

Reflection Statement

My Major Work is a theatre script that incorporates elements of Absurdism and comments on the oblivious and hypocritical nature of humans in relation to our own actions and way of life.

My composition is aimed at critically-minded audiences who are receptive to ideas about human nature. It targets individuals who regularly attend cutting-edge theatre, and are willing to evaluate their own lives. However, perhaps even latent social critics would appreciate its content; as Socrates said “an unexamined life is not worth living.”

Plays such as mine are typically presented at venues such as Belvoir Street Theatre and Sydney Theatre Company’s Wharf Theatres, where experimental pieces of theatre are often performed. Alternatively, it could also be presented at a Fringe Festival or as a part of a university theatre group performance.

My concept progressed from an examination of people’s political apathy to a study of the sameness of societal behaviour. While my awareness of society still showed that there seemed to be an actual inability to conceive ideas and thoughts that were in any way different to those that had come before, I did not want to over-politicise my work. As such, I instead focused on social issues, particularly the inability of individuals to break the narrow mould of accepted societal norms.

This notion was further crystallised by a cartoon I found that satirised the actions of sheep and their tendency to group as a herd:



“Sure, I follow the herd—not out of brainless obedience, mind you, but out of a deep and abiding respect for the concept of community.”

This cartoon then inspired the idea of creating a parallel between humans and sheep to highlight the presence of herd mentality in humans. I researched several journals and websites that detailed scientific exploration of this issue, such as “Examining the Mob Mentality”, by South University, Georgia, and identified key examples of herd mentality that were already clearly present in day-to-day human activity: “When people are part of a group, for example a sporting match, they often experience deindividuation, or a loss of self-awareness... and [are] more likely to lose their sense of individual identity.”(Avant)

By exploring the instances of human inability to act autonomously through the medium of absurdist theatre, I aim to communicate to my audience the parallels between the behaviour of sheep (of which we already have set and unflattering conceptions), and that of humans, to draw attention to the issue of society overlooking our lack of individualism.

My research into theatre and the form of scriptwriting focused on theatrical conventions, features and techniques. ‘HSC English Extension 2 Scriptwriting Starter Kit’ by Timothy Dale proved to be an invaluable tool in informing my work and shaping the form it took.

I also researched a number of theoretical sources on Absurdism, its techniques, and its application to ensure a solid foundation and understanding of the style. Whilst any discussion of Absurdism evokes Martin Esslin, it was the work of Antonin Artaud, namely his collection of essays, “The Theatre and its Double” that communicated the idea of using theatre as a way of exploring social issues. With two of Artaud’s key philosophies being the use of art to mirror real life, and the potential theatre has to make individuals aware of issues they previously had not been, I decided to project an abstracted form of the human herd mentality on stage so that a greater understanding and objectivity can be achieved by audience members. The influence of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty can be seen in the final

scene of the play in which Human 1 and Sheep 1 are put in a Perspex box and forced to answer questions.

My own interest in theatre, my studies of Absurdist theatre in Drama, and the English Extension 1 text *Waiting for Godot* further inspired me to incorporate absurdist techniques and elements, such as nonsensical dialogue, pauses, platitudes, and non-sequiturs, throughout my work. I have done this in order to parallel the absurdity of the situations presented on stage, and the corresponding real-life situations, with the theatrical style of Absurdism. My work encourages the audience to examine the extent to which day to day life has become nothing more than a collection of meaningless platitudes, aphorisms, idioms and expected behaviours. On pages 4 – 5, and page 11 of my work, there is the following exchange:

SHEEP 1: True. The grass is always greener on the other side.

SHEEP 2: Still, better the devil you know.

SHEEP 1: Never bite the hand that feeds you, that's what I always say. One bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

SHEEP 2: Oh, come on, don't count your chickens before they hatch.

~ ~ ~

HUMAN 1: No good deed goes unpunished.

HUMAN 2: I feel your pain.

HUMAN 1: Trust me, this hurts me a lot more than it hurts you.

HUMAN 2: It's neither here nor there.

HUMAN 1: What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

I exaggerated the use of these language features to further express the ways in which these commonly spoken statements have ceased to mean anything at all, thus showing the characters' lack of individuality and ability to construct original thoughts and ideas.

This idea of challenging societally accepted norm can also be seen in other absurdist works such as *The Bald Prima Donna*, by Eugene Ionesco, and *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. *The Bald Prima Donna* in particular focuses on the meaninglessness of societal banter, and how language becomes an inadequate form of communication when used with no real intent behind it.

Waiting for Godot, Samuel Beckett's iconic and quintessential absurdist play, contributed to my understanding of characters that may, at first, seem nonsensical and irrelevant, but when looked at from a broader perspective, provided unique insights into particular contexts. This brought about the inclusion of allegorical quality in my work (see below).

I also chose to depersonalise my characters by naming them, simply, by their nature and/or occupation: Sheep 1, Human 1, Compere, and Interviewer. This successfully extends the reach of who and what I wanted these characters to represent; to not limit them by name or status so that they could be more easily transferred to our own society in the minds of the audience members.

The allegorical aspect of my work was inspired by Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. I have utilised characters from both these texts to allude to the allegorical qualities of my script, as well to highlight the ways in which herd mentality can be seen in literature and in life. Elements of allegory can also be seen in the Sheep who are representative of herd-minded people in society; a relationship which is then made explicit through the 'human scene' in which the mirrored situation and dialogue exchanged create clear correlations.

I have used iconic literary figures such as Hamlet and Reverend Hale in my work to show the way in which herd mentality has an enduring relevance to the human condition. I also used these characters to reinforce the universality of the themes explored, and to draw the audience into the

action of the play with well-known characters. The successful subversion of these characters relies on the audience's familiarity with them, and the preconceived expectations they assign to them. The destabilisation of these norms of character acts to spark a re-evaluation of aspects of the audience members' own lives, which in itself is a typical absurdist provocation.

My script also possesses a degree of self-awareness in its approach. Dramatic irony is utilised in the interview section of my script, where I have used well-known literary characters to illustrate the issues I am exploring. By subverting the expectations of the audience, and forcing them to re-evaluate their opinions of characters, I aim to make them extend this level of questioning to general societal opinions of people and their actions. This level of self-awareness is, of course, present in the metafictional nature of transporting these characters from their original settings, as well as the puns and double entendres that are made possible by this transference. This can be seen on pages 23 and 24:

"Well, it's clear to see what's really rotten in the state of Denmark, isn't it folks? Stay tuned, and we'll be right back."

~

"Now, pull out your sickle and hammers and get ready to paint the town Red with... Snowball!"

~

"[Snowball] who was just a hop, skip and a Trotsky away from being the leader of Animal Farm."

Through this use of puns and humour I aim to both entertain and exact a measure of self-questioning from the audience; both of their own context and of their public persona

Further examples of self-awareness include the Interviewer asking Snowball to speak without his accent, and Human 2's antics with his red ball; intended to be reminiscent of the character's clowning with the coin in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, by Tom Stoppard. Finally, excerpts

from other texts such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Animal Farm* were included to communicate the inauthenticity of the characters and their words and actions, such as on page 5:

SHEEP 1: I fear, too early; for my mind misgives

Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars –

Yo diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon!

This dialogue is a representation of the character's inability to control what they are saying and the irrelevance behind what they are saying.

My study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* began in Advanced English, and then continued independently with a particular focus on the Gravedigger/Clown, and Hamlet's mad ramblings, which at first may seem meaningless, but actually contain profound insights. This idea is communicated through Jacques Lacan's essay 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet'¹:

"Note that Shakespeare gives an essential role in his plays to those characters that are called fools, court jesters whose position allows them to uncover the most hidden motives, the character traits that cannot be discussed frankly without violating the norms of proper conduct."

This study then led me to the idea of communicating key pieces of information through borrowed or nonsensical pieces of dialogue in order to show how truth or autonomous thought is now seen as absurd in the face of repetition and meaninglessness. This can be seen in the final line of the play:

COMPERE: "The creatures outside looked from sheep to man, and from man to sheep, and from sheep to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."

Through the use of absurdist elements, intentional stripping of identity, allegorical connotations, and the inclusion of self-aware features, my script challenges people's conceptions of the society in

¹ Lacan, J. (1968) *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

which they live, and the authenticity of their own words and actions. It explores the overridingly powerful and sub-conscious humanist need to be accepted by “the pack”, and the ways in which this creates a cyclical relationship between an artificial society that has been rendered meaningless by its members’ incapacity for autonomous thought, and the subsequent unconscious subjugation of its citizens.

My completed major work reflects my increased understanding of not only the conventions of scriptwriting, but also of the theatre’s ability to communicate important social issues to an audience. My work achieves this by exploring issues and concerns that are integral to society and the human condition.