

# ALBERT CAMUS: INSIDE THE OUTSIDER

Albert Camus was born in Algeria in 1913 in a working class family. In his early years he has worked a various jobs - in the weather bureau, in an automobile-accessory firm, in a shipping company - to help pay for his University courses.

After graduation he's chosen journalism for a career. His report on problems of the Muslims of the Kabylie region prompted the Algerian government to action and brought him public notice. During 1935-38 Camus ran the Théâtre de l'Equipe, a theatrical company that produced plays by Gide, Sygne, Malraux, Dostoevsky, and others.

During World War II Camus was one of the leading writers of the French Resistance. In 1943 on the opening night of Sartre's drama "Flies" Camus met Sartre and recruited him to a Resistance group, Combat. They issued a journal of the same name.

Although both of them were considered close minded, Camus always protested being called existentialist. As for Sartre, central to his view is commitment to the connected pair of ideas that 'existence precedes essence' and that we are indeed free.

In the "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus stated: "There is only one really philosophical question, and that is suicide".

Camus insisted on describing his view as 'absurdist'. He argued that humankind absurd condition consists in the gratuitous nature of the relationship between humanity and the world; the fact that neither has any intrinsic meaning is 'the only bond between them', as he puts it. This invites one of three responses: literal suicide, intellectual suicide in form of accepting some form of religious solace, or courageous acceptance and embrace of absurdity of things. This point of view is predominantly stated in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", apart from his novels. Sisyphus condemned for eternity to a futile task - never succeeding in getting a boulder to the top of a hill - that in view of the fact that 'the struggle itself' confers meaning, 'one must imagine Sisyphus happy.' Camus' novels exemplify and expand on this central theme, and gave it a powerful hold on the imagination of his time.

## IN PROFILE

### Albert Camus

Algerian-born French writer and thinker Albert Camus (1913–1960) met Sartre in Paris in 1943, and the two forged a close friendship, which lasted until they fell out in 1951 over their opposing views on communism. Although he rejected the label of existentialism, Camus explored many of the same themes, such as individual freedom and the futile, or “absurd,” attempt to find meaning in a meaningless world. His 1946 novel *The Stranger* (or *The Outsider*) is a brilliant study of 20th-century alienation, while in the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1956), he analyzes the nihilism prevalent in postwar thought.

ALBERT CAMUS OUTSIDE HIS  
PUBLISHER'S OFFICE IN PARIS, 1955

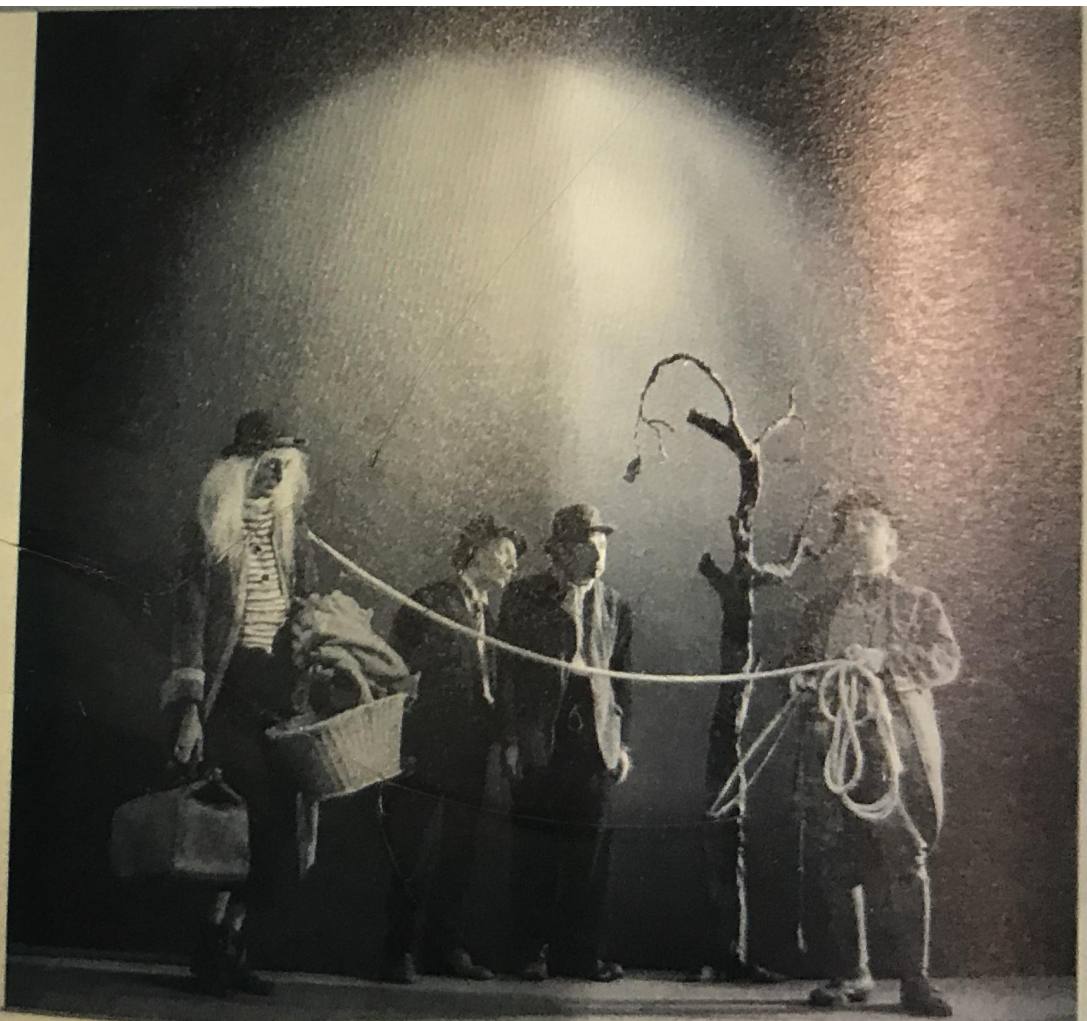


## IN CONTEXT

### The Theater of the Absurd

Existentialist views as expressed by Sartre and Camus (see box, p.270) lay at the basis of a new kind of theater that rose to prominence in Paris in the 1950s. The works of such playwrights as Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Eugène Ionesco abandoned traditional dramatic structure and logical stories in favor of anti-realistic situations, nonlinear or entirely absent plots, and baffled-seeming, purposeless characters who are often confused about their own identity. Beckett's famous *Waiting for Godot* (1956) is the seminal Absurdist play, the plight of its two endlessly, hopelessly waiting characters Vladimir and Estragon exemplifying the essential precariousness and futility of existence.

PRODUCTION OF *WAITING FOR GODOT*  
IN PARIS, JUNE 1956



As a philosopher Camus remained in a shadow of Sartre unfairly, but even less excusable was a fact that his contribution to philosophy has become overshadowed that of Simone de Beauvoir. She was accomplished feminist and novelist, but her philosophical contribution has been subordinated to her achievements in those fields.

Camus opposed both Marxists and feminist views in Beauvoir writings. He insisted that every individual should embrace the absurd condition of human existence and promoted life rich in willful experience. The Absurd defines the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and a human inability to find any in a purposeless, meaningless or chaotic and irrational universe.

Camus emphasized two points of Absurd:

- Lucid reason to know its limits.  
When reason explores the world and becomes aware of its irrationality.
- Absurd is a passion most harrowing of all.  
The intellectual and emotional parts of absurd are inseparable from each other.



