



THE
GROTESQUE
IN CONTEMPORARY
ANGLOPHONE DRAMA

Ondřej Pilný



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Introduction: The Grotesque and Contemporary Drama

I

Theatre in English has been marked by extreme diversity since the early 1990s, ranging from a static rendering of bare narrative in many monologue dramas to site-specific performances using state-of-the-art media technology. This book is dedicated to text-based theatre, which has progressively become characterized by the blending of established genres. It aims to show that in the work of some of the most exciting contemporary playwrights, this generic combination is associated with the grotesque.

Reviewers have highlighted the presence of the grotesque in the work of young British, Irish, and North American authors such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Tracy Letts, Philip Ridley, Martin McDonagh, or Enda Walsh. However, a play or some of its features have mostly been labelled grotesque without any indication as to what exactly is meant by the term, apart from “bizarre but extremely engaging”, and where it is that the grotesque might take us. The objective of the present volume is to discuss the grotesque in Anglophone drama on the basis of a thorough examination of the concept, with a particular emphasis on the work of dramatists whose plays have been applauded by audiences and reviewers alike but who have suffered relative neglect by scholars. It is my contention that the reasons for the absence of more extensive commentary prominently include the use of the grotesque, given that one of its chief effects is leaving the beholder puzzled.

The grotesque is an aesthetic category whose origin has been outlined by virtually every art historian or literary scholar to have written on the subject. Around 1480, the remains of Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea were excavated in Rome, a grandiose palace that was to reflect Nero's image as a sun god. The excessive residence was found to be decorated by ornaments that freely combined elements of the animate and inanimate worlds, whose incongruity in the eyes of the Quattrocento gave rise to a reaction typical of the grotesque: a mixture of disgust and attraction. The ornaments became universally referred to as *grotesche*, as they were found in what by then was an underground space resembling a cave (Harpham 2006, pp. 27–32). Complaints by the guardians of the principles of classical aesthetics remained unheeded and a grotesque style came into vogue that lasted a number of decades. As early as 1484, Pinturicchio decorated a loggia in the Vatican with *grotesche*, and was followed by numerous prominent artists of the time, including Raphael, who created grotesque designs for several Vatican loggias with Giovanni da Udine between 1515 and 1519. Subsequently, the fashionable style spread across Europe, endorsed by the courts of the Habsburgs and King Francis I of France (Connelly 2012, pp. 32–4).

While the term was not coined until the late fifteenth century, grotesque images had been abundant in Western art ever since its very beginnings. To stay with Ancient Rome, we find evidence with Vitruvius, who launched a famous attack in his *De architectura* (ca. 27 BC) on those who chose to 'decorate the walls with monstrous forms'. He rallied: 'how can the stem of a flower support a roof, or a candelabrum a pedimental sculpture? How can a tender shoot carry a human figure, and how can bastard forms composed of flowers and human bodies grow out of roots and tendrils?' (qtd in Connelly 2012, p. 27). Horace also condemned the free amalgamation of the incongruous in ornaments in his *Ars Poetica* (published sometime during the last two decades before the Christian era), referring to them as a 'sick man's dreams [...] empty of substance, no single form relating head and foot'. (qtd in Connelly 2012, p. 26). Both Vitruvius and Horace objected to grotesque ornamentation because it was unnatural, at variance both with nature and with Classical harmony—all this still before the Domus Aurea, which was built after the fire of Rome in 64 AD. Similarly, early Christian art and architecture frequently features grotesque images, be it in the form of ornaments, marginalia in illuminated manuscripts, or indeed the numerous composite monsters or leering faces that appear both in the interior and on the exterior of Gothic cathedrals, well before the term entered general usage.

In her wonderfully comprehensive study of *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture* (2012), Frances Connelly describes how the concept has gradually broadened its meaning. Originally used for the style of ornamentation associated with Nero's palace in the 1480s, it was back in the early 1500s that a slightly different kind of ornamentation emerged in Europe and was referred to as grotesque: the arabesque or the moresque, an 'abstract vegetal design' of Islamic origin that became widely imitated and developed by European artists (pp. 54–5). By the seventeenth century, the word 'grotesque' was most often used to refer to a particular type of caricature and also to the capriccio both of which foregrounded the body. These were exemplified by the carnivalesque commedia dell'arte drawings of Jacques Callot from the 1610s, and later in their different ways by William Hogarth's caricatures (1730s–1750s) or Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos* (1793–1799). In Romanticism, the grotesque began to be linked to the emotions of horror and repulsion, following from the earlier nightmarish visions of painters such as Martin Schongauer (*The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, ca. 1480–1490), Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450–1516) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525–1569), who had been working in the tradition of the *diablerie* and often depicted the monstrous (Connelly 2012, pp. 19, 99–109, 120). This wide scope of reference amply supports Connelly's assertion that the grotesque is historically and culturally specific (pp. 13–14); at the same time, any contemporary use of the term will inevitably bear distinct echoes of all its previous applications.

Like any complex aesthetic category, and particularly given the historical variety of its meaning, the grotesque is a term that threatens to wear thin through being conceptualized too broadly. Generally speaking, the grotesque is primarily defined by the blending of radically incongruous elements, together with the simultaneous repulsion and fascination it triggers. The grotesque is also fundamentally puzzling—as noted earlier—to the extent that it 'confounds language and logical sequence', opening 'room to play' where meaning is created by the beholder (Connelly 2012, p. 12). The danger that this overall definition entails in a study dealing with the theatre lies in the temptation to regard, for instance, any incongruous mixing of genres in a play as grotesque, making the term virtually synonymous with 'experimental' or even 'avant-garde'. Further specification is clearly needed; this must consist in stressing that the grotesque is always concerned—in the words of Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund—with 'questioning and unsettling assumptions about what is human and

what is not human' (Edwards and Graulund 2013, p. 86). This concern is often communicated through an emphasis on the human body, as in Bakhtin's carnival, but frequently also by an examination of the intellect, particularly through focusing on individuals whose thought processes are incongruous with what is considered to be acceptable or normal.

Although the outline of the different types of the grotesque in Western art and culture presented by Frances Connelly is accurate and will be used as a constant point of reference throughout the present study, the nature of the material covered here still solicits a refinement of one of Connelly's categories—the monstrous grotesque. There is no doubt that the monsters depicted on the margins of medieval manuscripts or in Gothic cathedrals are grotesque, as are the monsters in Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1510), Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (ca. 1781), or the monstrous creature in Salvador Dalí's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936), vastly different as their nature and contexts are. Similarly, Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's novel (1818) may be regarded as grotesque, a being created from an assortment of body parts that combine in 'a mishmash of disparate elements made terrible by "horrific contrast" between the beautiful and the vile' (Edwards and Graulund 2013, p. 53). However, not everything that is monstrous is also grotesque. Much recent drama features graphic depictions of extreme violence; to give a few examples, consider the rape scenes in Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980) or in Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), the depiction of rape and war atrocities in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), or indeed the vivid description of the evaporated human bodies in a fallout shelter in Iraq after the explosion of a US drill-bomb in Heather Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire* (2004). Yes, monstrous violence *can* be made grotesque, as in the dark comedies of Martin McDonagh. However, these images are obviously not: they remain merely horrific. A dividing line is needed to distinguish between the two forms of the monstrous. This may be plausibly drawn by reference to mimesis and genre: monstrous images that clearly relate to human atrocity, be it in direct documentary fashion as in Raffo's play, or in the context of realist scenes as in the other plays just mentioned, are never grotesque.

As already apparent from the debates concerning grotesque ornamentation in Ancient Rome, the grotesque is always defined against a norm; it 'does not exist except in relation to a boundary, convention, or expectation' (Connelly 2003, p. 4). It does not stand in direct opposition to the norm, however: it occupies a liminal position and 'is more like a catalyst,

opening the boundaries of two disparate entities, and setting a reaction in motion' (Connelly 2012, pp. 8–9). Since it challenges accepted norms, it is always inappropriate; it may be perceived as offensive, dangerous, and may cause destruction. In Connelly's apt phrase, it embodies 'the threat of images to mortally wound what is known, what is established, what is accepted'. As such, Connelly asserts, the grotesque has been appropriated in the modern era 'as the weapon of choice for social protest and a voice for those oppressed by traditional social boundaries, or made monstrous by them' (Connelly 2012, p. 18). These uses of the grotesque are of eminent interest in the present volume, which aims to discuss in detail the ethics and politics pertaining to the grotesque in contemporary drama.

Yet not all plays that feature the grotesque foreground ethical or political issues, and even some of those that ostentatiously do so may not really voice any kind of protest, as I will attempt to demonstrate shortly. However, the grotesque does harbour a profound potential for true audience engagement, in the sense of the emancipation of individual audience members promoted by Jacques Rancière in his influential essay *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008). Rancière joins the ranks of those thinkers and practitioners who regard clear-cut political art as futile. He argues that the assumed connection between watching a play about social or political injustice and taking action is dubious; he asserts that 'There is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action' (Rancière 2011, p. 74). In other words, there is no guarantee that the spectator will interpret a work of art as socially critical or political in the way intended by the artist, or that he or she will act upon it either. According to Rancière, the power of art lies in its capacity to 'rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects. As such [it] can open up new passages towards new forms of subjectivation' (p. 82).

This emancipatory power of art had in fact already been identified by John Ruskin in his celebrated discussion of the grotesque. Ruskin wrote that,

A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself only; the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character. (Ruskin 1903, p. 132)

Ruskin's emphasis on the essential role of the imagination in interpreting the grotesque is precisely what Rancière requires of his 'emancipated spectator', watching a complex work of art, as the only means that may lead to the rectification of injustice. Rancière's notion may be idealistic, given that he himself acknowledges that the result of the engagement of the spectator's imagination cannot be predicted. Both Ruskin's and Rancière's argument besides presuppose belief in a basic set of shared moral values. Nevertheless, the appeal to the critical reasoning and imagination of the individual is perhaps the best that contemporary art can hope for, and is very much present in the grotesque.

The starting point for examining the effects of the grotesque in its association with ethics and politics in this study of contemporary drama is a basic contrast between two influential perspectives on the subject. In his pioneering work, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957), Wolfgang Kayser regarded the grotesque as essentially bleak and terrifying. He defined it as an expression of a fundamental 'alienation of the world' (Kayser 1966, p. 52). According to Kayser,

The grotesque world is—and is not—our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from an awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence. (p. 37)

The unhinging of the familiar world that is communicated by the grotesque has a tendency to inspire insecurity and terror in the audience: 'We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world' (pp. 184–5).

Taking a different perspective to Kayser, Mikhail Bakhtin has highlighted the centrality of laughter to the grotesque in his celebrated *Rabelais and His World* (1965). In his view, the grotesque involves 'the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract' to the material, earthly level (Bakhtin 1984, p. 19). This degradation is always positive according to Bakhtin, however, since in the grotesque, 'The world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed' (p. 48). The grotesque thus has 'power to liberate from dogmatism, completeness, and limitation' and the role of laughter on the way to this liberation is essential (p. 44).

The difference in opinion between the respective scholars stems from the nature of the material focused on as well as the circumstances in which they were writing. Bakhtin was concerned primarily with medieval and Renaissance literature and culture, and his concept of the grotesque is linked with the ‘folk’, the ordinary people whose grotesque laughter is to bring about liberation from an oppressive political regime. Bakhtin may have taken a rather idealistic view of the extent to which the peasants’ revelry would have in fact been capable of subverting the social hierarchy or the political status quo of the day (see Connelly 2012, p. 88), but his argument must also be read as an oblique strategy to challenge the Communist rule in the Soviet Union, which had been in place for more than three decades when he began writing. Kayser, on the other hand, focused primarily on the period from Romanticism up to the 1950s. He first conceived of his book in 1942 and wrote most of it in the atmosphere of a spiritually and materially decimated Germany immediately following World War II. The liberatory potential of the grotesque was barely touched upon in his study, and laughter was mentioned sporadically. Kayser described laughter only as ‘involuntary’, ‘filled with bitterness, [...] mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic’ (p. 189).

My own view is that Kayser’s and Bakhtin’s perspectives form useful end points on a broad scale of effects that grotesque works may have as regards engaging the audience in an ethical or political sense. At one end of the scale is Kayser’s bleakness and terror that paralyzes and potentially engenders bitterness and cynicism, at the other end is Bakhtin’s anarchic merriment that brings about change and freedom. While the impact of the plays discussed in the following chapters is inevitably dependent not only on the precise nature of the grotesque that each of these features, but also on the context of their staging and interpretation, they will all be positioned within this scale. As regards laughter, its nature and effect can be measured in a similar way, whenever it does actually occur. I tend to agree with Ralf Remshardt—the author of the only existing study in English dedicated to the grotesque in theatre—in that laughing at the grotesque is always inappropriate in a sense: laughter counteracts the horror generated by the grotesque but it is simultaneously a reaction that is chillingly aware of its own ‘callousness’ (Remshardt 2004, p. 85). According to Remshardt, the nature of such laughter reflects the principal generic base of the grotesque in modern drama, which is not comedy but in fact tragedy; indeed, most contemporary grotesque dramas can be described as a blend of tragedy with farce (p. 92).

II

Before embarking on a discussion of the contemporary era, several important manifestations of the grotesque in modern theatre need to be pointed out, as they have exercised seminal influence on subsequent playwriting and theatre practice. First, there is the explosive merging of puppet theatre with serious drama by Alfred Jarry in his *Ubu* plays. In a recent biography of Jarry, Alastair Brotchie has entertainingly detailed how the author and his friends orchestrated their first production of *Ubu Roi* in 1896 as an attack on what they regarded as the stale conventions of both naturalist and symbolist drama. The clamorous emergence of the monstrous Père Ubu on the scene through the fireplace, with padded belly, brandishing a toilet brush in place of a sceptre and uttering his infamous ‘Merdre!’ has entered theatre history as not only a notorious outrage but also a truly revolutionary moment. Using a lack of resources to his advantage, Jarry emphasized the crudity of set and costume, and had his principal player mime action like entering through a non-existent door in the fashion of zero-budget amateur theatre; this angered audience members and critics as much as the vulgarity of the show (Brotchie 2011, pp. 123–70). While the event may have been viewed by its perpetrators as a prank to some extent, in his detailed analysis of the play, Ralf Remshardt has argued that Jarry inaugurated a tradition in which grotesque theatre ‘reviles and assaults the audience’, going beyond satire as ‘a social corrective’ (Remshardt 2004, p. 182).

Staging the world as a puppet universe, Jarry’s method corresponds with Wolfgang Kayser’s emphasis on alienation as the most fundamental feature of the grotesque. Moreover, Kayser gives a useful summary of dramatic precedents to Jarry in his discussion of pre-Romantic and Romantic drama that centres around puppet-like characters (Kayser 1966, pp. 40–5, 195, n. 26). Apart from relatively well-known works such as Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz’s *The New Menoza* (1774) or Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* (1837), Kayser’s list includes Hans Dietrich Grabbe’s play *Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Signification* (1826), a freewheeling piece that provided inspiration for Jarry’s ‘pataphysical dramaturgy’ (Remshardt 2004, p. 184). Jarry has gone a step further with his brand of the grotesque, however, since his theatre truly proposes ‘the representability of human relations in the context of a Punch-and-Judy show gone berserk’ (Remshardt 2004, p. 168). Furthermore, most commentators on *Ubu Roi* have noted that the play deliberately parodies Shakespeare’s historical plays and Racine’s tragedies by using their elements in the context of amateur theatrics and the puppet show. This early foregrounding of

citationality, crude and approximate as it may be, has become an important precursor for subsequent manifestations of the grotesque in the theatre.

An entire grotesque style was developed by a group of Italian playwrights between 1916 and 1925. It was known as the *teatro del grottesco* and its authors also depicted human beings as puppets. Whereas for Jarry, the grotesque of German Romanticism served mostly as an incidental model regarding form, the *teatro del grottesco* followed directly on from these German Romantics as far as the existential dimension of the puppet universe was concerned. Writing in 1928, Adriano Tilgher described the principal belief behind the work of the Italian group as ‘The absolute conviction that everything is vain and hollow, and that man is only a puppet in the hand of fate. Man’s pains and pleasures as well as his deeds are unsubstantial dreams in a world of ominous darkness that is ruled by blind fortune’ (qtd in Kayser 1966, p. 135).

The most famous were Luigi Chiarelli—the subtitle of whose play *The Mask and the Face. A Grotesque in Three Acts* (1916) provided the name for the movement—and Luigi Pirandello. Their focus was unrelentingly on depicting the self as split between different identities and masks, resulting in the abandonment of any unity of character (see Kayser 1966, pp. 135–7). Pirandello became one of the most important innovators in early twentieth-century theatre with his masterpiece, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), the initial reception of which was almost as tumultuous as that of *Ubu Roi*. The play includes grotesque scenes enacted as pantomime, and the monstrously grotesque character of Madame Pace, described as an ‘Apparition’, ‘a gross old harridan wearing a ludicrous carrotty-coloured wig with a single red rose stuck in at one side’ that makes the Actors and the Producer jump off the stage in fright (Pirandello 2000, p. 713). However, it is Pirandello’s radical deployment of metatheatricality that develops the emphasis of the *teatro del grottesco* on the fragmented nature of the self, enhances the disorienting quality of the play, and leaves the audience ‘on the brink of losing foothold on reality’ (Kayser 1966, p. 137). Ever since, metatheatrical elements such as multiple plays-within-plays and various kinds of role-playing within these have loomed large on the palette of authors of the dramatic grotesque.

The conviction that the world is ultimately a bleak place has also been ascribed to the theatre of the absurd, although this ignores the essential role of humour in the works of Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and the early plays of Samuel Beckett. Developing after World War II, the theatre of the absurd is a grotesque genre par excellence, since its central principle is to create a puzzling mélange of the incongruous. According to

Martin Esslin's well-known delineation, plot and dramatic structure are shattered in the theatre of the absurd and characters are disfigured and/or resemble puppets. Instead of mirroring reality, absurdist plays seem to reflect dreams and nightmares, and language is often reduced to 'incoherent babblings' (Esslin 1968, pp. 21–2). Esslin's umbrella definition inevitably comes across as only approximate due to the vital differences between the works of the individual playwrights discussed in his book: for instance, compare the nonsensical language of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1948) with Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) where language is overloaded with meaning, or the political dimension of Genet's *The Balcony* (1952) with Pinter's 'comedies of menace', which relate to politics very obliquely, if at all. Problems of definition aside, there is still no doubt that the theatre of the absurd has been recognized as perhaps the most influential genre of post-war theatre, and its multifaceted use of the grotesque has been widely emulated by contemporary playwrights.

Esslin famously saw the theatre of the absurd as a radical embodiment of the absurdity of existence. For him, absurdist plays voiced 'the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time', a time in which 'the certitudes and unshakeable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away' by the war, having been 'tested and found wanting' (Esslin 1968, p. 23). However, when absurdist works were first allowed to be performed in the countries of the Eastern Bloc (incidentally also in the early 1960s when Esslin published his seminal study), they were mostly interpreted as allegories of life under the totalitarian regime. The views of the influential Czech director Jan Grossman may serve as an example of this. Grossman was affiliated with the Prague theatre Na zábradlí (On the Balustrade), which was then the local hub of absurdist theatre, with the young playwright Václav Havel serving as his assistant. Grossman's most powerful productions included Alfred Jarry's *Král Ubu* (King Ubu, 1964), Havel's *Vyrozumění* (The Memorandum, 1965), and an adaptation of *The Trial* by Franz Kafka (*Proces*, 1966). For Grossman, the theatre of the absurd focused 'on a single basic phenomenon: the uniformity, banality, forcing into line, and standardization' brought about by an excessively bureaucratized and dogmatically ideological political regime (Grossman 1999, p. 138; my translation). As such, the theatre of the absurd was to unravel the parochialism that lay at the heart of society, a 'state of mind' that was responsible for 'manipulating the world and exploiting, degrading and depreciating all values' (p. 138). Grossman continued:

The parochial mentality is truly embodied [in the theatre of the absurd]: its imaginings, dreams and interpretations seem to be rooted in a climatically favourable environment, where they proliferate as tropical vegetation out of all proportion. [...] Objects grow over into an unnatural dimension, as do the people, albeit in a different sense. Made by humans, things slip out of human control, cease serving people, and devour them instead. (p. 138)

Passages such as the preceding demonstrate Grossman's keen awareness of the grotesque aspects of absurdist works, which is also apparent in the vocabulary he used to comment on them. Contrary to many early reviewers of absurdist plays in Western Europe, who complained of the alleged nihilism and lack of engagement in this new strand of theatre, Grossman and his fellow practitioners behind the Iron Curtain conceived of the genre as profoundly political and socially critical. Grossman wrote that 'The theatre of the absurd is analytical and produces, if you wish, a cold diagnosis. As a matter of principle, it does not offer solutions. Nevertheless, I would argue that its adherence to such principles does not stem from a certainty that the solution does not exist, but rather from the conviction that the solution will never be *given* to us in any way by anybody anywhere' (p. 141).

Although certainly not viewing the genre as nihilistic, Martin Esslin perceived it as a radicalization of the angst of the existentialists (see Esslin 1968, pp. 23–5). Grossman, on the other hand, saw the roots of the theatre of the absurd in realism. He asserted that while absurdity was created by hyperbole, 'only that which has been first stated with precision may be hyperbolized' (Grossman 1999, pp. 138–9). Absurdism was to be regarded as a form of hyper-realism, epitomized by Franz Kafka standing alongside Alfred Jarry as an ur-father of the theatre of the absurd (p. 139). Consequently, Grossman's brilliant absurdist version of Jarry's *Ubu* did not assault the spectators, as the original production did, nor could it be seen as vituperation that went beyond social satire (see Remshardt 2004, p. 182). What it did instead was to point out an overwhelming social malaise by confronting the patient 'in the most drastic manner with his potentially imminent destruction. Not in order to bring this destruction about, but rather to prevent it from happening' (Grossman 1999, p. 141). As part of its political mission, the production emphasized that, in Remshardt's succinct phrase, in a grotesque world, human relations 'can be expressed only in the primitive metaphors of power and desire' (Remshardt 2004,