in his “own world” (10, 17). Arthur constructs a court room in the middle of his home, which, as law-abiding citizens of the state, we all metaphorically do. That this court room is exposed as the construction of a man whose ultimate goal is the reconstruction of “Noah’s Ark: The Supreme Achievement in Wood” (17) surely indicates that the play makes a wider point about the ultimate absurdity of human laws and other such attempts at objective modes of being – all too often we forget about what is really important to us: each other.

In conclusion, Simpson has proved a difficult playwright to categorise. His dramaturgical methods diverge widely from those to whom he is considered closest, Ionesco and Pinter; and if those two writers remain the benchmarks for the “Theatre of the Absurd” and the “Comedy of Menace” respectively, then Simpson’s plays belong in neither sub-genre. Nonetheless, the scope of his vision is as powerful and his social critiques are as valid as either Ionesco’s or Pinter’s. These are facets of Simpson’s work that were perhaps forgotten once he was safely pigeonholed under a specific label. What better way to deal with a penetrating social critique than to label it “absurd” – especially one that seeks to expose and undermine our core value-systems? Simpson once stated that “like most Englishmen, of which I am proud to be

one, I have a love of order tempered by a deep and abiding respect for anarchy, and what I would like to bring about is [a] perfect balance between the two” (Simpson, “[A comment...]” 7). Simpson’s plays demonstrate the absurdity of order as a “way of being,” as a means to live one’s life. His characters fail to connect with one another because of their subservience to ordered, inhuman modes of existence. If nothing else, the plays serve as a reminder that – even if there is no purpose to life, and although men and women are each free to make of themselves what they will – people all too easily get lost in their own machinations or those devised for them by society. It is worth remembering that humans still owe their survival and their emotional well-being – not to mention their sanity – to one another, and no logical system can explain that.

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