



Absurdity In Stillness: A Biographical Approach to *The Water Station* by Ōta Shōgo

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Abstract. This research explores Ōta Shōgo's *The Water Station* using a biographical lens, concentrating on three key aspects of absurdist theater: the Anti-Hero, Anti-Dialogue, and Anti-Climax. Breaking away from conventional storytelling methods, the play introduces a cast of anonymous characters who move gradually and silently across the stage, briefly stopping at a leaking water pipe. These characters represent the Anti-Hero—individuals lacking a distinct purpose, choice, or identity. The performance's lack of spoken words introduce a powerful Anti-Dialogue component, substituting conversation with silence and physical gestures, which symbolically mirrors the playwright's experiences of trauma and disillusionment following the war. Moreover, the story does not follow a typical climax or conclusion, utilizing Anti-Climax to highlight the meaningless repetition inherent in human life. Through an examination of Ōta's personal history—especially his experiences of displacement during World War II and his interest in the concepts of time, slowness, and stillness—this paper illustrates how these influences shaped the play's form and tone. The study emphasizes that non-Western absurdist art can arise from deeply personal and historical backgrounds. Ultimately, *The Water Station* creates a reflective theatrical experience where silence communicates more than spoken words, encouraging viewers to engage with the themes of emptiness, ambiguity, and the quiet beauty of existence.

Keywords: Ōta Shōgo, absurdist drama, anti-hero, anti-dialogue, anti-climax, biographical approach, post-war theatre, Japanese drama

1. INTRODUCTION

Theatre has consistently served not just as a source of amusement but also as a reflection of cultural aspects that showcase the societal, philosophical, and emotional states of its era. In the 20th century, the emergence of absurdist theater stemmed from the devastation of warfare and feelings of existential gloom, pushing back against conventional playwriting and dismissing the notion of logical structure or coherent communication. As noted by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), this style illustrates "the absurdity of the human condition," portraying a world where life appears meaningless and language fails to convey significant ideas effectively. This trend was particularly evident among Western dramatists like Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, whose creations are well-known for deconstructing narrative clarity in favor of silence, redundancy, and confusion. (Esslin, 1961).

However, absurdism is not limited to a Western context. The impact of war, the disintegration of self, and the quest for purpose are global issues, leading Eastern theatre to create its unique form of absurdism. A significant contribution in this realm is by Japanese

playwright Ōta Shōgo, whose silent piece *The Water Station* (Mizu no Eki, 1981) offers a groundbreaking theatrical experience that completely omits spoken language. Ōta, witnessing the bombings of Hiroshima and their consequences, viewed silence as a meaningful area (Takemoto, 2013). His experiences of displacement, philosophical inquiry, and influences from Noh theatre and Zen Buddhism were pivotal in shaping his dramatic creations, characterized by stillness, simplicity, and quietude (Suter, 2002a).

This paper focuses on *The Water Station* as a text that exemplifies **complex dramatic objects**, which resist linear interpretation due to their symbolic, metaphysical, or culturally nuanced nature. The most prominent object in the play—a slow, perpetual drip of water—functions not merely as a prop but as a metaphorical center of the performance. Drawing on phenomenological performance theory (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), this paper interprets the water pipe as a **complex object** that signifies suffering, time, impermanence, and rebirth. Characters, unnamed and unidentified, pass through the stage only to pause at this object, engaging with it in silent rituals. Thus, the object becomes a gateway to the unconscious and to metaphysical inquiry, akin to how Beckett's tree functions in *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 1952).

This study aims to examine *The Water Station* through three fundamental principles of absurdist theater: the Anti-Hero, Anti-Dialogue, and Anti-Climax. Each of these aspects defies the classical Aristotelian notions of narrative, character, and conclusion. The Anti-Hero depicted in Ōta's narrative lacks the agency, valor, or defined purpose generally found in Western heroes. Instead of actively seeking to resolve conflicts, the characters in *The Water Station* advance at a sluggish pace, seemingly burdened by their past and memories, a state that Esslin (Esslin, 1961)

links to the contemporary human experience. In a similar vein, Anti-Dialogue is emphasized by the complete lack of spoken words; the entire performance unfolds in silence, a bold decision that subverts the conventional role of language in communication. As Susan Sontag points out in *Against Interpretation* (1967), silence in the realm of art can often convey messages more powerfully than spoken language, serving as a form of defiance against the overwhelming use of words and excessive analysis. The analytical framework utilized here draws from various disciplines, merging absurdist theory, phenomenological performance theory, and biographical analysis. The concept of absurdism put forth by Martin (Esslin, serves as the foundational idea for themes such as anti-1961) heroism, nonsensical dialogue, and lack of resolution. Erika Fischer-Lichte's focus on the physical experience and sensory effects of theatre elucidates the importance of visual silence and immobility in Ōta's work. At the same

time, Susan Sontag's insights on formalist opposition and David Krasner's views on character fragmentation lend credence to the play's departure from conventional dramatic coherence.

In conclusion, this research posits that Ōta Shōgo's *The Water Station* presents a non-Western perspective on absurdity that is intricately tied to cultural uniqueness, personal suffering, and spiritual exploration. Instead of replicating Western absurdist frameworks, Ōta reinterprets absurdity through an aesthetic that emphasizes silence, temporal elements, and presence. His method not only disputes prevailing Eurocentric views but also enhances our comprehension of absurdism as a worldwide, adaptable, and culturally meaningful expression of theatrical defiance

2. MATERIAL & METHODS

This study adopts a **qualitative descriptive method** integrated with a **biographical and literary approach** to analyze *The Water Station* by Ōta Shōgo. The research investigates how the core absurdist elements—**Anti-Hero**, **Anti-Dialogue**, and **Anti-Climax**—are embedded in both the structure and aesthetics of the play. These elements are not only viewed as theatrical techniques but as expressions of postwar trauma and philosophical silence, drawing deeply from Ōta's life and cultural surroundings.

2.1. Research Design and Approach

Qualitative research is appropriate for literary and theatrical analysis as it allows for the exploration of nuanced meanings, symbolic patterns, and artistic intentions embedded in texts. According to Denzin and Lincoln (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), qualitative inquiry emphasizes interpretive frameworks, which are crucial for examining how non-verbal elements (such as silence, gesture, and stillness) convey meaning in performance texts.

The biographical approach is used to correlate the author's life events—specifically Ōta's experiences growing up in postwar Japan—with the theatrical silence, stillness, and existential imagery portrayed in his drama. His works reflect not only a rejection of Western logocentrism but also an embodiment of Japanese spiritual and aesthetic philosophies such as *mujō* (impermanence) and *ma* (the pause or space between things), common in Zen thought (Zeami, 1984)

This approach enables a deeper understanding of how personal and cultural trauma inform narrative choices and structural disruptions, aligning with the frameworks of absurdist drama

proposed by Martin Esslin (Esslin, 1961 1961) and expanded through postdramatic theory by Hans-Thies Lehmann. (Lehmann, 2006)

2.2. Data Sources

The research utilizes a combination of primary and secondary sources.

- Primary Source:

The English-translated script of *The Water Station* (Ōta, 1981) is the main object of analysis. This script serves as the textual foundation to identify dramatic structure, character representation, and stage direction that relate to absurdist conventions.

- Secondary Sources:

These include: o Biographical materials on Ōta Shōgo (Suter, 2002b; Takemoto, 2013)

- o Theoretical texts on absurdism(Esslin, 1961), postdramatic theatre (Lehmann, 2006) and phenomenological theatre (Fischer-Lichte, 2008)
- o Philosophical sources on silence and meaning,(Sontag, 1967) o Traditional Japanese aesthetics (Zeami, 1984)
- o Comparative scripts from absurdist theatre such as *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 1952) and *The Chairs* (Ionesco, 1952). (Beckett, 1952)

These materials help contextualize *The Water Station* both within the Japanese theatrical tradition and the global absurdist movement.

2.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis process is divided into several interrelated steps:

- Biographical Contextualization:

A thorough review of Ōta Shōgo's background, particularly his experiences as a child during the war, the loss of his father, and his engagement with Noh theatre, is used to interpret the silence and slowness in his work. This echoes Susan Sontag's (Sontag, 1967b) argument that form and meaning in art can be deeply shaped by the creator's historical position and psychological state.

- **Structural Mapping:**

The dramatic text is broken down into key scenes and stage actions. Particular attention is given to how the play eliminates verbal language and linear action, constructing meaning through nonverbal communication, thus fulfilling the anti-dialogue and anticlimax aspects of absurd drama.

- **Character Analysis:**

Each character's entry and exit, lack of identity, and passive movement are examined as representations of the anti-hero. These figures exist without traditional motivation or development, illustrating the existential vacuum emphasized by absurdist theorists.

- **Symbolic Object Analysis:**

Central to this study is the interpretation of the water pipe as a complex object, both materially (in its repeated dripping) and metaphorically (as a symbol of life, persistence, or futility). Using Fischer-Lichte's (2008) theory of performance and embodiment, the object is analyzed in terms of its relational meaning and its interaction with performers.

- **Comparative Analysis:**

Thematic and structural comparisons are made with Western absurdist works to situate Ōta's dramaturgy within the global discourse. This includes parallels in silence (Beckett, 1952), circular structure (Ionesco, 1952b), and passive protagonists (with Genet), while also highlighting distinct cultural underpinnings that separate *The Water Station* as a uniquely Eastern articulation of absurdity.

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2.4. Materials and Scope

The resources examined include the script, stage notes, academic critiques, and literature on theatrical theory. This research centers specifically on *The Water Station* as an example of absurdist theater within Eastern performance. While other pieces by Ōta could provide

additional context, this analysis deliberately restricts its focus to achieve (Ōta, 1981) thoroughness and accuracy in its evaluation.

The research acknowledges that the play's quietness and lack of movement are not just artistic decisions but embody cultural and philosophical significance related to Japan's postwar experience. Consequently, the approach combines an examination of the text with cultural critique, aiming to enhance both absurdist theory and the study of drama across cultures.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part examines the ways absurdist features appear in *The Water Station* by Ōta Shōgo, concentrating on Anti-Hero, Anti-Dialogue, and Anti-Climax. The analysis is framed by insights from the playwright's biography, the trauma faced by Japan after the war, and the philosophical ideas woven into the play. Each subsection relates the theoretical concepts to the actual text and performance aspects of the script.

1. Anti-Hero: The Passive Figure In Motion

In contrast to typical main characters who have distinct goals, motivations, and undergo personal growth, the characters in *The Water Station* embody traits of the Anti-Hero as described in absurdist plays (Esslin, 1961). These individuals seem to lack names and voices and move very slowly through their environment. Their travels lack a defined start or finish, illustrating the existential uncertainty that infuses the play.

For instance, the Woman with a Bundle, commonly seen as the primary character, trudges across the stage, carrying what appears to be her possessions or possibly her memories. She does not pursue redemption or closure. Her actions of pausing, drinking, and advancing imply a cycle of repetition and pointlessness rather than a clear goal. This supports Martin's (Esslin, 1961) viewpoint that an absurd hero continues to act without any true meaning, preferring action to logic, even when both have lost their value.

Additionally, this Anti-Hero concept can be tied to Ōta Shōgo's personal history. Growing up in the shadow of World War II, Ōta witnessed not only the death of his father but also the widespread confusion of a nation that faced defeat. The powerless characters in *The Water Station* reflect a society scarred by loss, nuclear devastation, and struggles with identity. These figures symbolize a populace that keeps moving forward, not driven by hope, but rather by routine.

Furthermore, the simple act of walking becomes a form of existential defiance. Their slow movements are reminiscent of Beckett's characters, yet the figures created by Ōta do not walk in place; they traverse a landscape of stillness. Their heavy presence represents the psychological burdens of memory, guilt, and endurance. Viewed in this way, the Anti-Hero evolves from merely a rehashed figure to a representation of historical suffering.

2. Anti-Dialogue: The Sound Of Silence

One of the most striking features of the play is its total lack of spoken words. In absurdist theatre, Anti-Dialogue goes beyond mere quietness to challenge standard forms of verbal interaction (Lehmann, 2006). In *The Water Station*, silence is not just an accessory; it is fundamental to the theatrical experience.

(Fischer-Lichte, 2008) asserts that theatre can provoke significant change through non-verbal communication, highlighting how the body communicates meaning. Ōta's form of silent theatre takes this idea to an extreme level. Through movements, breathing, stances, and the use of space, meaning is expressed with a raw power that the spoken word could weaken. For instance, the characters' engagement with the dripping water pipe evolves into ritual-like, highly meaningful actions. Every moment of hesitation before taking a drink or the meticulous examination of the pipe hints at an inner dialogue that remains unheard.

On a personal level, Ōta drew inspiration from Noh theatre and the tranquility found in nature. In various interviews and writings, he frequently noted how language fails to encapsulate the pain and disconnection of contemporary existence. His choice to avoid dialogue can be interpreted as a critique of the postwar political conversation in Japan, which often seemed empty and detached from the suffering faced by the populace. Thus, the silence in *The Water Station* carries political, existential, and aesthetic significance.

Additionally, this silence enhances the audience's awareness. Without spoken words directing their understanding, viewers are compelled to pay attention to subtle aspects, such as hand movements, the direction of a look, or the rhythm of a step. (Sontag, 1967) famously stated that silence can clarify perception, prompting the observer to engage with the essence of the form. Therefore, the Anti-Dialogue present in *The Water Station* does not eliminate communication; it transforms it.

In the history of its performances, productions of the play have been celebrated for their immersive experience, often compared to a meditative state. Critics like Jonathan Kalb

(2009) have described the silence as “a theatrical vacuum in which meaning condenses like mist,” reinforcing the transformative power of AntiDialogue.

3 Anti-Climax: Narrative without Resolution

In classic Western theatre, the climax serves as the peak of tension that eventually leads to a resolution. Conversely, in absurdist plays, the AntiClimax disrupts this expectation by removing any sense of narrative advancement. The Water Station illustrates this through its repetitive and stagnant nature.

The performance starts and finishes in silence. Characters come and go without any noticeable impact on their environment. The only unchanging element is the slow drip from the water pipe. There are no discoveries, no conflicts, and no emotional release. This lack of a climax mirrors the ideas of Albert Camus and the absurd reality of human existence: the quest for meaning within a senseless universe.

Ōta's approach to Anti-Climax transcends mere structure; it also engages with metaphysical themes. The feeling of stillness throughout the play resonates with the Buddhist notion of *mujō*, or impermanence, and the Zen focus on being in the moment rather than striving for progress. The continuously dripping water symbolizes both endurance and futility, leaving the audience with a lingering sense of suspended time and a life devoid of purpose.

From a biographical perspective, this showcases Ōta's profound fascination with Japanese aesthetics alongside his postwar disenchantment with Western modernism. His dismissal of straightforward storytelling reflects a longing for a more reflective and circular approach to creativity. This allows him to merge Eastern and Western absurdist ideas, forming a distinct theatrical expression.

Audience responses have ranged significantly, from irritation to spiritual appreciation. In Japanese settings, the anti-climactic structure is frequently welcomed as part of *mono no aware*, the beauty in transience. In contrast, Western settings often question long-standing beliefs about the role of theatre. This cultural clash highlights Ōta's creative contributions even further.

4 Complex Objects and Performative Meaning

The central element of the play—the water station—acts as a multifaceted symbol that carries deep metaphorical meaning. It represents more than just a water source; it is a ritual space for pause, contemplation, and rejuvenation. Each character's engagement with it is

distinct, indicating that the object presents different meanings based on the character's silent context.

According to Fischer-Lichte's (2008) performance theory, the water pipe derives its significance not from its physical existence but from the actions performed around it. For the Woman with a Bundle, the pipe acts as a short-lived refuge. For the One-Legged Man, it symbolizes a battleground. For the Children, it sparks inquisitiveness. These varied interactions transform the object into a storytelling mechanism without the need for dialogue.

This emphasis on objects rather than spoken words is characteristic of absurdist and postdramatic theatre, where understanding comes from the visual presentation rather than the storyline. The water pipe embodies themes of survival, recurrence, and spiritual longing, echoing the experiences of Ōta's generation. It serves as both a concrete and symbolic focal point of the drama.

In terms of design, productions frequently highlight the sound and location of the water pipe. It is positioned at the center yet lacks visual distinction, underscoring its contradictory essence as something both ordinary and hallowed. In certain performances, the pipe is illuminated to accentuate the rhythm of the water, acting as a metronome that measures existential time.

5. Comparative Absurdism: East Meets West

When looking at Western absurdist works like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco's *The Chairs*, *The Water Station* seems more extreme in its focus on stillness and silence. While Beckett uses minimal yet impactful dialogue to convey feelings of despair and the essence of waiting, Ōta eliminates language. Similarly, although Ionesco creates absurdity through dramatization and disorder, Ōta accomplishes this through a sense of emptiness and the passage of time.

Despite these differences, the core philosophies remain alike. All these playwrights confront the meaninglessness of human life, the failure of communication, and the unraveling of narrative significance. However, Ōta's background in Eastern traditions and his artistic sensibility introduce unique aspects, especially the spiritual practice of observing, waiting, and remaining idle.

This intercultural analysis shows that absurdism transcends being strictly a Western concept; it serves as a worldwide reaction to modern times. Consequently, *The Water Station*

is not only a reflection of Japanese history but also an addition to global theatre, illustrating that absurdity transcends language and cultural divides.

Future research could delve into how modern audiences, particularly in a digital age or post-COVID environment, connect with the themes of solitude, routine, and silence present in the play. Ōta's creations hold significant relevance today, prompting us to rethink what it means to act, to communicate, and to wait in a reality where certainty is no longer assured.

4. CONCLUSION

This research has explored the absurdist elements in Ōta Shōgo's *The Water Station* through a biographical and theoretical lens, with a focus on the three primary absurdist components: Anti-Hero, Anti-Dialogue, and Anti-Climax. Drawing from Martin Esslin's foundational theory of the Theatre of the Absurd, along with contributions from Fischer-Lichte, Lehmann, and Sontag, the study revealed that *The Water Station* embodies a unique, culturally hybrid form of absurdist drama rooted in post-war Japanese aesthetics and trauma.

From the Introduction, we established the urgency of examining Eastern absurdist drama as an equally potent response to modern existential disillusionment. Unlike its Western counterparts, Ōta Shōgo's play offers a contemplative, silent theatricality that is grounded in the Buddhist perception of impermanence (*mujō*) and the trauma of a society navigating the aftermath of nuclear devastation and imperial collapse. The objective of this study was to analyze how absurdist tropes manifest in a silent, non-narrative, and object-centered performance, while the method utilized was a qualitative, descriptive literary analysis supported by a biographical approach.

The Materials and Methods section laid out the basis of the study by examining Ōta Shōgo's background, his influence from Noh and traditional Japanese aesthetics, and his philosophical skepticism toward language. Drawing upon texts, critical essays, and performance records, we analyzed *The Water Station* as a primary text while referencing key absurdist theories and cultural frameworks to enrich interpretation.

The Results and Discussion highlighted the following key points:

- Anti-Hero was observed through the nameless, voiceless, and passive figures that traverse the stage without destination or transformation. These characters reflect both existential stasis and historical trauma, mirroring Ōta's own experience of loss and cultural alienation in post-war Japan.

- Anti-Dialogue was demonstrated through the radical silence of the play. Rather than acting as an absence, the silence became a communicative mode in itself, drawing attention to gesture, space, and ritual. The inefficacy of language, especially in representing trauma, is central to Ōta's aesthetic rebellion against spoken theatre.
- Anti-Climax emerged in the structureless, cyclical nature of the play. Lacking conventional narrative resolution, the performance unfolds as a ritual of repetition and stillness, evoking a sense of futility and persistence that resonates with Camus' notion of the absurd condition.
- The water pipe, as a complex object, became a site of ritual interaction and symbolic transformation, representing both survival and spiritual thirst. It acted as a non-verbal, non-linear narrative device around which all meaning and stillness revolved.
- Finally, a comparative reflection revealed how Ōta's work dialogues with, and yet diverges from, Western absurdist drama. While Beckett and Ionesco employed sparse language and surreal structure to destabilize meaning, Ōta relied on silence, duration, and minimal movement, anchoring absurdity in the aesthetics of emptiness rather than chaos.

In conclusion, Ōta Shōgo's *The Water Station* is not only a profound theatrical experiment but also a philosophical meditation on silence, stillness, and survival. It challenges Western-centric understandings of absurdism by introducing an Eastern metaphysical sensibility that reframes passivity as endurance and silence as articulation. This research contributes to a broader understanding of absurdist drama as a global, multifaceted genre—one capable of addressing existential concerns across cultures and histories.

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