

# **The Hanged Man**

Reflection Statement

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## Reflection Statement

My Major Work involves an exploration of the human condition as understood through an absurd lens. My central thesis is that subjection to the futility of a world devoid of inherent meaning is a manifestation of internal anxieties, from which the only possible escape is death. My Script, *The Hanged Man*, is a representation of absurdity as a reaction to an existential construct of reality – that is, a belief that human beings, through their consciousness, determine their own meaning in life as it is not an inherent value. Robert C. Solomon, in *Existentialism*, characterises this ‘existential attitude’ as, “a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless and incongruous world”. These existential quandaries and anxieties, engendered by World War Two, are accentuated through the utilisation of a Cold War setting. Total annihilation became a conceivable reality and the human condition became the subject of philosophical debate. Jean-Paul Sartre captures the essence of this debate in his exposition *Existentialism and Humanism*. The purpose of my work is to confront the audience with the challenges of existing within a fatalistic society.

*The Hanged Man* is intended for an intellectual and mature audience, specifically those interested in the philosophical school of the absurd and meta-theatre. It is immediately intended for an audience with an understanding of philosophy, although not exclusively. Rather, the presentation of universal human anxieties, through tragicomedy, requires only the desire to be challenged. Moreover, the propensity to apply preconceived notions of existence to the script personalises its

intention to challenge the individual's perception of reality. Examination of philosophical and humanistic values does not require an in-depth knowledge of the Cold War as these values effectively transcend contextual barriers.

I was initially influenced by the concepts explored in both the Advanced English and Extension English One courses. I was immediately engaged with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* studied in the former, and 'After the Bomb' studied in the latter's *Texts and Ways of Thinking*. I thus endeavoured to synthesise these two strong interests. It was Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which sparked my curiosity into the nihilistic and absurd schools of thought. This led me to the realisation of the contention of modern consciousness – one characterised by the tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any.

The concept behind *The Hanged Man* began to mature after reading Alfred Camus' philosophical essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). Camus dismisses the notion that the world, in itself, is an illogical entity, although he does state that the absurd arises when the, "appetite for the absolute and for unity", meets, "the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle". Camus also comments on the irony of this condition – The paradox that existence is built around the hope of tomorrow, and that it ultimately leads us closer to death, the 'ultimate enemy'. Acknowledgement of such futility demands revolt, as a world stripped of its romanticism is a foreign, strange and alienating place. Author Rex Elliot Hall, for example, indicates that the use of the "nuclear genie"<sup>1</sup> catalysed the regression of Cold War Britain into an 'unfeeling' society. Ethical imperatives are disengaged in such a society as they are based upon higher powers and justification that does not exist. Drawing on this principal is Camus' description of

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<sup>1</sup> The nuclear technology developed by the United States of America during World War Two.

the 'absurd conqueror', who, "chooses action over contemplation", with the realisation that nothing is immortal and no victory is absolute. This type of character acts as a foil to archetypal protagonists of the Kydian revenge tragedy<sup>2</sup>, notably Hamlet. A typical Renaissance character, Hamlet suffers from a fatal indecisiveness which arguably stems from his moral integrity, "Am I a coward?" The humorous subversion of Yorick's skull, "Alas, poor shovel", is an absurd nod to Hamlet's contemplation of the brevity of life. This notion is realised in Cain, the embodiment of political authority in my Script. He is a reflection of this absurd archetype in his expediency and opportunism in attempting to capitalise on the death of Abel to further his own career, "Cabinet spots up for grabs, old chap. It's our way in".

Sisyphus, according to Homer's *Iliad*, was the King of Ephyra<sup>3</sup> punished by the Gods for protracted deceitfulness and damned to roll a boulder up a hill. He sees it roll back down, and then eternally repeats the task. Professor James Knowlson, in his article *The Absurd... and Beckett: A Brief Encounter* concludes that, "the knowledge that all of life's tasks were equally as absurd, because they were all subject to Death, gave Sisyphus victory". This notion is reflected within my Script through Abel, who comes to a realisation of the futility of his position, "No point fight'n it." 'It' becomes the overbearing 'nothingness' that plagues the human condition, the "ult'mate reality". Paradoxically, yet unconsciously, he is freed from his recurrent suffering through death. The title itself, as a Tarot card, reflects on the notion that sacrifice opens one up to liberating experiences, highlighted in Abel's resignation and death- his absurd transcendence from the subjugation of Cain's

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<sup>2</sup> A drama that satisfies the archetypal formula developed by Thomas Kyd to distinguish revenge tragedies from other plays.

<sup>3</sup> Modern day Corinth.

lack of empathy and abuse of political power. My challenge, therefore, was to determine the medium through which such notions could be portrayed, both mechanically and metaphorically, to engage an audience.

Absurd theatre, coined by critic Martin Esslin in his essay *The Theatre of the Absurd* was chosen as the mechanism to expose these metaphysical doubts that torment our existence as it, “self-consciously employed the auditorium as part of the plays' ontology<sup>4</sup>”. Playwright Bertolt Brecht, the ‘founder’ of absurd theatre, sought to break down traditional modernist drama by directly utilising the audience and activating, “their critical, intellectual capacities”. In essence, it challenges the audience to make sense of nonsense and, through tragicomedy, compel a personal assessment of their reactions – the foundational purpose of my script. This is evidenced within my script through Cain’s comedic dismissal of Abel during his lucid moments – “It’s always half past something”.

The live performance of Declan Evan’s script *Eight Gigabytes of Hardcore Pornography*, at Stables Theatre (June 2014), explored two middle-aged characters, in search of a healthy relationship, struggling with crippling addictions and apprehensions. The final scene is built up with the hope of redemption for each character, but this is swept away in what appears to be an orthodox denouement. The revelation of these personal anxieties is targeted at the audience as a sense of voyeurism is evoked through individual monologues which are analogous to interviews. Similarly, I challenge the audience through meta-theatricality, “Is there anyone left with a backbone?” to challenge their role as bystanders and ironically reveal their powerlessness. The perceived humour of this “Chin up” scene is undercut by a damning social commentary in an attempt to stimulate an audience’s

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<sup>4</sup> A branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature and relations of being.

recognition of their indifference. The performance also exposed me to the considerations of drama that must be evident within the written script. Specifically, the utilisation of a minimalist set and dynamic lighting, “A sterile fluorescent light blares from above...”, metaphorically expresses the vulnerability of the characters. My conscious creation of a very ‘sterile’ environment is a reflection on these ideas.

Specific conventions of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ are realised in my script to create an outward expression of the characters’ internal anxieties. Beckett’s tragicomedy Waiting for Godot had a profound impact on shaping both the absurd nature of my script and aiding in the development of my understanding of form. My Script is inspired by this iconic text, although it is reimagined through a political lens during the Cold War to amplify the nihilism and loss of faith in humanity that permeates the world of the play. The elusive ‘Godot’ comes to symbolise an intangible projection of human desires and is a velleity<sup>5</sup>, paradoxically incapable of offering salvation without action. The emergence of a bus at the end of Act One (and beginning of Act Three) is an ironic subversion of the notion of salvation that Godot embodies. Rather, it reveals the futility and cyclicity of existence – a routine of banality reminiscent of the refrain in T.S Eliot’s The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, “In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo”. The vaudevillian dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon is reimagined in dialogue between Cain and Seth, whilst the importance of movement in otherwise static conversation, such as the ‘Chin up’ scene, is drawn from the Sydney Theatre Company’s 2013 production of Waiting for Godot. This production utilised comedic and consciously cyclical character movement to parallel the absurd dialogue.

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<sup>5</sup> A wish or inclination not strong enough to lead to action.

In Genesis 4, Abel is slain by his brother Cain. Research into the Biblical narrative of 'Cain and Abel' resonates throughout the script, in both the names of characters and the role they come to embody. Seth, the brother of Cain and Abel, appears only negligibly in the Bible, an idea which I utilised ironically to convey the diminishment of spirituality, faith and values reflective of the times. In an ambitious manoeuvre, Seth attempts to move his way up the political ranks by becoming an 'accomplice' to the 'murder' of Abel, despite his supposed empathy, "Should we help him?" Investigation into the historical context of the Cold War, notably through the *British National Archives* and the *BBC*, shaped the political and social authenticity of the script. The employment of political and British slang, such as 'Tory', and research into election results, framed the political 'pseudo-plot' as a reflection on Cold War anxieties. The complex social division and uncertainty of the times, manifested in the divisive 'war of ideologies', created a climate of fatalism that acts as an effective mechanism to convey my purpose. Abel's plight, foregrounded against a semi-dystopic Cold War Britain, is a revelation of the limitations of the human condition in consciously facing the predicament of a life stripped of inherent meaning. The audience is challenged to do the same.

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