



# *Silly to Think* and Never Question the Absurd: Integrating the female heroine in Absurdist playwriting

By Sophie Davis

## CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

In 1961, dramatist and scholar Martin Esslin published his seminal text “The Theatre of the Absurd” (TOTA); the book subsequently created the prolific theatrical movement which stemmed from the horrors of World War II, grouping together playwrights and philosophers whose works embodied the nonsensicality of war and the tyranny of the human condition (Bennett 1). Esslin borrowed from writers Franz Kafka and Eugene Ionesco to generate the patriarchal definition of what ‘absurd’ in TOTA was to truly express. Fifty years later, Esslin’s definition was challenged by author Michael Bennett in his 2011 text *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* which is predicated on a mistranslation of Kafka and Ionesco as well a misinterpretation of philosopher Albert Camus. Bennett’s discovery opened the possibility for a deconstruction and reinterpretation of what ‘absurd’ expresses and through this, the opportunity to liberate female characters and female playwrights from the constraints of an inherently gender exclusive theatrical convention.

Historically, TOTA has produced Absurdist works which are concerned almost entirely with white, cisgendered men; famous examples include *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Rhinoceros* (1959). Occasionally, women characters have been included in Absurdist works, however, all of these characters in question have been condemned to suffer spells of domestic hysteria, existing within roles of servitude and patriarchal structures, for example, Jean Genet’s *The Maids* (1947) and Margret

Hollingway's *The House that Jack Built* (1988). Since its emergence, TOTA has pigeonholed playwrights and perpetuated the existential man to the point in which the "white male body is the metaphoric default body" (Bennett 101), creating a masculine epicene for any unidentified female or non-gendered Absurdist character. Indeed, this was my experience following an early draft reading of my neo-Absurdist play *Silly to Think*. My play, which intentionally blurred gender roles and rejected binary gendered characters, was interpreted conversely: my two non-gendered characters were received by the audience overwhelmingly as men despite my dramaturgy to exclude gendered language and gendered stage directions. These surprisingly antithetical results prompted a series of preliminary questions before a rigorous interrogation into the issue itself: *where are all the female characters and playwrights in Absurdist theatre? Why have female characters been excluded from the Absurdist cannon? And furthermore, when evident in Absurdist works, why are female characters locked in roles of servitude?*

*Reflections on Self-Delusion* by feminist writer Jia Tolentino comments on these gendered issues by pointing out the dissonance inherent in the characterisation of male heroes and female heroines, "male characters are written and received to be the emblem of the human condition, rather than the female one," whereas "female characters in contrast, illuminate the experience of being a woman. Condemned to the universe which revolves around sex, family and domesticity. Their stories circle around love and obligation" (14; 16). Tolentino highlights the obstacles set in place by a patriarchal system for the female heroine, a thought which prompted my consideration and subsequent major research question: *how can the female heroine transcend the bounds of domesticity and servitude which confines her to the tyranny of male hegemonic Absurdist theatre?* Extending from Bennett, I posited the

opportunity to deconstruct, re-interpret and re-construct a neo-Absurdist convention which is gender inclusive. More so, by drawing on the feminist theories of 'transcendence' and 'immanence,' which shall be elaborated on further within this paper, create a female heroine who transcends the bounds of servitude which she has been chained to by Absurdist theatre, have her stare into the void and wait to see what stares back.

My topic area met at the crossroads of playwriting theory and practice, western philosophy, and critical feminist theory. To achieve a credible result I decided it necessary to contextualise my research through a feminist lens, familiarising myself with Simone De Beauvoir's ontological argument of 'immanence versus transcendence;' the dichotomy lording the subject/male in a transcendental state of freedom whilst oppressing the object/female to the static and passive immanent plane of existence when, according to philosopher Victoria Barker, "there is no theoretical reason why women should not be able to share the status of transcendence that is necessary to full subjectivity" (314). Responding to Beauvoir, Barker unveiled the means to liberate my female heroine from the tyranny of male hegemonic theatre, "true salvation for women lies in finding her own means to transcendence, eschewing those imposed upon her by her cultural inheritance..." (313). According to Barker, liberation for the female heroine lies in her ability to transcend her limitations on an individual level. The process of how to best do so, I discovered, was to dig into the semiotic roots of 'transcendence' and 'immanence' and the divine origins from which these concepts grew. Barker's analysis of the death of God in her text "Feminism and the Deconstruction of God's Death" (1999), warns that the Hegelian and Nietzschean declaration of God's death is not in the best interest of females, for "it seems that not only are we left without God, but we are left without a concept of a feminine/feminist identity. And if so, then we are without the means to affirm a feminist

theory of God or of a relationship to God that is specific to women as subjects in their own right" (320). To summarise: if man was created in God's image and men were to turn away from God, then men subsequently have inherited from God the ability to transcend to existentialism as seen in the hegemony of Absurdist theatre. This idea is further explained by Bennett, "since white male absurdist(s) do not have to worry about their own subject position, as white masculinity is the hegemonic norm, they have the luxury, if you will, to philosophise about universal bodies and problems" (101). Meanwhile, women, according to De Beauvoir and Barker, are further oppressed to the immanent plane and domestic sphere, left without relation to the divine and any chance of transcendence through which, once at the centre of her own existence, she could contemplate her own absurd life. These findings didn't just interest me from an academic or playwright's perspective, but viscerally too, from the experience of a woman who has at many times in her life been left to experience deep pangs of existential longing with little means or outlets to philosophise about it.

To become familiar with the Absurdist cannon I began to acquaint myself with the devastatingly, though unsurprisingly minimal examples of female Absurdist plays written by women, some of which included: *The House that Jack Built*; Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and *The Maids*. Initially, I was encouraged to find female representation in the Absurdist genre, however, after analysing these works, I discovered that even in examples of plays which depicted female characters and were written by female playwrights, the circumstances of these characters were subjected to experiences of domesticity, servitude, and immanence: maids, wives, mothers, girlfriends and so forth. I resolved that the female heroine, even when represented, was still trapped by the futility of the everyday, unable to ever transcend this realm and contemplate her own absurd existence,

reinforcing the 'transcendence versus immanence,' subject versus object binary as reflected in Melcher's statement, "in a male dominated society, operating within a male female, man woman binary, the act of interaction has always been subject-object with the subjective man defining the objective female" (16).

This realisation, though disheartening, unveiled an opportunity which I intended to rectify through my praxis as a playwright. In order to do so, I had to return to Bennett and his discovery of Esslin's mistranslation and further misinterpretation which pioneered TOTA. According to Bennett, Esslin moulded the backbone of TOTA based on Camus' teachings, mistaking him for an existentialist, though Camus never identified himself under such label (5). More so, Esslin's mistranslation of Kafka and Ionesco's definition of 'absurd' being "that which is devoid of purpose . . . cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" led to the constant and continued use in the field, "scholars and common readers alike... have basically understood the absurd and Theatre of the Absurd as emphasising the purposelessness and senselessness of life" (19; 5), though this is the incorrect interpretation of what 'absurd' truly means. Bennett argues that "the Theatre of the Absurd is not about absurdity, but about making life meaningful given our absurd situation" (4). This oversight of Esslin's and discovery of Bennett's provided an advantageous gap in Absurdist theory and became the space where I intended to reinterpret the convention through the lens of feminist theory and philosophy and write into effect a neo-Absurd genre which was gender inclusive.

Through further research, I discovered a potential solution to achieve this goal while also implementing a credible philosophical framework which I found hidden in the theories of philosopher Luce

Irigaray and her concept of the 'sensible transcendental.' By writing a female character who does not accept the Hegelian and Nietzschean idea that God is dead, and instead, in the beginning of the text, manifests as divine, embodying Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental' and further becoming throughout the play more mortal than God, she sidesteps the patriarchal confines of the immanent plane. Once done so, my female heroine may deconstruct, dissemble, and reimagine a neo-Absurd within the text itself; she may at very long last, stare into the void and see what stares back. As stated previously, I believed this hypothesis to be credible, as it would equate to the successful completion of my aim and objectives, however, as shall be elaborated on further, I discovered that I was incorrect.

## **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

My findings from De Beauvoir and Barker were met with another challenge: the difficulty of translating critical theory and philosophy into tangible writing practice. Whilst conceptually I was able to identify and conceptualise contradictions and paradoxes theoretically, the more difficult component was transforming these findings onto the page. To combat this obstacle, I devised a series of aims and objectives to ensure my research findings were able to physically manifest as practice. Alongside my aim to successfully characterize and write a transcendent female heroine, I intended to support my objective by using the following outcomes: analyse female Absurd playwriting, feminist theory, western philosophy and TOTA conventions. Evaluate Bennett's reassessment of Camus' Absurd and create through the drafting process a gender-inclusive theatrical framework based off this reassessment, and finally, formulate and synthesize the transcendent female heroine into my play *Silly to Think*.

At this point in my exploration, I became aware of the need to reflect upon my process, calling for the critical application of autoethnographic reflection, a methodology which seemed rather fitting, as my research area was initially provoked by reflective practice dating back to the first draft reading of *Silly to Think*. My research findings forced me to turn inwards and question my own biases, for example, why on a subconscious level did I too read my two non-gendered characters as male? And what did that say about my understanding of internal misogyny and females as second-class citizens? As a means of monitoring my self-reflections, I implemented numerous practice-based methods during the drafting process including journaling, mind mapping, voice memos and the recordings of feedback noting insights, setbacks, dilemmas, and dramaturgy.

The culmination of my investigation, methodologies and practice as a playwright led to three significant findings, these discoveries were far from what I had initially anticipated. I would like to emphasise that these findings did not occur in isolation, rather, in sequence as a result of their predecessor. Importantly, I became aware of these results through three key practice-based methodologies which were autoethnographic reflection, epistemological enquiry and personal ontology, techniques which centred myself as the subject matter to be interrogated.

## **FINDINGS**

### **1. Failed Hypothesis.**

After building a strong contextual foundation I proceeded with my strategy to insert Irigaray's theory of the 'sensible transcendental' in the drafting and characterisation of *Silly to Think*. The rationale behind this choice seemed initially credible, however, with the commencement of my



public reading in November 2020, I discovered my oversight, which is represented poignantly in a statement made by academic Jessica Bardsley in her 2018 paper “Fluid Histories: Luce Irigaray, Michael Serres and the Ages of Water.” This moment of discovery I noted in a journal entry on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2021:

*I'm still stuck in the rigid, solid, patriarchal western philosophical paradigm, argh! My female heroine, 'Poseidon,' though liberated through her dialogue in my play, remains chained to the paternal philosophical-symbolic system (Aristotelianism); though the convention be Absurd, the form itself categorically falls underneath the western, patriarchal umbrella. I have fallen short in my attempts to liberate the female heroine through Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental:' making her divine in body to transcend the bounds of immanence. I hypothesise this occurred because, I, socialised and educated within the prevailing dramatic framework, unintentionally manifest my heroine in hegemonic ideals. Now, months later, having jumped back into research with fresh eyes, I see my error, whilst I may have successfully interwoven a divine-in-body female protagonist, who is able to influence the fluidity of time, and ultimately subvert the themes of Absurdism (man's contemplation of existence), I was unable to disassemble the convention and instead, I simply replicated the form and altered the content! I've just realised this, triggered by my research into the philosophy of multiplicity and fluid mechanics and is best summed up in the following passage by Bardsley, "The fluid (Poseidon) threatens to distort the defined, solid shape, the "material consistency" of the subject (Absurdism).*

*But the containment of fluid complexity through the rigidity of the solid does its own violence by obliterating difference. Woman, as fluid becoming, as unfinished process, is constituted within a system that has neither accounted for her difference nor recognizes the turbulence she poses to that very philosophical-symbolic system” (19). Although I scratched my head at this for quite some time, I can now interpret this in the simplest of terms: water takes on the form of its container once confined within a space, meaning that Poseidon morphed to the shape of the convention she was attempting to subvert. In the end, although my hypothesis succeeded to an extent, Poseidon was left, like all central male characters in Absurdism are, to question what exactly the nature of her existence is, yet without ever coming to a conclusion, which is what I should have been focusing my efforts as a woman playwright on!*

To summarise this first key finding, it became apparent through reflection and deeper research into the theories of multiplicity and fluid mechanics that whilst I was able to write a female heroine who could contemplate her own absurd existence, she was still trapped within the oppressive form. The solution was to put aside my personal agenda to dismantle a convention and instead re-write uninhibitedly a new form, or attempt to, whilst incorporating my own ontological autoethnography.

## **2. Reframed approach and *Silly to Think* re-write.**

In February of 2021 I began a new draft with the intention of exploring my own ontological ideas and epistemology as a woman playwright. I fashioned a new framework and a series of perimeters which included the following: my text was to be limited to sixty minutes; thematically it had to

centre on my female authorial musings; I had to write without agenda or intention to subvert convention or philosophy. Again, I needed to turn inwards as a researcher and interrogate myself as subject matter through an epistemological lens. Rather quickly I arrived at a musing thought which I'd been contemplating for many years, best summarised through the phrase *I know what I am, because I know what I am not*, embodying the idea that we as individuals exist in relation to our surroundings, thus our identity is determined through the definition of that relation. For example, *I know I am kind, because I can define unkindness and recognise it in relation to my existence, or, I know I am not selfish, because I have seen true selfishness and I do not see myself reflected back in that example*. To extend this idea further, if we are able to recognise ourselves by comparing ourselves to our surroundings, then my ontology begs the following question, *who and what are we when we exist in relation to nothing?* To narrow this question further through a feminist and contemporary lens, *who or what is a woman when she exists in relation to nothing?* This question became the central idea to interrogate within my re-write of *Silly to Think*.

Interestingly, in a meta sense, I was fast becoming the female heroine which I wanted to write, questioning her own absurd existence, searching for an answer within a world I had constructed rather than falling victim to. With further research to support my autoethnographic reflection, I continued my investigation into fluid feminist ontology with Bardsley's "Fluid Histories," only to discover that her interpretation of Irigaray's metaphysics echoed and supported that of my own ontology, *I know what I am, because I know what I'm not*. Bardsley states that "the fluid metaphysics of Irigaray is a specifically feminist metaphysics in that it foregrounds our relationality to other humans and our embeddedness in

material environments” (20). Even more excitingly, Bardsley proceeds to summarise Irigaray’s intention: “Irigaray’s metaphysics uses fluidity to theorize who and what have been forgotten within Western philosophy, demonstrating the value of the fluid for a material feminism” (20). This statement, re-contextualised to suit my praxis as a contemporary feminist thinker and playwright, acted as a strong grounding point for the purpose of my re-write: to expose what has been forgotten within Western philosophy—now, Absurdist playwriting.

In a similar vein to the efforts of my previous hypothesis, the issue of theoretical and conceptual translation to playwriting practice presented new challenges. To remedy this, I harnessed Flower and Hayes’ 1981 Cognitive Process Model of Composition, using the techniques of ‘serendipity’ and ‘sense making’ to recontextualise my findings, drawing connections to key concepts including Irigaray’s relationality in material environments and linking her ideas to my practice through dramatic techniques. Imagery, metaphor, allegory and symbolism were used as representations of this research and epistemology. Eventually, through the drafting process, I was able to communicate dramatically my core idea, *I know what I am because I know what I’m not*, which dramaturgically manifests itself in my play as the following motif:

APHY. Who is a woman when she is alone in her car? When she sits stagnant, pelting one hundred and forty kilometres an hour down a shitty highway bleached in shitty light? Who is she exactly? Too late to call it evening, and too early to call it morning. Almost as if the two moments of day were the exact same.  
(Davis 1.1.1- 4).

Furthermore, I constructed my female heroine within my rewrite not only to contemplate her existence, but to actually discover an answer and resolution to her questioning:

APHY. Whatever the fuck you've *made* "woman" mean.  
(Pause). I'm only a woman if woman is a word. Because without the word I exist beyond it, beyond all of it actually. (Pause). And I know what I am because I know what I'm not. I am not Aphrodite, and I am not a woman, I am perpetually in motion.  
(Davis 4.1.20-24)

This approach contrasts traditional male-dominated Absurdist theatre in which male characters and male playwrights are left to contemplate their meaningless existence and forever dwell in the nonsensicality of it all, famously for instance, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953):

ESTRAGON. Ah! (Pause. Despairing) What'll we do, what'll we do!

VLADIMIR. There's nothing we can do.  
(Beckett 2.1. 6-8).

However, *Silly to Think* does not adhere to this convention and therefore it may be considered that the text itself pushes beyond the category of Absurdist playwriting.

Undoubtedly, my praxis has been heavily influenced by Irigaray's work on deconstructing the use and misuse of language in relation to women. I attempted to resonate with many of her core philosophies

relative to existence as fluid within the dramaturgy of *Silly to Think*, again, this sentiment encapsulated by Bardsley, “Irigaray argues against the validity of the concept of woman as having any essential or ‘generic’ meaning. We might instead read the category ‘woman’ as an effect of a philosophical-linguistic system that cannot accommodate difference and must resort to definitions that simplify the multiple to the one” (19). Having to the best of my ability as a writer embodied this school of thought, I paused to reflect on the progression of my re-write, recording insights in a journal dated from the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 2021:

*Holy hell, perhaps I haven't failed in my attempts to write a neo-Absurdist piece and integrate a female protagonist who contemplates her own absurd existence. Perhaps, after all, I've been framing the idea in the wrong way – why am I obsessed with the idea of referring to it as “neo-Absurd”?? I think this is because I am in a state of reaction, defence and defiance – a state that seeks to destabilise a historically patriarchal convention which I have felt oppressed by, one which is blinded by my own feminist/personal agenda, when my attempts all along should have been to write something uninfluenced, something unspecified in form, harnessing feminist theory and philosophy which emphasises the fluidity and multiplicity of history, time and a new concept I've just stumbled across today, 'mosaic'. Indeed, now that I have re-written *Silly to Think*, cut it down to sixty minutes and re-imagined my woman protagonist with the influence of Greek Mythology and my own personal and contemporary ontology – my work aligns strongly, and I must emphasise, unintentionally, with the theorization of Serres, Irigaray and Barkley Brown. *Silly to Think* now uses a*

*fluid conceptualisation of time, history and fragmentation in dialogue, structure and characterisation – something which is reminiscent (in hindsight, rather than development) of Elsa Barkley Brown’s quilt metaphor which emphasises a layered and stitched together approach to navigating history and all the way this lens allows us to experience history and time as layered, chaotic and fragmented into pieces which can then be stitched together like a quilt.*

As evident above, the use of reflective practice and journaling helped me to identify greater discoveries in my field of research. This prompted me to make sense of a potential new written form to categorise *Silly to Think* within now that it didn’t quite fit in the Absurdist genre.

### **3. New written form.**

After my interrogation into Bardsley’s “Fluid Histories,” I began to recognise that I had unconsciously woven unique dramatic techniques and quite dense theoretical concepts into *Silly to Think*. Three key examples of these techniques and concepts include:

- Multiplicity and fragmented structure, which incorporates the layering of multiple concepts and ideas playing out at once as made popular by French philosopher Michael Serres. Translated into practice, the layering of multiple themes and ideas occur within the four acts of *Silly to Think* which are sporadically spaced, and rather than repeating themselves in typical, cyclical Absurdist fashion, layer themselves on top of each other and extend the driving question of the text ‘who is a woman when she is alone in her car?’

- Liquid time. Similarly, I constructed time within the text to be post-cyclical and post-linear, framed similarly to the structure, reflecting the work of Serres who uses fluid mechanics like Irigaray does to critique Western philosophy, developing a 'liquid' conception of time. "Everything flows, turbulence appears, temporarily retains a form, then comes undone or spreads..." (Serres 82). *Silly to Think* jumps between temporality as linear, reversed, layered and non-existent, with these variables overlapping throughout the text.
- Characterisation. Perhaps the most important change I made within the drafting process was that to my female protagonist. Originally 'Poseidon' who embodied Irigaray's philosophy of the 'sensible transcendental,' she then became 'Aphy', abbreviated from Aphrodite. Aphy, I constructed as woman-becoming, as woman-ever-changing, as woman-fluid; she exists within the text as past, present and future layered – embodying the Grecian construction of the ideal woman 'Aphrodite' goddess of love and beauty, an identity forced upon her which she questions and throughout the text sheds as she grapples with her own ontological examination of what 'woman' is. Alongside this strain of thought, she exists as a contemporary woman in the twenty-first century, reflecting of our current zeitgeist, contemplating the absurdity of being 'woman' in a pandemic world. These layered frames of thought which transcend conventional time and history allow for Aphy to interrogate and reach conclusions about her identity.

## DISCUSSION



I believe that any attempt to categorise *Silly to Think* into form or genre would be counter-intuitive to the entire purpose of this research. However, I do posit parallels between the theories of scholar Elsa Barkley Brown and her quilt metaphor from her 1992 essay “What Has Happened Here: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics” which emphasises a layered and stitched approach to recalling history and politics. As well as the concept of ‘Quilting,’ the figurative technique described by Maura C. Flannery in relation to feminist scientific discovery who states, aptly, that “to make a quilt is a slow process, involving bringing together many pieces of fabric, aesthetic decisions, types of expertise, and ideas from other quilters. The quilting metaphor stresses that scientific inquiry is a slow, painstaking process, a building process, rather than something that happens in a moment” (639). This sentiment best reflects my process in drafting and constructing *Silly to Think*, a painstaking process that flourished due to the stitching together of ideas, mistakes, reflection, theory, practice, and ontology to create a final piece of work.

A final journal entry taken from March 15<sup>th</sup> best summarises the discoveries and insights I gained throughout my process:

*I thought that women characters and women playwrights in Absurdist theatre deserved to be part of the male conversation. That they didn’t deserve to be confused for male characters in text and onstage, that they deserved more than the immanent plane – I thought if I could blur the distinction between the two binaries of male/solid and women/fluid then we could achieve a unity. I was wrong; women, non-binary and non-gender conforming people deserve to have their absurd existences interrogated, because historically, they have not been in*

*playwriting. So instead of forcing the female heroine into a patriarchal form, I posit a new form, one which emphasises fragmentation, multiplicity, a layering of time and history; one which is rich in image and symbolism – a form that stitches together dramatic elements like a mosaic or quilt, one which doesn't succumb to genre or convention.*

Although the goals and outcomes of this paper morphed and evolved with each new discovery made along the way, I do believe that I achieved my desired aims and outcomes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through the drafting process, autoethnographic reflection, epistemology and research into the intersection of playwriting and feminist philosophy, strongly influenced by the philosophies and ontologies of Luce Irigaray, I was able to successfully characterize and write into existence a protagonist who was able to interrogate her own absurd existence. Valuably, however, through my research I discovered that any attempt to subvert the Absurd convention to be gender inclusive would not succeed as the form inherently was written by men and for male characters. The alternative was and is (for future female identifying, gender queer and non-gender identifying playwrights) to write uninhibited by convention and apply a 'mosaic' approach to playwriting. To conclude, I believe it is crucial to understand why this issue and area of research is important to me: given all that is happening around the treatment of women in Australia under the Morrison government and the growing level of oppression of women worldwide during the pandemic, I believe a deep and important examination is needed into this ever-sustaining oppression

in the Absurdist form. My aim for this article and for my play *Silly to Think*, has been to interrogate the absurdity of the conception of 'woman' as created by men, and ask what happens when one escapes this definition and can we? Since writing this paper I have successfully produced and directed the debut season of *Silly to Think* to sold out audiences in Sydney. However, as is the curse of all artists and their work, I feel there is another development to be done on my text. My philosophical journey with *Silly to Think* is not yet over; to answer my own question, 'what happens when we escape the definition of 'woman' as created by man, and can we?', I believe the answer lies in a realm beyond previous and current schools of thought, in the post-human world. I endeavour to take *Silly to Think* beyond the Absurd, beyond the existential and re-ask this question through a Post-Human lens, for I suspect that, in this space, the concept of 'woman' and the structures that reinforce it, may no longer exist.

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