

“SEARCHING FOR EXISTENTIALISM”

A ONE ACT PLAY:

CHARACTERS:

PAUL: a middle aged man with a keen sense of propriety.

BETH: a younger woman, in a relationship with him.

Duration: Approximatly Twenty to Thirty Minutes.

SETTING:

The action of this play takes place in a McDonalds restaurant in Melbourne, and in a bank nearby. Though the time is not specified, the action occurs on a weekday in the early 90's.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE: The Sollipsist:

A man sits in a McDonalds restaurant, alone. The lighting is by no means dingy. On stage are the round plastic tables, that are a commonality in this place. There is a glass framed mural on the back wall. PAUL, in his mid twenties wearing a brown suit, absorbed in his own thoughts and presence, starts to question his feelings.

PAUL: Loss and betrayal, I suppose. Lost and betrayed by God and that woman? Where is she? That stupid bitch, where is she?

[He walks to the mural, peering into his reflection. He walks to the centre of the stage, and the spotlight grows on him.]

“I dreamt I was in a sea absent of light,
but there was light! For I could see the looming dark waves -
like tentative Kingdoms rising and falling at random.
Lightning reached down from the heavens blindly
“What a chaos!” I cried, and I shook in the grasping water.
Then suddenly I realised where the light came from that allowed my vision -
It was I who saw the chaos and to whom the chaos existed.
The light of my mind which percieved the lack of order
I allowed for the sinister sea as it allowed for me - yet I was free of it!
I was in this sea, but not of its salt
At this realization I vowed to become the eternal thorn in the monstrous sea’s side.
I vowed to be man.”

[He looks up, as if a realisation had grown in him and the lights go out.]

SCENE TWO: Recovering Consciousness:

[There are people in the restaurant now, who occupy the other tables. They are smoking and talking, which becomes less apparent as the scene opens. Beth enters, carrying a handbag, which she puts on the table.]

PAUL: How long have we known each other?

BETH: Why?

PAUL: No, really – How long has it been. I'm beginning to wonder.

BETH: About Three and a half Years. It's not like i've been counting! And Sorry I took so long, there was a great little market on the corner. You can pick up anything there, it's great.

PAUL: Yes, I have been thinking a lot recently about city life – I mean, we really are very fortunate to be able to do this. We are lucky to move around so freely like we do.

BETH: Yeah, but we still have our moorings though don't we, I mean at least I've still got my job.

PAUL: Please! You treat me as if – you have no respect for my sensitivity or intelligence.

BETH: Look, it wasn't my fault you packed up your bags and left everything. I don't know Paul, maybe there are things I don't know about you – you're being so surly, these days. I'm not sure if that's the right word or not. Ever since you left your job, you are seeing things. I have no way of telling who you are.

PAUL: Don't you get it though, do you? You're right, I have changed. Why do you want to know who I am? How could you ever? You should try and fill your own gaps with understanding of yourself, that's the only way you'll ever be someone.

BETH: *[looking away]* You're deluded.

PAUL: Three and A half years. That's too long for a relationship to be in stalemate. Nothing has happened.

BETH: Too right. Of course nothing has happened. I can't even remember the last time we did anything passionate; we never do things like we used to. Remember how we used to spend hours just – doing things together. Maybe we have to accept that we hold on to different things, I mean look at me and look at you. All you seem to hold on to is anxiety, I guess.

PAUL: I don't hold on to anything, thankyou. At least I don't deceive myself trying to find meaning in things. Take a look at yourself, woman!

[BETH Runs out, leaving Paul bewildered as the lights fade.]

SCENE THREE.

PAUL and BETH meet some days later in the street nearby the McDonalds Reataurant. Despite the cold and wintry conditions, the more open environment suggests a reconciliation between the two characters.

[PAUL sneezes]

PAUL: This damned chill, it's killing me. I'm not sure if I can last for much longer.

[He puts his head down, and then faces upwards as he speaks.]

Look, Beth. I've been thinking recently; and I've come to the conclusion -I think I'm wrong. And there's been times, and there are times -when I can be a mean, despotic bully; it's just that it's my own world I live in, and don't get me wrong – that can be a good thing, but sometimes i'm trapped in my own thoughts. I walk around like a zombie – I'm free but I'm lost. Freedom didn't help a person to live, it's like it all means nothing.

BETH: Can we get over this? It's driving me crazy, I don't want to live like a TV drama!

PAUL: No, really, let me finish. I mean you have things to buy, and basically, you're a consumer.

But when I ask myself what I am, all I see is images. This road, these houses, they don't mean anything. And I find myself just wondering around, no job, no parents, and when I see the nothingness in my dreams, it's as if I slide right in.

BETH: Have you ever considered trying to find another job, I mean you've been unemployed for almost as long as we've been together. I wonder about you sometimes.....

PAUL: Three and a half years.

BETH: So you keep telling me.

SCENE FOUR: The Tyranny of Choice.

The same scene is continued, but a jump in time has occurred. As well as this, a shift in the characters also takes place.

BETH: What? You're out of money. I don't believe this.

[Pause]

Well. There's no way I'm letting you get your depressed little hands on mine. I've worked bloody hard for it.

PAUL: What is money anyway? Is it not just an ends to a purpose? I think that most people are attracted to the sense that making money is a purpose in life. What is the cause of the purpose? And aren't you unhappy when reached that goal?

BETH: No. You need money, Paul.

PAUL: Stop it. I simply don't want to live in a world of creations. And abundance of money is one of those. What I want is reality, or maybe to break free from reality, or to have reality imposed on me, I'm not sure.

You know I was thinking, wouldn't it be fun to get arrested; I mean like I was saying before, I'm a free man, and I'm starting to think that I hate it! Liberation can be found in the most absurd places, and it can be lost in the mundane.

Bascally; there's a bank not far from here, and if I were to perhaps "create" some money, I was wondering if you would like to join me?

BETH: How bad could it be?

PAUL: Exactly. It's an act of unsurpassed authenticity. I mean, the creation would be huge!

[he pauses for a second.]

One thing I don't get though; why are you in on this?

BETH: You will see, I think. You will see.

SCENE FIVE: Awful Freedom.

IN front of the Bank, it is cold and blustery and forboding.

BETH: Hi.

PAUL: Hey. As you can see, this is a very strange moment indeed. And, to be honest, I have no way of reading into what I feel right now.

I'm worried about this: Is stealing, knowing full well, that you will get twenty years in Jail, any better than cutting your life short? I might have done this if life's purpose was no meaning. Do you realise Paul? I want freedom. I resent freedom.

I am here, in front of the Bank, from which I could steal. My thoughts have already cast themselves into the future moment, so that I am not really conscious in the present. I know what I will say, at the time I will move.

Now I see another me transforming. In the future, I walk in a write a cheque, and the weak conformist inside me is revealed. Perhaps I already am the person who I will be, perhaps both, perhaps neither.

BETH: Are we doing this or not?

PAUL: I think so. If we are caught, or if we are not, what do you think you will do?

BETH: I don't know, maybe it will be the same, maybe life is unchanging. How about you?

PAUL: I think I need to be caught. I urge restriction. If I am free, then I will continue to be lost, but constriction I feel. In all in malice, will be ultimately liberating.

REFLECTION STATEMENT:

The one act play, "Searching for existentialism" represents the culmination of almost a year's research into ways of thinking and structures of philosophy and playwrights. The major work itself has undergone a large progression and evolution as different and emerging perspectives were discovered in the investigative process. Whilst each step in this process represented new insight, the major work often took on "lateral" changes in perspective rather than depth.

Although I have argued in my process diary, that the major work process has returned with the research into existentialism, to a connection to the original concept - the staging of a play similar to "seachange," the process diary demarcates stages in this process.

In term 4 of 2000, I submitted a proposal to the Head of English outlining my intention to research into the "ABC" series "Seachange," and effective aspects of melodrama and its structures. This was achieved through the continuation of a project developed in the preliminary course, however, lack of reading available in this area was a limiting factor. The article "Frozen out" and "The dreamers" by Jack Davis were used as a preliminary research into "other cultures," and theatrical format, though this was not taken up in full detail.

The pairing of these two studies was a continuation of preliminary course work, and personally, one of my biggest aspirations was to capture and recreate the "charm" exhibited in the rough irony of seachange and the dreamers:

ROY: Oh, Eli bought it this morning.

He starts to feel around for his thongs.

DOLLY: [*Threatening him with the bottle*] Roy Wallitch, you're a rotten stinkin liar. You spent the kids money on this, didn't you?

ROY: I tell you Eli an Peter got it.

[He starts to get up.]

DOLLY: You're not only useless, you're a bloody liar as well. You spent the kids dinner money, didn't you?

ROY: Shit, I'm getting out of 'ere.

The study of “travelling north” was quite extensive, and the following excerpt from my analysis, represents the way I was able to integrate some of the structures, and character traits that Williamson employs, into my own short drama:

“The couples travelling opens up a sense of liberation in the play, signified by *vivaldi* playing in the background and images of twilight in the stage directions, however Williamson continues to delve into the patterns of interactions in close relationships. A sense of “tentativeness” occurs in the rhythms of dialogue, and the analysis by Fitzpatrick used the following example, from Act 1

FRANK: I’ve been thinking a lot about where we should settle, and I think we should go up into the tropics, north of Townsville.

FRANCES: Yes, I think it would be lovely, but I don’t know if I’d like to be quite so far away from my family.

FRANK: If you want my opinion, the further you get away from those daughters of yours the better.

The analysis also pointed to the structure of the play; unlike some of Williamson’s earlier plays, travelling north moves freely between time and place, allowing the elements of the human experience to be juxtaposed; namely the winter of Melbourne “*It is damp and cold. We are in a room or perhaps a garden,*” and its associated qualities of self-absorption, loneliness and consternation, and the contrasting values of the north, with introspection, and the quest for definition.”

However, the key area of research was the exploration of the explicit and implicit values and philosophies of existentialist playwrights such as Simone De Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre.

My one act play, “searching for existentialism,” is aimed to express some of the key ideas of existentialism to mature viewers. My representation has been deliberately chosen as refined rather than experimental, as I wanted to convey the implications of this philosophy through the expression of the characters, rather than a complex plot structure.

In existentialist thought, with its roots in post-war theatre of the absurd; Mankind is ultimately free, but ultimately lost. Meaning is detached from the everyday. In fact according to theologian Paul Tillich, existentialism arises from the “experience of meaninglessness.” If we all endure this deprivation of meaning, then, whether we are fully aware of it or not, we are existentialists. The role of plays embodying this philosophy is to give expression to this “human predicament.”

My portrayal of existentialism comes through with the characterization employed by Williamson – Paul is the “restless searcher,” the existentialist, though lost without any real “roots.” Like Frank in *Travelling North*, he has an easily offended sense of propriety, and seems diametrically opposed to BETH, who although “inauthentic” in Paul’s perception, has a seemingly full identity in consumerism and all things “kitsch.”

PAUL: No, really, let me finish. I mean you have things to buy, and basically, you're a consumer. But when I ask myself what I am, all I see is images. This road, these houses, they don't mean anything. And I find myself just wondering around, no job, no parents, and when I see the nothingness in my dreams, it's as if I slide right in.

For Beth, everything is cut and dried, and questions exist to be answered, and she finds answers, even if they are in imposed structures. For Paul, the questions of life are an experience. Paul, not so much the protagonist, but dominant character, ultimately finds answers constricting as they are limits, ends and as such, false to experience. Paul's character is the manifestation of everything existential in my research. Existentialism challenges convention – we normally associate truth with answers, but it may be questioning that is the most truly active way to be; real insight here might not mean having answers, but understanding how everything can be questioned.

In "*Travelling North*," Williamson has made a noted movement away from the structures seen in his earlier plays such as "*the club*" and "*what if you died tomorrow?*" in that the action of Frank and Frances moves seamlessly –not only through a period of 4 years, but through place (Melbourne to North Queensland.)

In my analysis of Williamson's work, the greatest impact has been in appreciation of methods he employs; despite the fact that many of the methods I have used, do not in any way correspond to those used by Williamson, I feel that an understanding of them has shaped my work.

Scene One is entitled *the solipsus*, and it embodies most powerfully; Paul's notion of questioning. It is an appropriation of a poem by Camus. The absurd, ironically provides a counter balance for reason.

Then suddenly I realised where the light came from that allowed my vision -

It was I who saw the chaos and to whom the chaos existed.

The light of my mind which perceived the lack of order

I allowed for the sinister sea as it allowed for me - yet I was free of it!