

THE ROLE OF BLACK HUMOUR IN THE PLAYS OF
GEORGE F. WALKER

by

UNA THERESE WALSH

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Department of THEATRE

The University of British Columbia
1956 Main Mall
Vancouver, Canada
V6T 1Y3

Date SEPTEMBER 26, 1984

ABSTRACT

The world posited by George F. Walker in his plays is unrelentingly chaotic; it houses both good and evil, both justice and injustice. The equivocal and arbitrary nature of this universe, however, grants priority to no value system. Morality and truth are no longer absolutes in Walker's world; like everything else they are relative and fluid.

Walker's plays, like many twentieth century works consider the implications of living in a godless, silent universe. The incomprehensible and irrational world which envelopes his characters bears much resemblance to the absurd world of Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus. Walker's response to this world, however, is different from that of Camus. Whereas Camus sees liberation in the acceptance of man's absurd condition Walker does not. Liberation, for Walker, rather, lies in the ability to transcend this absurdity through laughter. Walker's characters are for the most part defeated, yet his vision is not totally bleak. As a black humourist Walker is able to evoke both "the comic and the terrifying." Man's isolation and alienation within the larger expanse thus is simultaneously experienced as both horrifying and humorous.

Black humour as a term is difficult to define. While many disagree on its nuances, most would agree that it contains within it a juxtaposition of incompatibles. Walker's plays display and exploit a very black humour - though his technique may differ slightly in each. It is the purpose of this study to examine the relationship of these techniques to the mood of black humour and to the larger philosophical vision which it supports.

To be examined here are the traditions of the Theatre of the Absurd, the Grotesque and Parody. Chapter One will deal with two early plays, Ambush at Tether's End and Bagdad Saloon and their position within the canon of "absurdist" plays. Chapter Two will examine Beyond Mozambique as a piece of grotesque literature and Chapter Three will analyze Theatre of the Film Noir as an example of black humour parody. These discussions will consider why black humour is essential to the play's structures and to what extent it shapes their vision.

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INTRODUCTION

The plays of George F. Walker, although varied in form and style, share the same philosophical premise. Each of his plays posits a world that is primarily chaotic and unintelligible. Devoid of absolutes and certainties, this universe defies all structures which man tries to impose on it. The individual in Walker's plays is invariably pitted against the overwhelming power of a capricious cosmos. "I am the absence of God," Rocco of Beyond Mozambique states the God which is lacking in Walker's universe is one of order, predictability and salvation. Silent and cruel before all cries for clarification, the "vast irrational" which surrounds Walker's characters is similar to the one evoked by Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus.

Walker's theatricalization of this Camusian sense of absurdity takes many shapes. Like the playwrights whom Martin Esslin classed as "absurdist," Walker strives to express "the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational:"¹ Philip Thomson in his book The Grotesque observes that "the formal means of presenting it (the absurd) are many and varied:" the Theatre of the Absurd being but one manifestation of the perceived phenomenon.² Thomson further suggests that "consistent perception of the grotesque, or the perception of grotesqueness on a grand scale can lead to the

notion of universal absurdity."³ Walker's play Beyond Mozambique is perhaps the best example of "grotesqueness on a grand scale". Evoking both "the comic and the terrifying" it presents a world completely out of joint.

This "rejection of rational devices" which typifies both the absurd and the grotesque most naturally includes a revision of form. Traditional forms such as the well-made play, tragedy, comedy and melodrama which attempt to organize the chaos, are rejected by practitioners of these styles. In their place is found a structure which attempts instead to mirror and reflect this chaos. Parody is often the construct chosen to effect this. By undermining the value system implicit in the art form which he is imitating the writer will inevitably discredit the form as well. Experimentation with genre is typical of many of Walker's plays. Walker, himself, admits this; "I like writing in genre because it implies a discipline that you either have to break out of or work with or use in some other way:"⁴

Absurd characters, grotesque happenings and parodic style are all hallmarks of Walker's work. Each is used in such a way as to support the overall presentation of an irrational universe which strips man of his autonomy. Though Walker's vision is bleak, his technique is unremittingly comic. This mixture of "the serious and the comic" places Walker firmly in the tradition of black humour. As a black humourist, Walker exploits the literatures of the absurd, the grotesque and parody to theatricalize and energize his particular

perception of the human condition.

During the late sixties and early seventies many critics were attempting to define and specify the boundaries of the latest of literary terms: black humour. Its literary origins, the style of its practitioners, and the philosophical vision at its core were avidly debated. Predictably, with each new interpreter the demarcations expanded or contracted to suit the argument. Some, like Max Schulz felt that the movement was sociological and could consequently be regarded as a "predominantly American phenomenon of the sixties."⁵ Others, like Robert Scholes while acknowledging the movement as modern felt that it was nonetheless "a development in a continuing tradition."⁶ Koji Numasawa classed black humour as a full-fledged "literary genre" while Mathew Winston preferred to define it as merely "a tone."⁷ The sociological implications of black humour were also disputed. Burton Feldman claimed that "it wishes to reform" and felt its enemy to be "American culture in all its permissive restrictions and glossy emptiness."⁸ Hamlin Hill while agreeing that the black humourist wanted to "assault" "shock" and "outrage" his audience maintained nonetheless that the works manifested an "obvious indifference to reform."⁹ Bruce Janoff extended the criticism of black humour "beyond social satire" to include the chaos of a "vast, indifferent universe."¹⁰ The most candid and amusing assessment of black humour, however,

rests with Bruce Friedman whose anthology, Black Humor, helped to popularize the term in America: "It is called black humor and I think I would have more luck defining an elbow or corned-beef sandwich."¹¹

Black humour resists rigid definitions and classification partly because of the diversity amongst the artists who are proclaimed as its champions. Stand-up comics, cartoonists, playwrights and novelists often use the techniques and trademarks of black humour. Lenny Bruce, Howard Shoemaker, Edward Albee, and Joseph Heller have all been heralded as practitioners of the art. Although employing different media, they share a similar vision and style. Each sees the world and man's place within it as unrelentingly hostile and unpredictable. Man is perceived as an "insensible object of manipulation" who is forever "rooted in a rootless world."¹² Yet the presentation of this grim predicament is always comic; the mood thus "combines horror and fun, the unsettling and the amusing."¹³ The uniqueness and elusiveness of black humour perhaps lies in this simultaneous manipulation of disparate and opposing moods. As the thrust of black humour is inherently contradictory, it is therefore not surprising that contradictions arise also in its definition.

Black humour as a term was first introduced in 1939 by the French surrealist André Breton in his Anthologie de l'humour noir.¹⁴ The works chosen by Breton as representative

examples of "humour noir" are varied in form and genre. Included in the anthology are letters of Jacques Vaché, poems of Arthur Rimbaud, excerpts from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and a passage from Poe's "The Angel of the Odd." Translations of Swift, Kafka, Nietzsche and Synge appear alongside the works of de Sade, Jarry, Apollinaire and Picasso. This small sampling of the forty-five authors represented in Breton's anthology make it quite clear that "humour noir" was not intended "to designate a genre."¹⁵

J.H. Matthews in his article "Intelligence at the Service of Surrealism" elucidates Breton's notion of "une intelligence supérieure" and its relation to "humour noir."¹⁶ Breton's higher intelligence is one which abandons the world of rational thought and the limits of reason in favour of the unexplored potentiality of the subconscious. This intelligence then functions in black humour as a guide "through two stages of experience, first by casting doubt upon the immutability of the real, then by affirming, or at least testifying to, the existence of something beyond the control of contingent reality."¹⁷ Winston describes this use of intelligence as an attack on "sentimentality, social convention (including literary convention), and an apparently absurd universe."¹⁸

It was not until twenty-five years after Breton's coinage that an American critic first used the term to classify the new breed of post-war American novel that was emerging:

Joseph Heller, Terry Southern, J.P. Donleavy and Thomas Pynchon being the best examples. Conrad Knickerbocker writing for the New York Times Book Review, described the movement in the following terms:

Bitter, perverse and sick - as the righteous defenders of a sick society aver - the new humor is black in its pessimism, its refusal of compromise and its mortal sting. Its adherents are few as yet but increasing. Bored beyond tears by solemnity and pap, an increasing audience finds in black humor no tonic, but the gall of truth. There are no more happy endings. A cheery wave and a fast shuffle no longer leave them laughing. New for us, black humor has been a part of the response of wiser peoples in other times. Its appearance in American fiction may signal the end of certain innocences. 19

One year later in 1965, Friedman's Black Humor appeared. With the exception of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, all the authors represented were post-war American novelists or as in the case of Edward Albee, dramatists. Although, Friedman readily admits that the writers chosen possess "completely private and unique visions," he still finds a recurrent theme in each of their works:

There is a fading line between fantasy and reality, a very fading line, a God-damned almost invincible line and you will find that notion riding through much of the work under discussion.²⁰

This loss of "certain innocences" typified by the upsurge of American black humour has been attributed to the many forces which have contributed to the decay of the American dream. Post-war America with its increasing commercialization and decreasing spirituality, its military

and political failures, its urbanization and its alienating mechanization could no longer house the happy optimism of "a cheery wave and a fast shuffle." Alarmed by the rapidity with which their society was disintegrating, the American black humour novelists searched for a new form to mirror this disintegration. A blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and reality and the comic and the terrifying became, thus, the stamp of their work.

Mathew Winston, however, argues - and rightly so, I believe - that "it seems unnecessarily provincial to apply the concept of black humor only to American fiction."²¹ Robert Scholes traces black humour's lineage to "the intellectual comedy of Aristophanes, the flourishing satire of Imperial Rome, the humanistic allegories and anatomies of the later Middle Ages, the picaresque narratives of the Renaissance, the metaphysical poems and satires of the seventeenth century and the great satiric fictions of the Age of Reason."²² More recent, however, and perhaps more pertinent is the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin cites the absurdist school of drama as "the latest example" of the "humour noir" of world literature."²³

The philosophical premise of Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd and black humour as described by Winston, and to a lesser degree Schulz and Janoff, is a shared one. Both perceive the universe as being random and arbitrary, totally without plan or signifi-

cance; it is an unrelentingly equivocal cosmos which allows for no absolutes and no truths. The resultant chaos is the force which makes man's situation so unpredictable and so futile. All belief systems, all moral postures and all hierarchal structures - be they societal, political or familial - are merely reflections of man's need to impose orders; they find no reverberations in the larger cosmos.

Recognizing the artificiality of all structures, the absurdist playwright and the black humourist finds himself in the paradoxical position of having to create a form capable of evoking a formless world. This dilemma is further complicated by their awareness of the irrationality which is representative of the human condition. Esslin claims that the theatre of Sartre and Camus - although it posits a similar universe as absurdist dramatists such as Beckett and Ionesco - does not fit under the rubric of Theatre of the Absurd because it still clings to the conventions of discussion drama. Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin suggests "has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being - that is, in terms of stage images."²⁴ Mathew Winston agrees, "black humor does not try to rationally explain to us that the world is chaotic and unknowable... rather it enables us to experience something vicariously."²⁵

With regards to the form of absurdist drama, Esslin describes the momentum of the play as deriving from the gradual accumulation of the "complex patterns of the poetic image

that the play expresses."²⁶ The dramatic structure of the absurdist plays often exists independently of plot; it functions as reflections of the larger amorphous universe and not as props for character development or revelation. Because of this "many of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd have a circular structure, ending exactly as they began; others progress merely by a growing intensification of the initial situation."²⁷

Winston describes a similar structuring in black humour; "the work does end, but it is unlikely to have a conclusion."²⁸ Akin to the "poetic image" of which Esslin speaks, are the patterns and motifs noted by Winston which prevents these plots from retreating into total chaos. The structural rejection in black humour of clear causal relationships is predicated by the philosophical vision of the mode:

But black humor claims that living does not divide into neat, separable segments, that the patterns one may perceive are arbitrary, that our selection of what is important and what is not has no inherent validity, that the following of clues and gathering of evidence of any kind is no more than playing a meaningless game, that the crucial questions have no answers, and that mystery is not a particular obscurity in an otherwise known and ordered world but is the very nature of existence.²⁹

Winston also cites language as a tool which the black humourists use for reflecting the chaos. If the world posited in black humour is one of anarchy and disorder, then language can be manipulated and distorted to reflect this. Winston

claims that verbal play "is one of the elements that shows black humor's affinity with comedy."³⁰ But it is also yet another link with the Theatre of the Absurd.

Ionesco and Pinter are examples of playwrights who manipulate language to reflect their version of man's dilemma. The drama of Ionesco, at its most potent, is a theatrically eloquent statement of man's isolation within the void of his existence, The Chairs being perhaps the most poignant representation of this. Language in Ionesco's hands becomes both the symbol and the cause of man's inability to communicate. Words become clichés - empty constructs, hopelessly inadequate in their attempt to render meaning. Pinter uses language similarly. Esslin links Pinter's use of language with the "desire for verification."³¹ Communication in Pinter's plays is constantly foiled; verification is ultimately denied. "Misunderstandings", "mishearings" and "false anticipations" are according to Esslin, characteristic of Pinter's dialogue: "Instead of proceeding logically, Pinter's dialogue follows a line of associative thinking in which sound regularly prevails over sense."³²

The motiveless characters, the inconclusive plots, and the ineffectiveness of language are trademarks of both absurd drama and black humour. Linking the two further is their use of humour. Both forms rely on farce and slapstick to create and maintain the comedy; nonsensical language and flat characters

contribute to this farcial mood. Winston, recognizing the close links between absurd drama and much of black humour, classes as "absurd black humor" those forms of black humour which placed the "emphasis on the humor." For the modes which stressed the blackness he attached the tag "grotesque."³³

Winston describes black humour as "a tone in drama and fiction which is simultaneously frightening or threatening and farcical or amusing."³⁴ Philip Thompson, describing black humour as "a tradition which continues to produce some of the best examples of the grotesque," uses the same dichotomous terms to define the grotesque: the grotesque is "essentially a mixture in some way or other of both the comic and the terrifying (or the disgusting, repulsive, etc.) in a problematic (i.e. not readily resolvable) way."³⁵ The "unresolved nature of the grotesque conflict" is of paramount importance to Thompson's definitions, for it "helps to mark off the grotesque from other modes or categories of literary discourse."³⁶ Lee Byron Jennings, quoted by Winston, cites the function of this conflict as the simultaneous arousal of "fear and amusements in the observer."³⁷

Winston places grotesque and absurd black humour on a continuum and acknowledges that rigid lines of demarcation between the two are impossible to graph. Grotesque black humour, according to Winston, maintains the "same basic treatment of character motivation and plot as the absurd,

is similarly concerned with the breakdown of normal communication and plays with its own form, and implicates the reader in a similar fashion."³⁸ It is a macabre obsession with the body, however, which distinguishes grotesque black humour from absurd black humour. The human body is exaggerated, deformed and mutilated throughout much of grotesque black humour. Of this obsession with the body, Winston states, "The threat to the body is part of the omnipresent threat of death in grotesque black humor. Death dominates, but it occurs in a ridiculous manner and is never dignified."³⁹

In order to maintain the tension between the "comic and the terrifying" so essential to both grotesque and absurd black humour the author must continually shift the perspective of the reader. The spectator must never be allowed to empathize too strongly or for too long with any of the characters. One way which the black humourist accomplishes this is to remind the viewer of the artifice of the work. This is done through verbal play, through stylization and in the case of drama through direct reference to the audience. Another technique for this is the use of parody. A highly self-conscious form, parody never permits the reader to step completely into the work. Maintaining a frame of reference that is extra-textual, parody "makes us into active participants in the work instead of passive spectators of it."⁴⁰

Parody, like the techniques of the absurd and the grotesque, may be used to support the philosophical premise of black humour. The form parodied, and the vision inherent in that form, become now "the target of the author's sallies of wit."⁴¹ This technique is the black humourists answer to Beckett's cry for a "new form ...of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else."⁴² By superimposing a form which presupposes a set of values against a thematic vision which negates those same values, the black humourist succeeds in undermining the credibility of the form itself. As Max Schulz so rightly points out, for "the black humorist even this limited assent to the traditional arrangement of human experience has become impossible."⁴³ Literary constructs now are as laughable and as futile as any of man's other attempts at ordering.

Black humour then appears to be as much a vision as a form, as much a theme as a style. It creates this duality of "blackness" and "humour" by continually shifting the perspective and the distance from which the viewer regards the characters. It shares with the Theatre of the Absurd a desire for a form which reflects and merges with the chaos it presents. It manipulates plots, characters and language in an effort to create this form. Like the world of the grotesque it presents theatrical and visual images of the horrific; it concerns itself with our mutability and vulnerability and attempts to

minimize death's dominion through ridicule. Its manipulation of parody allows it to mimic dramatic and literary structures, while at the same time undermining them by undercutting the moral ordering which allows them validity.

Walker, himself, is aware of the juxtaposition of the ludicrous and the horrifying in his plays:

I'm trying in all my work to walk that fine line between the serious and the comic. That's when I feel that I'm trying to do something. When I put the work out there on that edge.⁴⁴

Walker's plays are indeed "out there on that edge." Murder, mutilation, rape and incest figure frequently in his works, yet they are perpetually minimized and mitigated through a style which prevents empathetic identification. The grim reality behind these gruesome acts is only felt when the distance between the viewer and the character is reduced. It is Walker's adroit manipulation of that distance which allows him "to walk that fine line" and allows the spectator to feel either simultaneously or alternately the combined horror and humour of his absurd predicament.

NOTES

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37. Quoted in Winston, "Humour noir," p. 282.
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39. Winston, "Humour noir," p. 283.
40. Winston, "Black Humor," p. 42.
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CHAPTER ONE

AMBUSH AT TETHER'S END
AND BAGDAD SALOON

Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus describes the feeling of absurdity in the following way:

I said that the world was absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world.¹

The collision between man's unquenchable need to understand and the unintelligible, indecipherable world in which he finds himself constitutes absurdity for Camus. The "vast irrational" which envelopes man is fundamentally amorphous and fluid; it contains no cosmic key to happiness or knowledge. Unpredictable and arbitrary in design it can offer to man no pattern with which to structure his life. Thought is necessarily limited in such a world, and reason is ineffective when faced with an unintelligible universe. Camus describes the absurd as "lucid reason noting its limits," and further delineates these limits as "those waterless deserts where thought reaches its confines."² The absurd mind - lucid, aware and conscious - finds its metaphorical home in a "desert where all certainties have become stones."³ The image of the desert becomes then in

Camus' hands the symbolic battlefield on which man's "wild longing for clarity" and the "unreasonable silence" of his meaningless universe confront each other.

Both plays under discussion here - Ambush at Tether's End and Bagdad Saloon - explore life in this desert.⁴ The plot of Ambush at Tether's End, however, is of a much simpler structure than that of Bagdad Saloon. A two-act play, it has only five characters. Sharing the stage with them is the corpse of their friend or son, Max. Max, a philosophical recluse during his lifetime, has hanged himself in a final attempt to perform the "definitive act." Frustrated by the complacency of his friends Bush and Galt he has planned his suicide as an exercise in philosophical enlightenment. Aided by Jobeo, a fellow philosopher, he plotted the strategies which would eventually expose the falsity and vacuity of their of their lifestyles. Letters declaring Bush and Galt as financial and sexual frauds have been mailed to their families, friends and business associates prior to Max's suicide. Max's interference in their lives, however, does not stop with his death; having stuffed his clothes with notes and diagrams he continues to send posthumous messages and thereby influence events. Bush, Galt and Jobeo are also joined on stage - albeit briefly - by Max's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Crane. Like Jobeo, they enter and exit through a mysterious closet which appears to lead nowhere. It is only Bush and Galt who remain

trapped within the warehouse. No longer able to rely on the fictions of their former lives they must now confront the reality of their naked selves.

Much about the play is redolent of Beckett's Waiting for Godot and consequently prompted the following criticism from Edward Mullaly:

Rather the question unanswered is why Walker has spent his time on a script that Beckett had already written with much greater discipline, intelligence and skill.⁵

As Chris Johnson points out, however, Walker does avoid "slavish imitation."⁶ Godot remains throughout Beckett's play a mystery. Max, however, in exposing Bush and Galt, also exposes himself. His "petty rivalry" with Jobeo, his scheming revenge against Bush and Galt and his pretentious posturing trivialize his stance.

Although the staccato language, the vaudevillian antics, the hanging motif, and Bush and Galt's status as "little men", link the play with Waiting for Godot, another of Beckett's plays, Endgame, offers perhaps more parallels. The vacated warehouse of Ambush at Tether's End and the inhospitable world outside it are strongly evocative of Endgame's desolate wasteland. Like Hamm and Clov, Bush and Galt live in complementary interdependence. Bush has poor ears; Galt has poor eyes. Bush's prowess and passion are spent on making money; Galt's are spent on making women.

The world outside the warehouse is as hostile to Bush and Galt as is the lifeless terrain of Endgame to Hamm and Clov. Unable to exist beyond the confines of their suffocating rooms they are forced into an inescapable co-existence. Bush and Galt, like their Beckettian counterparts find such a situation intolerable. Having failed at a simultaneous suicide attempt, all that is left them is mutual contempt. The play's final tableaux - Bush and Galt in separate corners each warning the other to "keep away" - is an effective theatricalization of their predicament.

This intolerable nexus of mutual need and loathing suggests also the Sartrean hell of Huis Clos. The three characters in Sartre's play - Garcin, Inez and Estelle - are mere shades living out eternity in insufferable co-habitation. Rendered static by their deaths they no longer contain the potential for change. "I've left my fate in their hands;" Garcin says of his co-workers on earth.⁷ Forever a coward in the eyes of the living he must now turn to the dead for exoneration and redefinition. Yet it is ultimately their gaze which proves unbearable to him:

GARCIN: ...I won't let myself get bogged in
your eyes. You're soft and slimy.
Ugh! (bangs on the door again)
Like an octopus. Like a quagmire.

(p. 160)

Inez, aware of Garcin's vulnerability, taunts him with her presence:

INEZ: ...I'm watching you, everybody's watching, I'm a crowd all by myself. Do you hear the crowd? Do you hear them muttering, Garcin? Mumbling and muttering: 'Coward! Coward! Coward! Coward!'

(p. 165)

Despite the horror of his predicament, however, Garcin chooses to remain in his hell, for without the critical gaze of the others he ceases to exist. Recognizing the dichotomy inherent in their relationship he tells Inez, "If you'll have faith in me I'm saved." (p. 162)

These same motifs also appear in Walker's play. Bush and Galt, alone in the warehouse with Max's corpse are unable to escape. Like Garcin who refuses to enter the passage and allows Inez the satisfaction of a defeat, Bush and Galt choose to remain and avoid the censure of their peers. "There's no way out," (p. 157) Galt cries to Bush when he becomes aware of the eyes staring in at them. For Bush and Galt, these gazes, too, prove unbearable.

GALT: Yeah. I don't like to be stared at either. And I hate being watched up close. Especially by people who know me.

BUSH: You don't get a chance to fight back or get out of the way. It's like being attacked in a small room.

(p. 174)

The accusations and jibes of Huis Clos appear also in Ambush at Tether's End:

GALT: They'd call us cowards.

BUSH: They're calling us cowards now.

GALT: But it'd go on and on. They'd get together just to talk about us. And I don't like the thought of that very much. Do you?

(p. 174)

As in Huis Clos the insults from the outside eventually become absorbed by the entrapped characters. "If you weren't such a bloody coward," (p. 182) Galt screams at Bush. Likewise, Max's earlier condemnation of Bush and Galt as a "couple of stagnant ponds" is echoed by the two men:

GALT: But nobody believes what you say!
You stagnant pond!

BUSH: Swamp!

GALT: Quagmire!

(p. 182)

The no-exit world of Sartre's play is thus recreated here by Walker. The irrationality of a universe which offers death as its only certainty is theatricalized in Ambush at Tether's End by the inescapable warehouse and the putrifying corpse which it houses. Bush and Galt, however, are as much trapped by their own petty failings as they are by the absurdity of their unavoidable fate. Like Garcin, Inez and Estelle, they will remain forever stamped by their actions, forever immured in unbearable stasis. "Knives, poisons, ropes - all useless," (p. 166) Inez states in Huis Clos. The same ineffectuality is presented in Ambush

at Tether's End. The attempted murder of Jobeo with a machete, Bush's constant pill-popping and the final abortive attempt at a simultaneous strangling all prove futile. Their predicament is inescapable; "There's no way out."

Awareness of the absurd, argues Camus can be sudden and unexpected; "at any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face."⁸ For Bush and Galt this is certainly true. Using the parable of a tethered cow Jobeo discusses Bush and Galt's reluctance for intellectual adventures.

JOBEO: ...The human mind is like a well-fed cow. A cow with a tether tied around its neck which is attached to a fence. If it strays from the fence the rope becomes taut. If it grazes near the fence it stays loose and comfortable. Now when the grass near the fence becomes sparse, the temptation to stray out becomes irresistible. But when the noose tightens out at the perimeter the cow, or the mind, loses its appetite and retreats to the fence and spends the rest of its life eating dust.

(p. 134)

Like the cows who remain close to the fence, "loose and comfortable" each has spent his thinking life "eating dust". Trapped, however, in the warehouse, at the "tether's end" where "thought reaches its confines," retreat is no longer possible. Ambushed and imprisoned, the feeling of absurdity is now inescapable.

Walker reinforces the incomprehensibility of the situa-

tion by having the confused Bush and Galt continually moan, "I'd like to think there's a point to all this." (p. 171) This refrain echoes Camus' "wild longing for clarity" and signifies Bush and Galt's entry into the "waterless desert." Camus states in The Myth of Sisyphus that both physical suicide and the philosophical "leap of faith" are inadequate responses to the absurd. He argues instead that "the real effort is to stay there" in the desert that "we must not leave behind."⁹

In Camusian terms then both Max and Jobeo are false philosophers for each advocates a rejection of the desert. Their motives are presented as petty and trivial and their philosophies are subsumed by professional rivalry. Jobeo, angry at Max's posthumous slurs on his integrity, plots his revenge by attempting to incite his own murder. Through specious argument he tries to convince the witless Bush and Galt to do the deed:

JOBEO: Now in biblical times, a step beyond the limit involved withdrawal into the nearest desert. A man lived on his juices while he dried up under the sun like a fig. Some waited for revelation but most just dried up. Anyway, the desert's the thing.

BUSH: Times have changed.

JOBEO: It's good that you've noticed.

GALT: Besides, there aren't any deserts around here.

JOBEO: Oh, you're just as sharp as he is...
 So, as you've already observed - albeit
 somewhat awkwardly - withdrawal is out of
 the question. There's no place to go.

(p. 162)

"There's no place to go" for Bush and Galt because they have already taken "a step beyond the limit." The desert which they inhabit is a combination of Camusian metaphysics and Sartrean entrapment. Jobeo, however, through linguistic manipulation tries to move Bush and Galt toward "rational homicide." Death, though, is irrevocably rejected by Bush and Galt. "But I don't want to get used to the smell," Bush says of the decomposing body. (p. 169)

Life in the desert is a state of permanent revolt against the futility of one's predicament; to embrace death or to acclimatize oneself to its stench is to leave the desert behind. Faced with the limits of their rapidly enclosing world, and stripped of all facades which pretend things are otherwise, Bush and Galt must now confront the absurdity of their isolation. Their entrapment in an unintelligible universe void of justifications and pungent with death has effectively robbed them of all evasions. Unlike the Cranes who choose to deny death, Bush and Galt, surrounded by its malodorous presence, live in perpetual recognition of its power.

A similar pre-occupation with death and man's role within

the universe is found in Bagdad Saloon. Here, however, the desert is literal as well as metaphysical. This time Walker has set his play on the sprawling terrain of the Arabian Desert. The image now is no longer the entrapped world of Max's warehouse but, rather, the interminable aridity of the desert wasteland. Corresponding to the sprawling visual image is the loose meandering structure of the play itself. Organized into seventeen scenes of varying lengths it shifts its focus between fourteen characters. And as with Ambush at Tether's End, the impending fate of an inevitable death is theatricalized by the on-stage presence of a corpse.

Allusions to the desert - both eastern and western - are numerous in Bagdad Saloon. The title suggests, of course, the fabled Bagdad of the legendary Arabian Nights. But Persia is not the only desert which boasts a Bagdad. More obscure, perhaps, than its Arabian counterpart, but not completely without significance given the context of the play is the desert hamlet of Bagdad, Arizona. The connection between the two Bagdads is perhaps not as tenuous as it might first appear. The creation of myths and legends - particularly American myths - is a major concern of the play. Arizona as a frontier state is the perfect embodiment of the mythos of the wild west and the men who tamed it. Home to Tombstone, the sight of the now legendary gunfight at the O.K. Corral, it is closely linked with one of Walker's characters, Doc. Modelled after Doc

Holliday, who along with Wyatt Earp, made history at Tombstone, Walker's Doc is the archetypal western hero. Likewise, his one-time paramour, Dolly Stilleto, whose "home is in Arizona" personifies the image of the lusty, loud saloon girl.

Walker's manipulation of the desert connects the play with both American myth and Camusian metaphysics. Yet the living dead who inhabit his desert - Doc, Henry (Miller) and Stein - also link it to the theatre of Eugène Ionesco. In Notes and Counter-Notes, Ionesco makes the following comment:

To explain the end of The Chairs:
 "...the world is a desert. Peopled by
 phantoms with plaintive voices, it whispers
 love songs over the gaping ruins of my
 emptiness! But gentle ghosts, return!"
 (Gérard de Nerval, *Promenades et souvenirs*.)
 It could perhaps be that, without the
 gentleness.¹⁰

These "cultural tidbits" etched into the American psyche and engraved within their legends are indeed the plaintive phantoms of Bagdad Saloon. Like Sartre's trio in Huis Clos their petrification reduces them to an incommunicable statis.

Yet it is precisely their mummification which appeals to Ahrun - the mastermind behind the Bagdad Saloon. Painfully aware of the irrational surrounding him, Ahrun tries to circumvent his mortality and his contingency by searching for fame and glory. To this end he has brought Doc, Henry Miller and Gertrude Stein to his saloon for observation. Aided by his

servant, his daughter, Sara, and his friend Aladdin, he scrutinizes his guests. Other intruders and visitors to this scene include Dolly and her son by Doc, Ivanhoe, Mitch a chameleonic American who wants to restore the "museum pieces" to America, and the Masonettes, three mannequin-like show girls who dance and sing to the accompaniment of the piano.

It is Ahrun's "wild longing for clarity" which places him in the desert and which will not allow him to acquiesce in the unknowable. Faced with an indifferent heaven he invents and imposes his own cosmic interpretation of events:

AHRUN: Profiles of ancestors on the moon.
Directly preceding great achievements.
A family omen.

SARA: What profile? That's a full moon.

AHRUN: You aren't looking closely enough.

. . .

AHRUN: (Notices that she has left.) Sighs
A pathetic fallacy. A conspiracy to
make me seem constantly mediocre.
(looking up) Just the hint of a
profile would have been enough. Why
is it that I cannot be anything more
than mundane.

(p. 22)

Doc and Stein, however, provide an antithetical viewpoint of their universe. The whys and wherefores of their existence provide no interest to them. Dumbfounded, Ahrun protests against such indifference, "But I have theories... And a few beliefs." (p. 55) To this Stein and Doc can only

repeat, "poor old man." (p. 55) Theories, beliefs and interpretations must all prove ineffectual within the confines of the unintelligible.

Ahrun's last refuge against the absurd is a belief in the immortalizing power of fame. "And if its guided in the right direction, it can create things. Purpose. Glamour. Mystique," (p. 55) he tells his apathetic captives. Stein, however, exposes the vanity of such a pursuit with her penetrating question, "What happens then?" (p. 55) Fame is not only "fickle" but also futile, and by the play's close even Ahrun acknowledges this. His final line of the play, "Chaos", testifies to his new awareness. No longer hopeful of finding order in the unorderable Ahrun perceives, with a newly found lucidity, the arbitrariness of his world.

This obsession with fame, however, is not restricted to Ahrun. Mitch, the multi-disguised American is also seeking his "big chance for the limelight." His approach, though, differs from Ahrun's. Not content with studying the personalities of others he actively adopts their characteristics. Throughout the play he appears in numerous guises: an emcee; an undertaker; a diplomatic-courier; an Arab; Lawrence of Arabia; and finally a caddy. Such character transformations are redolent of many of the role-reversals and alterations in the plays of Genet and Ionesco. Martin Esslin, using Sartrean philosophy sums up the many metamorphoses of Choubert,

a central character of Ionesco's Victims of Duty:

Man is nothing because he has the liberty of choice and therefore is always that which he is in the process of choosing himself to be, a permanent potentiality rather than actual being.¹¹

The notion of man as nothing is particularly significant with regards to Mitch. When Henry first asks Mitch, "Who are you," Mitch appropriately replies, "Nobody." (p. 25) And later alone on stage he confides to the audience "I'm all grown up and I still don't know what I want to be." (p. 36)

Living in the desert, craving the limelight and obsessed with role-playing, Mitch also calls to mind (Camus' interpretation of the actor as "l'homme absurde."

He abundantly illustrates every month or every day that so suggestive truth that there is no frontier between what a man wants to be and what he is. Always concerned with better representing he demonstrates to what a degree appearing creates being. For that is his art - to simulate absolutely to project himself as deeply as possible into lives that are not his own. At the end of his effort his vocation becomes clear: to apply himself wholeheartedly to being nothing or to being several.¹²

Though each of his lives may last but a few hours, they are no less significant than his own larger life which envelopes them. Assuming a foreign mask the actor "travels the whole course of the dead end path that the man in the audience takes a lifetime to cover."¹³ Mitch, like Camus'

actor, then, enacts the absurd end to life each time he discards his assumed posture. In such a stance, he is a man fully lucid before his fate, without evasion or denial.

Doc, Henry and Stein, already dead and without potentiality, are not concerned with the revolts of Mitch and Ahrun:

AHRUN: I haven't heard any of you ask why you've been brought here. Or what's going to be done with you. Or how long you're going to stay. Why?

DOC: None of your business.

STEIN: That's right.

AHRUN: But don't any of you feel strange at not being where you should be. Or with who you want to be with.

DOC: Where should we be?

STEIN: Who do we want to be with?

. . .

STEIN: Do you know where we are?

DOC: No.

STEIN: Do you care?

DOC: No. Do you?

STEIN: Not in the least.

(pp. 55-56)

The paradox of their position, however, lies in their legendary mystique. As part of American history - political and literary - their lives are continually re-examined and re-interpreted. "You should never have consented to all those biographies," (p. 49) Henry tells Stein. With each

new biography, a new life is presented, a new potentiality is enacted. Stein is continually being made anew. Her rebirth, however, is not indicative of exercised personal freedom, but rather of the power of others to give definition to the self. Like Sartre's defunct trio, Stein exists only because the others choose to grant her form. Henry's rebirth is also literary. A guru-like figure of the mid-twentieth century, his obsession with mass recognition (typified by the Pulitzer Prize he is chasing) drives him to insanity. Claiming to be a "literary reincarnate" he enacts the lives of Herman Melville and John Donne as well as his own. Melville, the American literary giant who died in obscurity only to be re-discovered thirty years later, is another example of resurrection through fame.

The most interesting instance of this phenomenon, however, is the western hero, Doc Holliday. In his case, legend and myth have totally eclipsed the man who spanned them. "There's a real man behind this legend," (p. 32) Dolly reminds her son. The tragedy, though, is that he is no longer discernible. "How is it that every time you open your mouth you satirize yourself," (p. 54) Stein asks Doc. Lionized in numerous films and books Doc becomes a passive recipient of his life rather than an active creator. "What did it say in the books," (p. 62) Doc asks Sara when questioned about his actions. The "permanent potentiality" that was once Doc Holliday now lies in the hands of film makers and writers. With each new interpretation Doc is resurrected and revived; his story, continually rewritten,

will not die.

Doc, Stein and Henry, however, are finally rejected by Ahrun as false fictions. "They're concerned only with being legendary," (p. 57) the concerns of the desert are not theirs. Communication is denied them because they can relate only in prescribed formulas. Their lives are only the manipulations of others, who like Ahrun, want to find in their fame a theorem which will explain the inescapable.

Camus describes recognition of the absurd as "revolt devoid of future."¹⁴ The posterity offered by fame and legend is a false promise which only obscures the reality of an immutable death. This absence of future and of hope is further theatricalized in the play by its treatment of children. In the final scene Henry rejects Dolly's mothering:

HENRY: Don't give me that. Your kind of silly maternal instincts are never satisfied. You want to expand the family. And I'm not having any part of it. You hear?

(p. 84)

Likewise, Ahrun expresses no joy in his daughter's pregnancy; "take her to the tent. She's going to give birth to a monster." (p. 82) Like the Cranes who denied Max in Ambush at Tether's End, Ahrun considers his potential grandchild to be "embarrassing". Rejection of children is a common motif in many plays which deal with the implications of the human condition - Estelle, in Huis Clos, for example, is an infantcide. The small boy

sighted in Endgame causes only dismay; children signify the perpetuation of an intolerable predicament and as such are viewed with fear.

However unwelcome children may be, though, abortion is considered even more reprehensible. Walker's stage direction indicates this: "Abortion is a bad word in this play for some reason. Everyone groans, mutters or shouts their disapproval." (p. 77) Redolent of Beckett's "birth astride a grave" in Waiting for Godot, abortion represents simultaneously the potential for life and the inescapable death which will snuff that life out.¹⁵

The most perverse representation of childhood in the play, however, is found in the pathetic figure of the deformed Ivanhoe. The offspring of a fraudulent legend he is mutilated, scarred and unintelligible. Like the dismembered infant of Albee's American Dream, Ivanhoe personifies the decay of a founding mythos. "Dust has settled on the American dream," (p. 23) Mitch says at the play's opening. Ahrun's vision, however, is more grotesque and pessimistic:

AHRUN: ...I asked: What river is this?
 I was told that it was the river
 of tears that men shed in lamentation for
 their dead. I found also that everything
 was proportionate and that those who
 stood longer and were more decayed were the
 sons of the more wasted and vile who had
 died. And those who shed but a few tears
 and then passed on were the sons of the
 dead who were closer to goodness or creation.

I sat awhile. Then I noticed a cluster of men in the background who seemed rooted to the earth by dust and who were by far the most hideous of all; and whose skins were full of gaping filthy blotches and whose limbs were bone-thin and crooked. Who are the men in that unfortunate cluster, I asked. And was told - they are the sons of the west.

(p. 21)

Ivanhoe is described as "immediately hideous. A short sprawling man with a deformed face. (A victim of fire) A partial hunchback with an oversized head." (p. 79) For Dolly, though, he is the embodiment of the American spirit. Having changed his name to Jones, Ivanhoe sets out to be the all-American hero; swimming Lake Erie, climbing Mount Fuji, invading Korea, he perpetuates the myth of America as invincible. His heroic actions, and the myth which inspires them, however, are ultimately undermined by the disfigured reality of his physical being.

Unable to bear his purulent presence, the others shoot him; yet each supplies a different motive for his action. Doc, his father, justifies himself by saying, "He looked like me when I'm old, ugly and very short." (p. 22) Dolly, "the mother who wanted a beautiful baby" kills out of disgusted disappointment. (p. 83) Stein, obsessed with style, kills because his "form was not clear" and Henry unloved and "exed right out of existence" claims he would "kill anyone for absolutely no reason at all." (pp. 82-83) Accurately defined

by Mitch as "cultural tidbits" these figures, whose existence is dependent upon the continuation of the same cultural ethos which Ivanhoe represents, must inevitably resist all denigrations of the legend. As the son of a decaying west, Ivanhoe represents the reality of a myth turned sour; festering and rancid, he is, like Max, the smell that no-one wants "to get used to."

Bagdad's desert is multifunctional in Walker's play; it is simultaneously the Camusian desert of lucid awareness, the locale of myth-making events and finally the symbolic representation of the aridity of those myths. "In the desert no-one can afford to be British," (p. 69) Mitch tells Aladdin. The same can be said of America. National myth-making and patriotic fervor pale before the irrational of a silent universe. Self-imposed definitions and classifications only obscure the pain of one's inescapable isolation within the larger unintelligible void.

Religion is also rejected as an answer to man's painful predicament. By making the sun-crazed Stein champion of spiritual doctrine, Walker effectively diminishes any validity it may possess:

STEIN: Silence. I've just come from the desert. No, I wasn't waiting for God or the Son of God, or the nephew or the second cousin of God. I was waiting for the universe to straighten up its act. I was waiting for the irrational to become rational and the contra and pro quid, pro factem of all that to become finally and crystally clear.

HENRY: Did it?

(Dolly goes to Ivanhoe, straightens his clothing. Smoothes his hair.)

STEIN: I was visited by a family of gophers. We conversed. They invited relatives. ...Much dialogue and interaction between me and the gophers. Good news! The world is not arbitrary. Everything is motivated. They have a doctrine. Those gophers are Moslems.

(p. 85)

The final tableau of the play, further counters Stein's assertion that "the world is not arbitrary." Ahrun, Aladdin and their servant all sit "motionless" and "dusty" throughout the final scene while Stein declares that she is "going back into the desert to die and be reborn." (p. 85) The play then reverses itself, to end with Stein repeating, "If I return you'll know I've failed." (p. 86) Caught in a revolving door of entrances and exits re-birth becomes impossible. Stein is now thoroughly immured in her stasis.

Walker has subtitled his play "A Cartoon" and its fast pace and lively action support this classification. M. Thomas Inge in his article "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip" describes the cartoon as the following:

It is a narrative of words and pictures both verbal and visual in which ...neither words nor pictures are quite satisfactory alone without the other. It is the interdependence of word and picture that gives to the comics their most unique and distinguishing characteristic.¹⁶

This interrelationship between word and image finds a home also in Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd where "concrete stage

images" take the place of rational discursive speech. Language, though a vital part of the absurdist theatre, never functions without a corresponding visual image.

The same is true of Bagdad Saloon. The Masonettes, the corpse, the saloon as well as the many costumes and postures of the characters all complement in some fashion or other the play's dialogue. Robert Barshay's article "Black Humour in the Modern Cartoon" observes that "Perhaps one common characteristic of black humour applicable to all the genres in which it is found is the transformation of the invisible to the starkly visible."¹⁷ Walker's stage imagery, like that of the playwrights whom Esslin has classed as "absurdist" is a physicalization of the mood or tone of the play. The Masonettes are representative of man as helpless puppet, a being continually manipulated and manoeuvred. The corpse, like the morbid Max of Ambush at Tether's End, is an ever present reminder of the fate which awaits all. The saloon is redolent of the mythic west. As Virgil's Aeneid did for Imperial Rome western movies and comic books have propagandized and legitimized American prosperity and dominance. And finally, the larger image of the enveloping desert combines all these symbols; the individual, faced with both the aridity of his society and the irrationality of his universe exists in isolation. "In such a large desert a man should be able to die alone," (p. 68) Aladdin states. The ironic tragedy is,

of course, that in such a desert one has no choice but to die alone.

Imagery, however, is not the sole link between Walker's play and the Theatre of the Absurd. Mathew Winston defines the characterization of absurd black humour as the following:

Absurd black humor tends to present characters who seem to belong to the world of comedy. They are ignoble wretches with petty problems, limited responses, and little psychological depth. Such characters do not develop in the course of a work; they are their own dilemma and will forever be so. In most comedy they would be the exceptions to an otherwise healthy and functioning society, but in absurd black humor there is no other kind of character. Without the contrast of 'normal' characters, we cannot be certain that the individuals we see are aberrations, and so we do not know what to expect or how to judge.¹⁷

This definition applies not only to Bagdad Saloon but also to Ambush at Tether's End. Bush and Galt without difficulty, could be described as "ignoble" "petty" and possessing "little psychological depth." The same holds true for Doc, Stein and Henry. "Why are you always arguing about the pettiest of things?" (p. 54) Ahrun asks of them. The accordion-like ending of the play, however, unites all the characters, not just the three legends in a no-exit tunnel. Like Bush and Galt, the patrons of the Bagdad Saloon will be forever locked in their common dilemma.

Communication is also impossible for the characters of absurd black humour. Winston states that "words become cliché,

babel or a refuge from experience."¹⁹ Stein's conversation is, throughout the play, unintelligible. Ahrun continually protests against her evasions: "I don't understand;" "No I don't follow you Stein;" "Don't confuse me Stein," (pp. 70-71) become his continual refrain. Similarly Stein accuses Henry of using "kindergarten rhetoric" while Doc struggles with a primary reader. It is finally, though, the garbled speech of the deformed Ivanhoe which underlines the impossibility of communication. Knowing only six words - and each of these nonsensical - Ivanhoe can only communicate through an interpreter.

Ambush at Tether's End also exposes the equivocal nature of language. Ivanhoe's gibberish in Bagdad Saloon is a graphic representation of the ineffectiveness of language in a desert which houses only the irrational. Walker's technique in Ambush at Tether's End, however, varies from this. Language, here, is presented as equivocal and purposefully ambiguous; in such a stance it mirrors the larger arbitrary and unpredictable world. Galt, after reading Max's note stating, "I telephoned my dear friends Bush and Galt and they both told me to go hang myself" replies in exasperation, "It was only a figure of speech." (p. 99) Galt may have been speaking figuratively to Max but the binary nature of his message allowed it a second interpretation. Later when Bush offers Galt "a synonym for stagnant ponds," Galt can only say "why bother?" (p. 103) Language, like everything else in their

capricious world, is too elusive to be defined.

In another article Winston describes "the disparity between content and form" as the "hallmark of black humor."²⁰ He continues, "The contents provide the blackness and the style mitigates that blackness with humor."²¹ This incongruity which typifies black humour is present in both plays discussed here.

The suicide in Ambush at Tether's End is treated with a nonchalance and indifference that belies the horror of the event. As Max rots and decays, Bush and Galt concern themselves with petty insults and worries. Fearing only the exposure which Max has prepared for them they remain unconcerned about his death. Likewise the notes which continually drop from Max's corpse minimize the significance of the situation. Able to influence events he remains a participant in their lives and as such is treated by Bush and Galt as a third party.

BUSH: You've got the same problem I have.

GALT: What's that?

BUSH: Don't know whether to talk about him in the past or the present tense.

GALT: It's all these memos and instructions.

BUSH: I say it's very unorthodox behaviour for a corpse. He'd never have made a go of it in the business world.

(pp. 125-126)

Highly unorthodox, also, is the behaviour of Max's parents. Analytically and without emotion, they scrutinize the death mask of their son:

MRS. CRANE: There doesn't seem to be one.

MR. CRANE: That's right. Not exactly a sign of sincerity, is it? To die without a twist of emotion.

MRS. CRANE: Not a line out of place.

MR. CRANE: Slack-jawed and indifferent.

(p. 148)

Though we may laugh at the Crane's treatment of their son's corpse we do so in full awareness of the reprehensibility of their actions. Parental indifference to offspring, characteristic of many absurdist plays, is presented here as material for stage comedy. As with the absurdist playwrights this comic indifference masks a blacker truth; trapped in a chaotic and equivocal universe the lucid man rejects all promises of a false future: children, as symbols of rejuvenation and continuance, will then also be rejected.

Incongruity is also present in Bagdad Saloon. Walker's cavalier presentation of Doc, Stein and Henry runs contrary to audience expectation. Like the famous personnages of Tom Stoppard's Travesties, these figures are trivialized and exploited for authorial purposes. Physical violence is also treated with apathy and unconcern in the play; Henry slashes his wrists; Dolly slices Doc's neck; Aladdin runs electrical currents through Stein. None of this violence, however, has any serious consequences and the other characters barely pass comment upon it.

The most obvious mixture of blackness and humour is once again found in the disfigured presence of Ivanhoe. Hideous, deformed and very, very old, the hunchback whom Dolly refers to as "a sight for sore eyes" steps into the limelight to lip-sync "The Good Life." Winston claims that the success of black humour lies in its ability to disorient the audience; the spectator's perspective and distance from the work must constantly be shifted: "Often we are made to laugh at a character then suddenly to recognize that we share his dilemma and therefore have been laughing at ourselves all along."²² This is surely the case with Walker's Ivanhoe. Our laughter arises from the inappropriateness of the responses of the other characters to him. Dolly's terms of endearment, "sugar", "honey", and "darling" only highlight the disparity between the horror of Ivanhoe's physicality and the image which such expressions normally suggest. Equally ludicrous are the reactions of Stein and Henry. Stein screams nonsensically, "Mother! It's my mother" while Henry madly shouts "Get back. It's the demon whale! My lampoon, Mr. Starbuck." (p. 79) Our compassion, however, is evoked when Ahrun enters and accurately declares Ivanhoe, "A poor wretch....A sad story." (p. 81) Ivanhoe's final grasp at "The Good Life" before collapsing from his bullet wound, although somewhat overstated as an image, succeeds nonetheless in reminding us of the reality of our predicament. The metaphorical desert posited by Walker in Bagdad Saloon is

one which must inevitably exclude any possibility of "the good life." Like Ivanhoe, however, our life in the desert is equally futile; aging every day our bodies race towards decay, yet despite the inevitability of such a fate, we continue to try to communicate to make contact, and to believe in the potentiality of a "good life." In this respect, we identify with Ivanhoe; his struggle to assimilate in a world which continually rejects him parallels our persistence in seeking meaning in a universe which possesses none.

Robert Barshay says of the black humourist/cartoonist:

He reveals the precarious situation in which modern man is rooted in a rootless world, exposes the uncontrollable forces against which man is ignorantly pitted, magnifies the impotence of man's will against arbitrary change and concerted hostility, and hopes to exorcise his all too frequent shrinkage from a being with dignity to an insensible object of manipulation.²³

This is clearly the position of Walker in Bagdad Saloon and Ambush at Tether's End where characters are seen as pawns in games they don't understand; where mythological and religious belief systems are exposed as faulty and futile before the "vast irrational" of an amorphous cosmos and where man is stripped of any dignity or grandeur that might ennoble his position.

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

1. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sysyphus trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1969), p. 21.
2. Camus, p. 9.
3. Camus, p. 25..
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George F. Walker, Bagdad Saloon in Three Plays (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1978).
5. Edward Mullaly, "Waiting for Lefty, Godot and Canadian Theatre," The Fiddlehead, No. 104, (1975), p. 53.
6. Chris Johnson, "George F. Walker: B-Movies Beyond the Absurd," Canadian Literature, No. 85 (1980), p. 91.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, In Camera, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946), p. 157. All further references will be to this edition.
8. Camus, p. 11.
9. Camus, p. 27.
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11. Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 153.
12. Camus, pp. 79-80.
13. Camus, p. 80.
14. Camus, p. 66.
15. Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 57.
16. M. Thomas Inge, "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip" Journal of Popular Culture, 12, No. 4 (1979), p. 641.

17. Robert Barshay, "Black Humour in the Modern Cartoon" in It's a Funny Thing, Humour ed. Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977), p. 57.

18. Mathew Winston, "Humour noir and Black Humor," in Veins of Humor ed Harry Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 278.

19. Winston, p. 279.

20. Mathew Winston, "Black Humor: To Weep with Laughing" in Comedy: New Perspectives ed. Maurice Charney (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1978), p. 33.

21. Winston, "Black Humor" p. 33.

22. Winston, "Humour noir," p. 276.

23. Barshay, p. 57.

CHAPTER TWO

BEYOND MOZAMBIQUE

Philip Thomson in his book The Grotesque delineates the relation of the grotesque to the absurd (i.e. the absurd as a thematic rather than theatrical representation) as the following:

We have seen that the grotesque can be reduced to a certain formal pattern. But there is no formal pattern, no structural characteristics peculiar to the absurd: it can only be perceived as content, as a quality, a feeling or atmosphere, an attitude or world-view. The formal means of presenting it are many and varied: the absurd can be expressed through irony, or through philosophic argument, or through the grotesque itself. In connection with the latter possibility, we should note that consistent perception of the grotesque, or the perception of grotesque on a grand scale, can lead to the notion of universal absurdity.¹

Camus describes this concept of absurdity as estrangement:

"in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger."² The alienated and the estranged are precisely the characters who comprise Walker's fifth play Beyond Mozambique.³ Fugitives from an inescapable past, these exiles live isolated and afraid in a hostile jungle. This no-man's-land which they inhabit will allow neither retreat nor advancement for integration into the chaos of the jungle inevitably proves as impossible as does re-entry into their abandoned homelands. Of the alienated

man Camus states, "His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land."⁴ Such is the position of Walker's characters. The "universal absurdity" which defines their condition finds its expression in their combined alienation and isolation within a chaotic and unpredictable world.

The vision of Beyond Mozambique is indeed "grotesqueness on a grand scale." Thomson situates within the grotesque the "co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable."⁵ Mathew Winston notes that it "is obsessed with the human body, with the ways in which it can be distorted, separated into its component parts, mutilated and abused."⁶ Lee Byron Jennings observes the inclusion in the grotesque of a "figure imagined in terms of human form but devoid of real humanity" and adds that this grotesque figure "always displays a combination of fearsome and ludicrous qualities."⁷ For Thomson the "unresolved nature of the grotesque conflict" - i.e., the tension inherent in such a combination - is the "distinguishing feature of the grotesque."⁸ In Winston's words the reader must be kept "uneasily suspended between the two responses."⁹ It is this suspension which creates in the reader the same confusion - and hence the same alienation - which the characters are experiencing. The horrors of Beyond Mozambique, its mutilations, rapes and deaths

inject into the play the necessary mood of fear and terror. Yet this terrifying quality is continually undercut by the characters lack of concern and the play's comic style. It is this comic mitigation of the play's horrific events which situates Walker in the tradition of black humour - "a tradition which combines to produce some of the best examples of the grotesque."¹⁰

The opening tableau of Beyond Mozambique suggests immediately the co-presence of opposites for flanking either side of the steps are a picnic table and an operating table. More strongly felt though is the sense of isolation. The "old poorly maintained colonial house" is completely "surrounded by jungle." Scattered around it are "old tires; machine parts, magazines and newspapers." Most significant perhaps is the "battered telephone pole" which rests against the house, its "wires hanging to the ground." As communication with the world beyond the jungle is impossible, the inhabitants here must survive within the confines of their own environment; yet as the stage suggests it is a world in disarray and decay. Technology has been dismantled and the conquering spirit of imperialism is withering from neglect.

The play is tightly constructed having only six characters and six scenes and throughout it the menace of the enveloping jungle is stressed; incoherent mumblings, piercing screams and rhythmic drums punctuate the conversation on the

porch. Living in the colonial house are Dr. Enrico Rocco and his wife Olga. Rocco is an Italian doctor hiding from justice - his history includes a stint in the Nazi laboratories experimenting on human guinea pigs. His wife Olga likewise is hiding; her flight, however, is from reality and she takes refuge in being "classically deluded." Believing herself to be Olga from Chekhov's Three Sisters, she hums Polovtsian Dances and fantasizes a sister named Masha. Rocco and Olga are aided in their chores by a Greek named Tomas. As Rocco's laboratory assistant he robs the local graves for cadavers with which Rocco can experiment. His duties towards Olga, however, are of a domestic nature and include both the kitchen and the bedroom. The local law officer is an ex-Mountie sent by his superiors to prove himself. Corrupt, delirious with fever and violently psychotic, the Corporal, however, is more representative of chaos than of order. Liduc, the parish priest, likewise, has been exiled to the jungle in the hope that he "will never be heard of again;" a pederast and a junkie he has been rejected by his church as an embarrassment. The final inhabitant, Rita, in flight from a past which includes porn films and a physically abusive boyfriend, passes her time in cinematic reverie:

RITA: Sometimes I just pour myself a stiff gin and lean against that big tree outside my tent and just let that sun sink slowly down into the ground while I shake the ice cubes around in the glass. And when I do that I get so deeply into Rita Hayworth I could just about die.

(p. 107)

Obsessed with filmic fantasy, Rita dreams of the movie which will legitimize her career. In self-mockery she describes her fictional role; "I play a stupid slut who always wanted to be an actress." (p. 106)

The play's link to Hollywood, however, goes beyond Rita's cinematic allusions. The stereotyped characters and setting of Beyond Mozambique immediately suggest to an audience raised on latenight television, the bizarre world of the fifties' B-movie, as Chris Johnson points out. However, "while its mode is that of the B-movie, its content is not."¹¹ The maniacal schemes of a perverse scientist and his dim-witted assistant were common fare among the fifties horror flicks, Dr. Frankenstein and his creation being the prototype for this genre. The threat of evil inherent in these couples, however, was usually viewed as temporary; the frenzy which they perpetrated was inevitably conquered. Here in Beyond Mozambique, however, the chaos which envelopes the characters does not allow this threat to be perceived as foreign; evil is presented rather as endemic to the environment. An intrinsic part of the universe it can never be eradicated.

The relationship between Rocco and Tomas also varies from its cinematic counterparts. Tomas, found "in the desert surrounded by a platoon of dead soldiers," with "a bullet in his brain" is like so many of the reconstructed laboratory monsters of the movies. (p. 120) Resurrected by Rocco, he

becomes the butcher behind the doctor's experiments - often resorting to murder in his quest for cadavers. Olga, likewise, claims him as her "lackey." Clothed in an apron when the crazed couple found him, Tomas becomes Olga's homemaker. Unlike his filmic ancestors, however, Tomas is not annihilated. Rather, his fate is the exact reverse for not only does he survive the entire length of the play, but he does so at the expense of the others.

Johnson sees in this reversal, a battle between the races and a rejection of imperialistic arrogance and Walker himself would appear to endorse this view:

Beyond Mozambique expresses what I think those jungle movies were really all about - the ugliness, the imperialist quality, the desperation of the characters in a theatrical setting.¹²

Metaphorically, the plight of the western characters can easily be interpreted as a comment on the corruption of their culture. Represented in these five characters are the institutions of medicine, law, religion, art and sex. Each of these institutions, however, proves impotent before the surrounding chaos and is ultimately presented as perverse. Indeed, none of these routes proves capable of proving the redemption for which the characters are searching. Rocco's medicine is sadistic; Corporal Lance's law is violent; Liduc's religion is escapist; Olga's art is delusory and Rita's sex is degrading.

To view Tomas as an alternative to this society, however,

is perhaps simplistic. He, too, is estranged and isolated. The natives who drum in the jungle are not his compatriots and his brutal murders of their elders manifests his indifference to them. His violence and sexual aggression are as ugly and as desperate as the imperialism and oppression professed by the whites. His ascendancy is not an act of vindication but rather one of inheritance. Brought to life by Rocco and Olga (who themselves embody the extreme poles of western civilization - sadistic brutal power on the one hand and a lyrical love of the refined and beautiful on the other) he is at home in the jungle. Unlike the others, Tomas never speaks nostalgically of the past or hopefully of the future. Raised in chaos, he accepts the present as the only reality.

According to Bruce Janoff, black humour often presents two conflicting societies. He cautions though, that "in the world of black humour there is frequently great confusion as to which society is the norm and which is absurd and what characters fit where."¹³ This confusion between norms exists on many levels in Beyond Mozambique. The first on-stage appearances of Rocco and his wife are deceptively domestic. Rocco, in a lab coat and "carrying his medical bag" rushes on stage to answer a whistle from the jungle. Immediately we imagine the heroics and dedication of a missionary doctor. A similar reaction occurs with Olga's entrance. "Carrying linen and a basketful of silverware, plates, etc... ." Olga

suggests the devoted and dutiful wife. These opinions, although quickly destroyed are nonetheless in great contrast to the ones formed by the entrances of the other characters.

Liduc's arrival, immediately suggests a man uncomfortable with his environment. "Covered with mud up to his chest," we are told that he is "a bit myopic," has been chased by a wild pig and has just "spent two entire days clinging to a vine." (p. 101) His alienation, though comically presented, is manifested at once to the audience.

More ghastly, though still enacted in a comic style, are the entrances of Tomas, Rita and Corporal Lance; each enters carrying either an entire corpse or its dismembered pieces. Tomas, back from his gruesome chores, arrives with a corpse over his shoulder. Rocco immediately recognizes it as Old Joseph, the man he taught to play dominoes:

ROCCO: No. The knife was only for cutting open the corpse's sacks. To check for decomposition. You've murdered Old Joseph. Look at him lying there. I taught that old man how to play dominoes. Oh God, he's missing a foot. Where's his foot? (Tomas shrugs.) Rocco points to his own foot. Where's Old Joseph's foot?

(Tomas nods. Undoes his coat. The foot is strung around his neck.)

TOMAS: Good luck.

ROCCO: What's wrong with you? (Yanks it off.)
Have you no respect for human life?
(Throws the foot into the bushes.)
I'm very sad.

Minutes later, however, the foot returns to the stage, this time wrapped around the blade of Corporal Lance's machete. Sharing the stage now with the Corporal are Rita, Olga and the severed head of Father Ricci. Rita, having awoken to find the head outside her tent has arrived at the Rocco's home with it in a shopping bag. Blood covering her hands and arms she "fingers her hair back:"

OLGA: Not so much activity please. You'll stir up the mosquitoes.

RITA: Goddamnit. Have you seen the Corporal. I can't find him anywhere.

OLGA: No. What's that you're covered with?

RITA: Blood.

OLGA: From where?

RITA: His head.

OLGA: Whose head?

RITA: The priest. Father Ricci. Someone took an axe to him. I found his head outside my tent. It's in this bag. And I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it. I mean I can't carry it around forever. It's stupid.

OLGA: This joke is in poor taste, Shirley.

RITA: The name's Rita. Not Shirley. Rita. And it's no joke. Look. (She drops the head from the bag.)

OLGA: Yes. That's Father Ricci all right. I recognize the disapproving look.

(p. 92)

Olga's nonchalance and complacency before these gruesome events belie her first almost suburban appearance. Unperturbed

by the head at her feet she tells Rita, "My dreams are much worse. Much worse. When I see blood in one of my dreams its like comic relief." (p. 92) Buried below the surface of this woman's calm is an imagination of brutal proportions.

Rocco's first stage entrance is also a study in contrasts. Completely unconcerned with the living he concentrates on the dead. His quest for a cure for cancer, likewise, is prompted not by altruism but rather by self-serving ambition. Towards Tomas, he manifests a brutal sadism. "The secret is to apply pressure to his head. At the point where the blood stain is the brightest," he advises Olga when she complains that Tomas is sleeping. (p. 104)

The bizarre world of Beyond Mozambique is one that is at odds with itself. Yet to this disordered mess, Walker offers no alternatives. Winston, talking of black humour, states that "it does not assume a set of norms, either implicit or explicit against which one may contrast the absurd or grotesque world of the author."¹⁴ This is certainly true of Walker's play. The only worlds which exist separately from the isolated dwelling depicted in the play are the surrounding jungle, which is inhabitable and hostile, and the societies from which the characters have fled. It soon becomes apparent, though, that these three worlds are inextricably linked. The increasing drumming throughout the play highlights the jungle's proximity and suggests a threat of invasion. Similarly the

demented actions of the characters are quickly revealed to be mere continuations of past atrocities and habits. The new life which the characters have established in the jungle varies little from their previous patterns.

Liduc in the jungle is still drug-crazed and likewise the Corporal is still "haunted." Having shot a farmer's cow in Canada because "the expression in their eyes made him feel they were in eternal misery," (p. 121) he enacts in the jungle the same remedy on defenseless eleven year old native girls. Rita, too, cannot escape the persecutions of her past; beaten by her boyfriend and exploited by pornographers she lived in New York a servile existence. In the jungle, too, she is exploited; double-crossed by Tomas and raped by the natives for whom she smuggled, Rita is unable to break the pattern. Olga is similarly trapped. Her prison, though, is her mind and the horrifying dreams and delusions which it produces. A new locale would change nothing for her.

Most frightening, though, are the maniacal experiments of Rocco. As a doctor to the Nazi's, he aided and performed experiments on live humans. This monstrous act, rooted in history and mirrored in Rocco's insane operations in the jungle provides the most grisly link between Walker's fictional chaos and recent western history. Thomson observes that it is "precisely the conviction that the grotesque world, however strange, is yet our world, real and immediate which makes the

grotesque so powerful."¹⁵ In theatrical terms the "real and immediate" is evoked through a realistic set which avoids stylization. Walker, comparing his production of the play to an earlier one discusses the technique.

He did it in black and white, for example. But it occurred to me that there was another way to do it. I don't know if it was better or worse. I think the basic difference, besides the design which I did in colour, was that I had the actors go for a very realistic base. Eric's production was much more stylized. What I wanted to see and verify was whether the script would hold if the actors went for a realistic approach. I think it did.¹⁶

As the grotesque is essential to Walker's style a realistic presentation becomes mandatory. Thomson rightly claims that in a fictional world "with no pretensions to a connection with reality, the grotesque is almost out of the question."¹⁷

The evocation of Walker's world as our world is further created by the individual actions of his characters; however deviant they may be, they are still not without real-life models. Nazi psychopaths, child abusers, and drug addicts are all part of the world's recent history. The social chaos which haunts these characters is but a reflection of the society which has shaped them.

Black humour, though, is not satire and Walker's aim in Beyond Mozambique is not satirical. Winston highlights the difference:

But they (black humorists) view social and individual chaos as aspects of universal chaos and therefore hold out no hope of reform or correction. Unlike satire, black humor has no ideals.¹⁸

We have already seen that both the characters and the societies presented in the play provide neither an alternative to the chaos nor a potential for redemption.

Redemption in immediate terms is defined differently by each of the characters. For Rocco, redemption is a Nobel Prize; for the Corporal it is a promotion; for Rita it is a legitimate movie; for Liduc it is congregation and for Olga it is Moscow. Like Chekhov's Moscow, however, these dreams will remain unrealized and the characters will remain trapped in a no-man's land; "No hope of reform" can be held out as the future offers no alternative to the past.

In the larger metaphysical sense, however, hope is also denied. Virtually all of the characters make reference to God - albeit some more frequently than others - yet none has a clear idea of what God represents. Olga, while admitting that God might be a reality complains that he is nonetheless "not accessible." (p. 123) Liduc, who as a priest would be expected to have the clearest idea of God is actually the most confused.

LIDUC: ...But the strangest thing. In the middle of all that and even now, my occasional relapse into total catatonia notwithstanding, I still have a relationship with God. I love him. And I trust him. And until I am done away with I will endeavour to bring him and his word to others.

(pp. 122-123)

Liduc's God might be a reality but he is still like Olga's

inaccessible. While "in the process of shooting up" he explains to Rocco, "Okay. Sure. But first I have to get closer to God. I have the feeling we've been out of touch." (p. 132) God for Liduc is eventually reduced to a drug induced dream.

Corporal Lance and Rita treat God more cavalierly. For them he is an exclamation - a statement of despair and anger. "Oh my God," (p. 133) the Corporal screams when he realizes he is whining. Unable to bear his own "external misery" he begs to be killed. Rita's opening lines include two outbursts of "Goddamn it." Damned by God is an appropriate summation of her predicament. Living in chaos she is denied the ordering and meaning that a God would allow.

The most significant statements on God come perhaps from Tomas and Rocco. At the play's close Tomas enters in priest's clothes wearing the two crucifixes of the murdered priests, Father Ricci and Father Carson. When questioned by Liduc as to where he had obtained these articles, Tomas replies twice "God." Given that Tomas has become the embodiment of chaos and that chaos is the reigning force, Tomas' description of himself as God is appropriate.

God as a force, however, is equivocal and indefinable. Describing his own inner chaos as "the absence of God," (p. 113) Rocco supplies another interpretation of God. For Tomas, God is the power - whatever it may be - that rules for Liduc, God

is the drug that numbs. For Olga, God is still Moscow - the inaccessible, the unattainable. For Rocco, however, God is purpose, meaning and redemption. "This is the truth," Rocco states "It's not glory I'm after it's redemption." (p. 126)

As "the absence of God" he does indeed embody the arbitrary and gratuitous violence of an irrational and indifferent universe. His past history and his treatment of Tomas indicate his disregard for human life. Winston states that "the grotesque is apt to present an inflictor of torments, an aggressor in a world of victims."¹⁹ Rocco's role as doctor/mad scientist grants him immediate control over the lives of many.

In such a stance he resembles Camus' dramatic portrayal of the crazed Roman Emperor, Caligula. Like Caligula he places himself on par with the Gods:

ROCCO: I have finally destroyed that fucking tower and now there are only three forces in the world. God. Ignorance. And me.

(p. 127)

Rocco's search for the cure for cancer - symbolic of a desire to cheat death - is redolent also of Caligula's mania:

ROCCO: My experiments. I'm searching for the cure to cancer.

LIDUC: Which one?

ROCCO: All of them.

LIDUC: It seems like an impossible goal.

ROCCO: That's why I chose it.

(p. 112)

In Camus' play Caligula, Caligula is motivated by a similar longing:

SCIPIO: But Caius, it's ...it's impossible!

CALIGULA: That's the whole point.

SCIPIO: I don't follow.

CALIGULA: I repeat - that is my point. I'm exploiting the impossible. Or, more accurately, it's a question of making the impossible possible.

SCIPIO: But that game may lead to - to anything! It's a lunatic's pastime.²⁰

Caligula describes himself as "lucid" and declares that "this world has no importance."²¹ Conscious before the absurdity of a universe where "men die; and they are not happy,"²² Caligula decides to force his subjects "to live by the light of truth."²³ To this end he arbitrarily and randomly condemns men to death. Under Caligula's regime the Roman senators and patricians can no longer avoid recognition of the absurd. His living presence has become its physical manifestation.

Rocco justifies his cruelties and tyrannies with the same philosophy.

ROCCO: Because there's something about committing crimes against humanity that puts you in touch with the purpose of the universe.

(p. 126)

Offering a harsh, unjust cosmos as his model, Rocco, like Caligula, tries to embody its cruelty.

As with Caligula, though, Rocco makes a crucial error. Camus in programme notes to the play observes:

But if Caligula is right to deny the existence of the Gods, he is wrong to deny the importance of men.²⁴

Rocco's denial of his fellow men increases his isolation. Impotent with his wife and unable to love "with such hell in my heart," Rocco succeeds in destroying his own humanity and furthering his alienation.

The sense of alienation and disharmony which permeates the play is theatricalized through grotesque imagery. Madness and mutilation are the two motifs which externalize the estrangement of man from his universe and of man from himself. Every character can be described as "unhinged:" Corporal Lance by his fever; Liduc by his drugs, Tomas by his operations and Rocco, Olga and Rita by their reveries. This separation of mind from body, typical to the grotesque, dramatizes the fundamental isolation of the individual. Disjointed even from himself, he can never hope to make contact with another.

Mutilation is another approach to the same concept. Winston observes that "the threat to the body is part of the omnipresent threat of death in grotesque black humor."²⁵ As the "final divorce between body and spirit" death is the ultimate symbol of alienation. Beyond Mozambique is a virtual catalogue of mutilated limbs and muscles: Old Joseph's foot, Father Ricci's head and Old Peter's intestines are thrown

and bounced across the set.

Throughout the play the human body is treated with irreverance. Winston links this treatment with the technique of grotesque black humour:

The threat becomes stronger when a character is mutilated, but a comic element is added if the character is untroubled by his mishaps or if the mutilation is acted or narrated farcically.²⁶

"Change your bandage, Tomas. You're bleeding on the croissants," (p. 122) Olga calmly tells Tomas. The juxtaposition of the image of Tomas' hideous wound beside the refined elegance of tea and croissants increases the sense of incongruity. Olga's matter of fact order supplies the comic tone. Similarly, Corporal Lance's first reaction to his missing arm is unexpected: "Then it's gone. They really took it off. Failed again. (looks up) Sorry Sarge." (p. 133) The bewildering note "Entertain us" which is pinned to his sleeve supplies the farcical mood and prevents the spectator from empathizing too strongly.

The trivialization of death in the grotesque provides a dual purpose. Death on stage allows a theatricalization of the threat which has been present throughout the play. An irreverent approach to this same death serves - however briefly - to minimize its awesome power. In Winston's words, "death dominates but it occurs in a ridiculous manner and is never dignified."²⁷

Olga's death at the play's end is an example of such an indignity. After having painted with lipstick "two tears and a huge obscene smile" on the dead Olga's face, Rocco then manipulates her vocal cords and gives her the play's closing speech. Walker's treatment of Olga's corpse corresponds to the objectification of the body which Winston hails as typical of grotesque black humour:

People become animals or objects, or share their traits or are likened to them. Bodily parts are exaggerated or distorted.²⁸

Objectified the human body is a mere puppet and represents a reduction of man to a helpless pawn and denying to him any authority in his universe.

Olga's final speech - as manipulated by Rocco - is the same closing speech of Chekhov's Olga in the Three Sisters:

OLGA: ...We shall live! The music is so gay, so joyful, and it seems as though a little more and we shall know what we are living for, why we are suffering ...oh. If only we could know. If only we could know.

(p. 135)

This is again Camus' desert of lucid awareness where the cry for clarification will always go unanswered for Olga's desperate desire to know will remain as elusive as her beloved Moscow. Furthermore, the music which closes this play is far from being joyful. At the sound of exploding drums,

there is a "sudden violence and activity from the bushes, getting closer and louder." (p. 135) Chaos has now fully unleashed itself. The inhabitants of this universe find themselves abruptly in a world "divested of illusions."

"It sounds like anarchy," (p. 100) the Corporal rightly observes. Anarchic and irrational, the universe of Beyond Mozambique is forever incomprehensible.

The world posited here by Walker is still one which allows no absolutes and no truths other than death. Equivocal and arbitrary it provides no solace for the isolated individual. The grotesque which harbours in its structure a tense conflict of incongruities and incompatibles vividly evokes the nature of a universe that will give precedence to no system of belief or structuring. Wolfgang Kayser describes the grotesque as a game:

The grotesque is a game with the absurd, in the sense that the grotesque artist plays, half laughingly, half horrified with the deep absurdities of existence.²⁹

"Half laughingly and half horrified" Walker in Beyond Mozambique walks the "fine line between the serious and the comic."

NOTES

CHAPTER TWO

1. Philip Thomson, The Grotesque (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 31-32.
2. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Albrecht A. Knopf, 1969), p. 6.
3. All references will be to the following edition: George F. Walker, Beyond Mozambique in Three Plays (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1978).
4. Camus, p. 6.
5. Thomson, p. 3.
6. Mathew Winson, "Humour noir and Black Humor," in Veins of Humor, ed. Harry Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 282.
7. Lee Byron Jennings, The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of The Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 9-10.
8. Thomson, p. 21.
9. Winston, p. 284.
10. Thomson, p. 16.
11. Chris Johnson, "George F. Walker: B-Movies Beyond the Absurd," Canadian Literature, No. 85, (1980), p. 94.
12. Robert Wallace, "George Walker: Interview" in The Work, ed. Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1982), p. 218.
13. Bruce Janoff, "Black Humor: Beyond Satire," Ohio Review, 14, (1972), p. 17.
14. Mathew Winston, "The Ethics of Contemporary Black Humor," Colorado Quarterly, 24 (1976), p. 278.

15. Thomson, P. 23.
16. Wallace, p. 215.
17. Thomson, p. 23.
18. Winston, "Ethics," p. 278.
19. Winston, "Humour noir," p. 283.
20. Albert Camus, Caligula, trans Stuart Gilbert, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 13.
21. Camus, Caligula, p. 14.
22. Camus, Caligula, p. 8.
23. Camus, Caligula, p. 9.
24. Quoted in Philip Thody, Albert Camus. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961), p. 74.
25. Winston, "Humour noir," p. 283.
26. Winston, "Humour noir," p. 283.
27. Winston, "Humour noir," p. 283.
28. Winston, "Humour noir," p. 282.
29. Quoted in Thomson, p. 18.

CHAPTER THREE

THEATRE OF THE FILM NOIR

Discussing the relation of form to content, Mathew Winston observes "the shape of any plot has an implicit correspondence with what is believed or hoped to be the shape of the world and the way it operates."¹ This is immediately evident in such traditional structures as tragedy, comedy and melodrama. Inherent in these dramatic genres is a philosophical cosmic ordering. The black humourist, however, believing "reality to be formless," "experiments with form and mutilates it."² Viewing the universe as unpredictable and without design, black humour rejects all literary conventions which posit - either implicitly or explicitly - an ordered world, for "with the black humorist even this limited assent to the traditional arrangements of human experience has become impossible."³

As Max Schulz points out black humour often uses parody to cast doubt on "these frames of reference - these categorical imperatives - by means of which we organize the chaos."⁴ Parody, as a playful approach to form, arouses reader expectation with the intention of later subverting it. Through counterfeit it establishes a relationship with the original - style, language and situation being assiduously recreated.

A sense of incongruity, however, arises when discrepancies between expectation and outcome are introduced into the parodic text and it is this incongruity which gives the parody its comic effect. Originally defined as "the high burlesque of a particular work (or author) achieved by applying the style of that work (or author) to a less worthy subject," parody is now viewed in a broader context.⁵ Distinctions between elevated and lowly subject material have been abandoned and the focus lies instead on the contrast.

Parody is a literary form, which is created by incorporating elements of an already existing form in a manner creating a conscious contrast. These imitative contrasts result from the juxtaposition of two unlike approaches to the same form.⁶

Black humour - itself a juxtaposition of opposites - is thus a natural partner to the parodic and the uncertainties and incongruities which it evokes.

Beckett's call for a form which will "admit the chaos" finds a partial response in this mixture of parody and black humour. By upsetting the modes of thought behind the imitated model, the black humour parodist weakens the structure of the form as well. Its own internal ordering shaken, the work can no longer posit a larger cosmic ordering. The uncertainty introduced by parody is a first step towards admitting the chaos.

Walker's play Theatre of the Film Noir uses precisely this technique.⁷ Combining the structure of detective fiction

with the stylistics of "film noir" he creates in the audience a sense of familiarity. The expectations aroused by this familiarity, however, are soon subverted. Through manipulation of the character types, plot developments, and philosophical premises which form the hallmarks of detective fiction, Walker manages to turn the form against itself.

George Grella in his essay "The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel" describes the action of these novels as a "quest, both a search for truth and an attempt to eradicate evil."⁸ Edward Margolies perceives the detective in similar terms:

The hard-boiled dicks, on the other hand, however crass, cynical or illiterate they may sound, frequently perceive themselves as engaged in some kind of moral if not metaphysical quest ...the test of their integrity is that they get to the bottom of things - the truth.⁹

The detective's integrity - along with his solitude and his independence - is what distinguishes him from the others who inhabit his world.

Dressed typically in trench coat and fedora, a constant smoker and a heavy drinker, the hard-boiled hero was a man of the city, usually though not always engaged in criminal detection, a cop or a gumshoe. Moving through the criminal underworld with a shield of ironic and wary detachment, this self-conscious he-man figure used violence to contain violence; he twisted or circumvented the law in order to uphold the law. His morality was flexible and utilitarian. Though he might resort to devious means to get the job done, he was not for sale; he had a fundamental integrity.¹⁰

Sam Spade of The Maltese Falcon and Philip Marlowe of the Chandler mysteries typify the hard-boiled detective. Their language is terse and concrete, devoid of either sentimentality or self-indulgence. Despite enormous personal risk, they proceed unaided in their quest for truth.

Invariably the detective is tempted by the allures of a seductive but dangerous woman. Brigid O'Shaughnessy in The Maltese Falcon murders Spade's partner and tries to implicate Spade in her criminal activity. Spade's integrity, though, triumphs over his personal desires. Quoting his duty ("when a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it")¹¹ he turns Brigid over to the police.

When the hard-boiled novels were transferred to the screen they naturally found expression in the shadowy and claustrophobic stylistics of the "film noir." The alienation of the detective and the chaos of the world in which he lived demanded a filmic equivalent. "Film noir" as cinema was more of a mood than a genre; gangster films, horror movies, and melodramas might all qualify as "noir" works. The quintessential film noir could derive its plot from a variety of sources. Its uniqueness, however, lay in its cinematic manipulation of theme and character.

Apart from a shared blackness of mood and cynicism of tone, the most obvious and predominant feature of these films is their use of lighting. Tenebrous shadows and misty scenes

give the film a vague, indistinct look. Light was used more to intersect the frame than to irradiate it. The effect was often fragmented and disjointed and was used as a visual equivalent to the characters' state of mind.

A similar fragmented atmosphere is created in Theatre of the Film Noir. By dividing the action into twelve short scenes and by abandoning the traditional contained sets, Walker evokes a disjointed, disconnected world. Also linking the play to the "film noir" portrayals of detective fiction are the narrative form, the preoccupation with a central mystery, the sexual intrigues and the predatory portrayal of Lilliane.

Walker's play, however, deviates from the "film noir" prototype in a significant manner. Unlike Spade and Marlowe, Inspector Clair does not "get to the bottom of things;" the force behind the mystery is never revealed. The desire for the truth which so strongly motivated the hard-boiled detectives is all but abandoned here.

Of the twelve scenes which divide Theatre of the Film Noir Scenes One and Twelve function as a sort of prologue and epilogue. Both scenes spotlight the detective alone under a street lamp and both serve as commentaries on the action within. Of the ten scenes which these two frame, five occur in a graveyard, two in a bistro and three in Lilliane's apartment. The main protagonists are Bernard, the murdered Jean's homo-

sexual lover; Lilliane, Jean's sister; Eric, her Nazi boyfriend; Hank, a soon to be court-martialled American soldier; and finally Inspector Clair.

The time is Paris, 1944, shortly after the liberation. Jean, a nineteen year old member of the Communist Party has been murdered and Inspector Clair has been assigned to the case. A second intrigue, however, is introduced in Scene Four when Bernard and Lilliane meet in the graveyard. Bernard is drunk and has dug up Jean's body for reasons that are never explained. Bernard, aware that Lilliane has been harbouring a Nazi soldier in her apartment, tries to blackmail her into marrying him. A self-described "aging neurotic," he is too frightened to surface as a homosexual and wants marriage as protection. Lilliane refuses and informs Eric that Bernard knows of his existence. The intrigue becomes then one of bizarre events, manipulation and ultimately survival. Before the play closes, however, Eric, Hank and Bernard all lie dead in the graveyard. The survivors are Lilliane, who goes on to be one of "this country's more successful film actresses," and Inspector Clair. The murder of Jean remains an enigma.

Inspector Clair and Lilliane are the most recognizably "noir" characters of the play - i.e., their functions are typical of the detective genre. Eric and Hank, as soldiers of the Second World War, also find antecedents in the post-war

"films noirs." The returning veteran in film noir is always portrayed as an outsider.

He is shell-shocked and violent (William Bendix in The Blue Dahlia, Robert Ryan in Crossfire), re-entering a world whose laws he doesn't understand. (Burt Lancaster in Criss Cross, Alan Ladd in The Blue Dahlia). When he surfaces in noir, the returning soldier has the disconnectedness of an ex-con.¹²

Eric and Hank, however, unlike their noir counterparts can never return home. Eric, an AWOL Nazi soldier in hiding from the liberators, would be as much a fugitive in Germany as he is in France. Hank, too, has been ostracized by his compatriots; "conduct detrimental" has earned for him an inevitable court martial.

Their alienation is further suggested by their linguistic isolation. "You speak my language," Bernard tells Hank, "But you have an accent." (p. 13) Moments before his death, however, even this accented attempt at communication fails. Reduced to hysteria, Hank repeatedly screams, "I don't care."

BERNARD: ...He has a very limited vocabulary. These are complex issues we're dealing with. How is he going to manage with so few words.

(p. 44)

Eric's linguistic problems are of a different variety. Believing himself to be trapped within a cliché he yells, "Just because I am a German doesn't mean I am violent, rigid

and heartless. That's a cliché." (p. 39) And his final line before death is a bitter "I hate clichés." Clichés like limited vocabulary, obscure complex issues and reduce communication to the banal.

Both Eric and Hank are exaggerations of their filmic counterparts. The "Americaness" of Hank - typified by his folksy song and friendly manner - and the teutonic rigidity of Eric are made more extreme and more ridiculous by Walker. This exaggeration reduces them to types and renders them flat. Uni-dimensional and undeveloped, they prohibit audience empathy and encourage a comic response.

Lilliane is also a flat character, but unlike Hank and Eric, her role is not comic. Like Brigid O'Shaughnessy of The Maltese Falcon and Phyllis Dietrichson of Double Indemnity, Lilliane represents a threat to both male integrity and happiness. A typically "noir" heroine, Lilliane, however, does not suffer the "noir" fate.

Defined by their sexuality, which is presented as desirable but dangerous to men, the women function as the obstacle to the male quest. The hero's success or not depends on the degree to which he can extricate himself from the woman's manipulations. Although the man is sometimes simply destroyed because he cannot resist the women's lures (Double Indemnity is the best example), often the work of the film is the attempted restoration of order through the exposure and then destruction of the sexual, manipulating woman.¹³

Rather than destroying the "sexual, manipulating woman," Theatre of the Film Noir chooses instead to glorify her.

"Lilliane will go on to be one of this country's more successful film actresses," (p. 50) states Inspector Clair. Having survived the war and her two lovers Lilliane's possible complicity in murder goes uninvestigated and unpunished.

Her sense of estrangement is perhaps more immediately felt than that of Eric and Hank.

LILLIANE: ...It's politics. Everything is politics. I'm a victim of other people's beliefs. I'm a stranger in my own country. I don't understand these new influences. The radio plays American jazz. That's political. I'm just trying to survive.

(p. 31)

Jazz on the radio and blues in the bistros; Paris is becoming Americanized. After four years of German occupation the influences have changed. Survival now demands chameleonic talents.

"I survived without affiliations," (p. 5) Lilliane boasts to Inspector Clair. Lilliane's lack of affiliations, while it permits survival, does so at the expense of any form of self-definition. Lilliane is as undefinable as the cigarettes and chocolates which are continually showered upon her. The list of dramatic personae identifies her solely as a "former shop-girl;" her self-definition - if it

ever existed - lies only in the past. Lilliane, herself, is aware of the unreal quality of her life.

LILLIANE: I'd like to be in films. I really would. I saw one last week. American. No. English... Anyway, I would have liked to be in it. I sat there thinking that I would like to live in a film. Just be alive in a film and nowhere else. I'd like that. I think somehow that would be better.

(p. 49)

"She lives an abstract life" we are told throughout the play and it is appropriate that this "abstract life" should find expression within the celluloid frame.

Lilliane's successful entry into filmdom is arranged by Inspector Clair. Clair's treatment of Lilliane, however, is indicative of one of the ways in which his character differs from the hard-boiled variety. The typical hard-boiled detective would have rejected Lilliane both for her amorality and for her sexuality. The detective's personal code will inevitably make him an outsider; neither friends nor lovers can penetrate his rigid exterior. Philip Marlowe rejects his friend Terry Lennox for failure to maintain a code.

...You had standards and you lived up to them, but they were personal. They had no relation to any kind of ethics or scruples. You were a nice guy because you had a nice nature. But you were just as happy with mugs or hoodlums as with honest men...You're a moral defeatist.¹⁴

Lilliane's amorality and duplicity provide the greatest

threat to the Inspector's quest for truth. Yet, contrary to "noir" tradition, Clair does not try to eliminate her. His approach is the opposite; instead he eliminates all obstacles to her desires and closes the case when the messy ends of her life are sewn up.

Morally ambiguous and professionally unethical, Inspector Clair is a contradiction of type. It is not, however, only his characterization which runs contrary to genre in the play but also his status within the play. In most detective fiction, the investigator is the focus of all action; indeed he is often the eyes through which the reader sees the events. His dual status as narrator and character makes him the reference point for the work. All other characters and actions are judged according to his standards. Isolated within the purity of his code and consumed by the need to discover the truth, the hard-boiled detective is viewed as alienated and obsessive. Inspector Clair, however, whose personal code is as fluid as the world around him and whose passion for the truth is submerged within a larger desire to make things complete fits neither of these categories.

Film noir protagonists invariably experience some form of estrangement and "film noir" detective stories with the emphasis on the investigator, highlighted the loneliness of the solitary quest. Alain Silver, in his discussion of "film noir" observes the following:

If a usual definition of the noir protagonist is to be formulated it must encompass two key character motifs.¹⁵

For Silver these two motifs are alienation and obsession. Although he feels alienation to be "the more intrinsic" to the form he does grant obsession an important role in the "noir universe."

In traditional detective fiction the alienated, obsessive hero stands apart from the chaos which is enveloping all the others. Though lonely and isolated, he represents nonetheless the possibility of an alternative. The world of "film noir" may be unremittingly black and claustrophobic, but its overall conclusions always supports the status quo. Ideals such as friendship, loyalty, and honour were upheld in "film noir." Walter Neff in Double Indemnity may have committed murder and betrayed his company, but his dying confession in his friend's arms, suggests an acquiescence in social values. Likewise, Sam Spade, despite his love for Brigid O'Shaughnessy affirms his loyalty to his dead partner by bringing justice to his murderer.

Theatre of the Film Noir rewards none of these virtues. Each character, obsessed with survival and "getting by," continually cheats and betrays the other. Bernard, Hank and Eric die; Lilliane and Inspector Clair live. Yet neither retribution nor justice appear to play a role in their fates.

George Grella observes the following of the hard-boiled detective:

Though the detective is compelled to work in this chaotic and sinful society he does not share its values; instead he is always in conflict with or in flight from civilization. He finds no fruitful human relationship possible. His condemnation or rejection of other human beings unites him with the alienated and loss of American fiction.¹⁶

Inspector Clair, as the murderer of Bernard, does indeed share the values of the murky environment of Theatre of the Film Noir. His complicity in the cover-up of Jean's murder and his indifference towards Lilliane's amorality bind him with the other depraved characters.

Silver's definition of the "noir" protagonist as alienated and obsessive seems more appropriate to Bernard than to Clair. Apart from being more central to the play's actions than is the Inspector, Bernard is also a more eloquent spokesman for the alienated. Before beginning an analysis of Bernard, however, it might be useful to examine dictionary definitions of the terms "alienation" and "obsession."¹⁷ Within the psychological realm, alienation is defined as a "state of estrangement between the self and the objective world, or between different parts of the personality." Obsession, however, has both a modern and an archaic meaning. Contemporary usage implies "compulsive preoccupation with a fixed idea or unwanted feeling or emotion, often with symptoms of anxiety." The archaic connotation, however, involves the supernatural: "the state of being beset

or actuated by the devil or an evil spirit."

Both these definitions appear central to a discussion of Bernard. His alienation is acutely experienced through his homosexuality. Life under the Communists, Fascists, or Democrats is equally frightening for him; in any militaristic, assertive society he will remain an outsider. As for Hank and Eric, conformity for Bernard also means a linguistic transformation. "I've been hiding in basements for years, learning how to speak english so I could ingratiate myself with the liberation army," Bernard tells Lilliane. (p. 11)

Bernard's paranoia prevents him from functioning "above ground." He quits work because "There were always people on the street who were hostile towards me." (p. 22) The estrangement Bernard feels from the world around him, however, is not as frightening as the one he feels from himself. The fragmentation of Bernard's thoughts suggests a psychological alienation. Lilliane tells Eric that Bernard was "talking like his brain was exploding." It is Bernard himself, though, who most clearly articulates this segmentation.

BERNARD: I did understand him. I did. I saw into his brain. It was broken into little pieces. And the pieces were talking to each other. Just like mine. Exactly like mine. (He looks at Lilliane. Smiles.) In my darker moments, of course.

(p. 45)

Alienated, underground and without affiliation, Bernard, too, becomes obsessed with survival. The "fixed idea" of Bernard's compulsion is surfacing. Tired of living on the fringe he goes to extreme lengths to try to blackmail Lilliane into marriage. The anxiety which accompanies obsession is also present in Bernard. Throughout the play he continually describes himself as scared and frightened:

BERNARD: That uniform has made me behave strangely in public. And earned me many anxious moments. I don't like it. I don't like uniforms in general. They shouldn't be allowed. They always show up uninvited and cause anxiety.

(p. 2)

Yet inherent also in Bernard's obsessive behaviour is a suggestion of the supernatural. In Scene Two, Bernard describes his inspiration from God:

BERNARD: I found that coin the day the Nazi's invaded. God whispered strangely in my ear. Here's a little two-headed coin for you, Bernard. A little token of my affection to see you through the dark times ahead.

(p. 2)

Rather than connoting the Christian Holy Ghost, however, the spirit which invades Bernard suggests instead the folkloric ghoul. As evil demons of the night, Ghouls occupied themselves by plundering graves and feeding on corpses.

While Bernard does not actually chew on the dead Jean, he does, however, exhume his corpse and kiss his lips. The coffin, once unearthed, is then used by Bernard as a food locker - housing both wine and chocolate.

The character of Bernard, although thematically consistent with the traditions of detective fiction, is in itself not typical to the genre. He is too hysterical, too exaggerated. His frenetic and emotional language is in direct contrast to the tight, terse and concrete language of the hard-boiled novels. His estrangement and isolation, however, place him firmly in the noir universe. "I am the moral conscience of the day," (p. 15) Bernard tells Lilliane. In the typical detective novel he would have been merely a temporary aberration and his death would have signalled a restoration of order. In Walker's world, however, chaos reigns. In a world where "Morality is a question of circumstance ...and circumstance depends on fortune," (pp. 1, 51) the opportunistic, cowardly Bernard is indeed paradigmatic of the prevailing ethos.

Walker's inclusion of Bernard in the play gives it a grotesque flavour that is rarely found in "film noir." As with Walker's other plays the vulnerability and mutability of the body are overtly theatricalized. Over half the play takes place in a graveyard and three on-stage murders occur before its close. Typical of the grotesque, death is treated

in an undignified and irreverent manner; Eric accidentally shoots himself in the middle of a sexual encounter with Bernard. Similarly, the unearthed corpse of Jean is granted no respect; Bernard not only kisses the cadaver but also balances his food on it.

The grotesque imagery, the incongruous actions and the parodic contrasts situate the play within the tradition of black humour. It is the presence of this black humour which prevents the play from acquiescing in "film noir" values. As Winston observes black humour claims "that mystery is not a particular obscurity in an otherwise known and ordered world but is the very nature of existence."¹⁸ Mystery is endemic to the black humourist's world. The hard-boiled detective's quest for truth cannot be accommodated in a world where "precise definitions," "patterns of behaviour," and "a clear consensus of morality and a belief in absolute guilt" have disappeared.

Inspector Clair's task of "making things clear" is an impossible goal. Like the "wild longing for clarity" which "echoes in the human heart" this need to know will go unanswered. Truth is an absolute in detective fiction; in Theatre of the Film Noir it is a relative value.

J. Hillis Miller states that "A gravestone is the sign of an absence."¹⁹ Over half of Theatre of the Film Noir occurs in a graveyard beside the coffin of the dead Jean but the sense of absence continues throughout the entire play.

Absent from the lives of Walker's characters is, of course, the murdered Jean. Gone also is a sense of identity, of patrimony, of nationality and of belonging. More significant to their lives, perhaps, is "the absence of God." Deprived of an ordered, comprehensible universe, the characters find themselves without any guiding absolutes. "If one could only say just once: 'this is clear', all would be saved," Camus observes.²⁰ The foggy misty world of Theatre of the Film Noir asserts that nothing can ever be made clear; the world's mysteries are ultimately impenetrable.

NOTES

CHAPTER THREE

1. Mathew Winston, "The Ethics of Contemporary Black Humor," Colorado Quarterly, 24, (1976), p. 284.
2. Winston, p. 287.
3. Max Schulz, Black Humor Fiction in the Sixties (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1973), p. 67.
4. Schulz, p. 66.
5. John D. Jump, Burlesque (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 2.
6. Sander L. Gilman, The Parodic Sermon in European Perspective (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiners Verlag GMBH, 1974), p. 3.
7. All references will be to the following edition: George F. Walker, Theatre of the Film Noir (Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1981).
8. George Grella, "The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel" in Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robin W. Winks (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 104.
9. Edward Margolies "The American Detective Thriller and the Idea of Society," in Dimensions of Detective Fiction, ed. Larry N. Landrum, Pat Browne and Ray B. Browne, (n.p.: Popular Press, 1976), p. 84.
10. Foster Hirsch, The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir (San Diego: A.S. Barnes and Company, Inc., 1981), p. 24.
11. Dashiell Hammett, The Maltese Falcon, ed. Richard J. Anobile (London: MacMillan, 1974), p. 246.
12. Hirsch, p. 21.
13. E. Ann Kaplan, Women in Film Noir (London: British Film Institute, 1978), pp. 2-3.

14. Quoted in Grella, p. 109.
15. Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward ed. An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style. Film Noir. (New York: Overlook Press, 1979), p. 4.
16. Grella, pp. 110-111.
17. All definitions will be taken from the following source: William Morris, ed. The Houghton Mifflin Canadian Dictionary of the English Language. (Ontario: Houghton Mifflin, 1969)
18. Winston, p. 283.
19. J. Hillis Miller. Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 59.
20. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus trans. Justin O'Brien. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 27.

CONCLUSION

Describing the black humourist as one "enraged by the absurdity of his irrational metaphysical," Bruce Janoff concludes:

In the blackest of black-humor novels affirmation simply means continuing to live rather than committing suicide, and optimism is nothing more than laughing darkly at a tragically insensitive environment where uncertainty and anxiety have become a way of life.¹

The laughter evoked in the plays discussed here is indeed "dark." The "irrationalist metaphysic" which envelopes Walker's characters provides neither justice nor salvation as solace. Fate is arbitrary and gratuitous; each individual's future is forever contingent upon the workings of a cosmos that is at best capricious. Anxious, alienated and isolated the characters of Walker's world are in continual conflict with their environment.

Although Walker posits a similar universe to the one evoked by Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus he does not offer the same response. For Camus "happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable."² Once the Gods have been silenced man becomes master of his world.

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days.³

Within the confine of his rock, Sisyphus will create his individual world and destiny. It is this confrontation with his rock which gives his life purpose.

Walker's characters, however, remain devoid of purpose. This is not to say that they have abandoned the search for meaning but rather that meaning itself is elusive. Ahrun in Bagdad Saloon believes that fame can create purpose. Rocco of Beyond Mozambique believes that a noble pursuit will negate all harsher realities. Bernard of Theatre of the Film Noir believes that assimilation within the larger society will eradicate his isolation. Yet none of these characters is rescued from his malaise or his anxiety: none finds the Sisyphean liberty which Camus advocates.

Koji Numasawa sees in black humour a deliberate renunciation of this stance.

If, it might be said, the whole attempts of existentialists have centered on creating something positive out of the omnipresent. Negative, on finding a way to live in the midst of irrational, incoherent chaos which is our universe, or, failing it, on at least establishing a semblance of value in the very Sisyphean process, the new black humorists set up shop on mocking the futility of such processes in a I-told-you-it's-no-good spirit.⁴

"The best that the black humorist can hope for is a formula for personal survival," Janoff states.⁵ Survival is a major theme in Walker's plays. The stakes are not always the same but the game is nonetheless "getting by." Bush and Galt want to survive scandal; Ahrun wants to transcend anonymity. The jungle exiles of Beyond Mozambique want to survive the invading chaos which drums in the bushes. The socially vague milieu of Theatre of the Film Noir makes survival a political concern.

Yet on another level, survival assumes a metaphysical dimension. Survival within the limits of an equivocal and formless universe becomes for the black humourists a major concern.

Eugène Ionesco advocates humour as a means of transcending the tragic.

There is only one true way of demystifying:
by means of humor especially if it is 'black'
...the comic alone is able to give us the
strength to bear the tragedy of existence.⁶

Walker's manipulation of the comic in his plays is what saves them from total nihilism. Maintenance of the tension between the comic and "the tragedy of existence," however, is necessary for a successful evocation of the two. Walker frankly discusses the difficulty of this:

We live in chaos and it's difficult to differentiate between the two. The serious and the comic is somehow on this spooky, funny line, and it's hard to find out the division.

That's why the writing walks an odd line sometimes and occasionally falls over one way or another. It's a matter of control and discipline. Ideally, what I want to be is right on that line.

The techniques which Walker uses to remain "right on that line" have been discussed earlier. Merging the traditions of the Theatre of the Absurd with those of the grotesque and parody, Walker creates an incongruous and uncertain world. Although each play is dominated by only one of these styles, evidence of all three can be found in each. The deformed Ivanhoe of Bagdad Saloon is more redolent of the bizarre characters of the grotesque than of the absurd. Likewise, the violent world of Beyond Mozambique, although steeped in grotesque imagery, also contains elements of parody. The melodramatic world of the low budget thriller with its naive divisions into good and evil are here explored. Evil in Beyond Mozambique is endemic to the environment; no one character is free of it. Theatre of the Film Noir, clearly a parody, also

contains elements of the grotesque. The graveyard, the unearthed corpse, the undignified deaths and the general delirium are hallmarks of grotesque literature.

The blackness of Walker's humour is dependent upon the tension inherent in the juxtaposition of opposites. The polarized world which he creates can accommodate no absolutes, no ideologies, no formulas and no structures. It is instead totally equivocal. While acknowledging the bleakness of the human condition Walker still affirms the uniqueness of the individual. "Humor is liberty," Ionesco states.⁸ Humour such as Walker's which allows laughter in the face of the horrific offers to its readers a form of liberation. Mitigated by humour, the "tragedy of existence" can be temporarily transcended.

NOTES

CONCLUSION

1. Bruce Janoff, "Black Humor: Beyond Satire," Ohio Review, 14, (1972), p. 19.
2. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus trans. Justin O'Brien, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 122.
3. Camus, p. 123.
4. Koji Numasawa, "Black Humor: An American Aspect," Studies in English Literature, 44, No. 1 (1967), p. 181.
5. Janoff, P. 15.
6. Eugène Ionesco, Notes and Counter Notes. trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 144.
7. Chris Hallgren, "George Walker: the serious and the comic," Scene Changes, 7, No. 2 (1979), p. 23.
8. Ionesco, p. 142.

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