Chapter X

The One-Act Play and the Theatre of the Absurd

I

The One-Act Play

An interesting phenomenon in the realm of drama in the twentieth century is the growth of the one-act play. It is not that the one-act play is an altogether new thing in Western theatre. In point of time its history goes far back to the short Italian farces, called 'Commedia dell'arte', which flourished from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and the miracles, moralities and interludes of the Middle Ages. It was an important part of folk drama and a favourite with wandering players, who found it indispensable for centuries. But it suffered greatly during the sixteenth century in England when drama became wholly professional. In the seventeenth century, it found no place on the stage, while it was revived during the next century in degenerated forms of farces and burlesques. The nineteenth century made its position still worse as it came to be admitted "only for ignominious performances as a curtain-raiser, while late arrivals stumbled into the stalls." It is only the repertory movement that gave the one-act play a new lease of life.


R.J. Rees considers the morality of Everyman "the most famous one-act play in the World" (An Introduction to English Literature, p. 327).

2. John Hampden, Twenty-Four One-Act Plays, Intro., pp. v-vi
The Repertory Theatre Movement that grew early in this century gave birth to such regional theatres as the Abbey, Dublin; the Gaiety, Manchester; the Liverpool Repertory Theatre; the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre, and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. With these theatres were associated such playwrights as J.N. Synge, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Stanley Houghton, John Drinkwater and others, who along with full-length plays, wrote a number of one-act plays of great merit. But the demand for the one-act play in the Repertory Theatre did not last long, and 'repertory' itself was weakened by the First World War together with many other factors. Fortunately, the one-act play was saved from extinction by the Amateur Drama Movement, which had begun in 1918. And it is in this amateur field that the one-act play has continued to develop as an art form. 3

This, briefly, is the history of the growth of the one-act play in Britain. It has been sketched here because it will help us to see how far and in what ways the one-act play in Assamese is a product of Western influence. It is true that plays in one act are not a new thing in Indian literature. The Sanskrit vyāyoga and utṣṛṣṭikāñka, for example, are plays in one act, the former limiting its action to a day. 4 Nor is the single-act play unknown to pre-British Assamese drama. The ankiyā nāts of medieval Assam are all plays in one act. But in no way can they be said to be predecessors of the modern Assamese one-act play. A single act alone would not make a one-act play in the modern sense. The

3. E.R. Wood, Seven Short-Plays, Bombay, 1960, Intro., p. 6
4. S.D., pp. 347-348
A modern one-act play in Assamese does not reveal any of the characteristics of the medieval ankiyā nāt. Whether it is in the subject-matter, style or technique, the modern Assamese one-act play has undoubted affinity with the Western one-act play that has developed in the present century. In fact, Indian or Assamese one-act play has arisen as part of the movement that developed in the West, particularly England and America. 6 Assamese one-act plays were also, at first, burlesques or farcical pieces, performed, often perfunctorily, before or after a five-act drama. Sometimes, as in a festival, even three such plays were performed one after the other. These performances were done chiefly to provide fun to the people who came to see a long play or who gathered at a place on some occasions. Consequently, not much attention was given to the quality of the acting. 7

7. Manchalekha, pp. 279-280
If Bezbaroa's short plays are considered one-act plays in the modern sense, then the history of Assamese one-act play would begin in 1913 when Pāchani (The Holy Man), Nomal and Chikarpati-Nikarpati came out. All these plays are in one act with, of course, a number of scenes—Pāchani and Nomal have six scenes each, and Chikarpati-Nikarpati has fourteen. The last named piece, except being in a single act, does not show any of the other qualities of the one-act play: its interest is diffused; dialogue is discursive, nor does it maintain the 'unities' of time and place. Nomal also suffers from similar defects except that the action is limited to a day. The Pāchani, on the other hand, comes close to being a one-act play: in it the unities of time, place and action are skilfully maintained. All these plays are burlesques or farcical pieces, intended mainly to be performed as curtain-raisers or after-pieces, and so the playwright does not seem to take care to make them real work of art. Bezbaroa wrote another dramatic piece, Gadādhar Raja (1918) which he called "Drawing-room play." The play, a comedy of errors, comes very close to being a one-act play and is a definite advance on the previous ones. It not only obeys the 'unities' but also has detailed directions both for the stage and the cast.

A few of Bezbaroa's contemporaries wrote some farcical and satirical pieces in one act, but hardly any of them shows an awareness of the technique of the modern one-act play. In the

8. These plays have already been considered (See Chap. VIII)
9. Granthāvalī, II, p. 1069
10. Manchalekha, pp. 279-280
fourth decade of this century, Lakshmhidhar Sarma and Prabin Phukan wrote a number of one-act plays. Some of the former's plays attempt at psychological probing into characters and situations, while those of the latter were all light pieces. It is not known if Lakshmhidhar Sarma's plays were ever performed, but those of Prabin Phukan were staged by the Sandhiya Sammilani (evening Club) of Gauhati. There were others who wrote one-act plays before Independence, but most of these plays were either not published at all or remain scattered in journals and periodicals, many of which are now defunct. Nor were the writers able to employ artistically the technique of the modern one-act play.

It is only after Independence that the one-act play grew into a real art form in Assamese. And a number of factors was responsible for its growth in the fifties and the sixties. Life after the War and Independence became busy, neither the actor nor the audience could afford time for a long play. The one-act play, therefore, became a natural substitute for the five-act or the three-act play. The cultural organizations and dramatic clubs, which multiplied after Independence and which had no permanent stages of their own, went in for one-act plays as they could be easily performed with makeshift arrangements. A very important factor that helped the growth of the one-act play is the establishment in 1948 of Gauhati University and a rapid increase in the number of colleges during the following decade. The growing popularity of this form of play among students led to the organization

11. ibid., p. 280
12. A.N.S., p. 376
of one-act play competitions at the University and colleges. The establishment of studies by All India Radio at Guwahati and Shillong in the same year also greatly encouraged young writers to write short plays of less than an hour's duration. But of greatest importance is the fact that all this encouraged young playwrights not only to read modern Western one-act plays, particularly of Britain and America, but also to delve into the technique as used by those masters beyond the seas.

That the modern Western one-act play greatly attracted our younger playwrights is evident from the fact that during the fifties and the early sixties some of the masterpieces in the genre were either translated to or adapted in Assamese. These have already been referred to in the chapter dealing with translated and adapted plays. The reading of such plays, whether in the original or in translation, encouraged our writers to write original plays. It was but natural that these playwrights were influenced by Western masters both in the choice of subject-matter and its presentation. As the plays, which were written by university and college students primarily for competitions were hardly published, it is not possible to discuss them. Yet the fact that an Assamese one-act play Vibhāt was adjudged best in the Inter-University Youth Festival held at Delhi (1955) is proof enough that by the mid-fifties our playwrights were beginning to realize the value and qualities of the one-act play.

13. See Chap. V

14. Published in 'Chitravan' (now defunct), Vol. I, No. IV, 1956
The play, written by a college student, Bhola Kataki, is based on life in the countryside. It is a tragicomedy and shows how an old, well-meaning villager is caught between love for his married daughter and the cruel conventions of society. This reminds one of the Irish dramatists of the Abbey Theatre, particularly J. M. Synge, who found that the peasant people had spoken poetry all their lives without knowing it.  

In fact, the one-act play competitions, organized by the Ministry of Education as part of the Inter-University Youth Festivals, encouraged the writing of such plays by University students and teachers. Among those who published their plays in the fifties and the sixties mention may be made of Harichandra Bhattacharyya (Āvīskār), Satyaprasad Barua (Ānārkali, Kūnāl-Kānchana, Rānādīl, 1958), Purgeswar Barthakur (Niruddesh), Prabin Phukan (Tritaraṅga, a collection of three one-act plays, 1962), Surendranath Saikia (Pretatmar Paridarshana, 1950), Jogen Chetia (Cenehar Sotā), Prafulla Barua (Pitri-viyog 1962). Rhabendranath Saikia, a short-story writer of repute, has a good one-act play in Putilānāc (The Puppet Show), while Tafazzul Ali's Nepāti Kanekai Thāko, and Jayanta Barua's Māch āru Kait (The Fish and Its Bones) are notable favourites with amateurs. Bhupen Hazarika's Erā Bātar Sur (The Tune of the Forsaken Path), so far unpublished and which depicts life in Assam tea-gardens, was later adapted for the screen (1956) by the writer himself. Besides these, there is almost a legion of others, mostly unpublished or scattered in...

15. See Synge's 'Preface' to The Playboy of the Western World
From the many one-act plays, published or unpublished, Bina Barua's (Dr Birinchikumar Barua's) *Ebeleār Nāt* (Drama of Half a Day, 1955), stands out as being "one of the best in this genre." The play turns on the conflict between the old and the young, the traditional and the new. Arnold Bennett and Edward Knoblock have a play called *Milestones* (1912) where the action moves through several generations. Another play, *The Younger Generation* (1910) by Stanley Houghton, "is a cynical study of puritanical middle age in conflict with outworn youth." The Bengali play, *Dui Purush*, by Tarashankar Banerji, is also around the conflict between two generations represented by a zamindār father and his young son. Rina Barua's *Ebeleār Nāt* naturally reminds one of these plays so far as the subject-matter is concerned. But it has to be admitted that the playwright has succeeded in evolving his own mode of presentation. The action of an afternoon takes place in the drawing room of the Baruas, and the chief characters are the father, mother, son and daughter. The parents stick to old ideals and values, while the children profess new ones. The theme of the play is clearly expressed by one of the characters: "An intense conflict is growing between the old ideas and the new. This is noticeable everywhere—in religion, in arts and in literature. There is a strong demand for destroying the old and establishing the new. This is the

16. P. Goswami, *Assamese Drama*, p. 34
17. *World Drama*, p. 669
cause of tension between father and son, the teacher and taught." But the playwright also makes satiric comments on the younger generation and the so-called 'progressive' woman of post-Independence days. While the father is a man of action with all his time and energy being employed for the welfare of his children, the son and daughter are empty talkers capable of doing nothing. They criticize their father and dream of a better world in the near future, but show no signs of positive action or thinking. The only thing they do is to waste their time and squander their father's money in luxurious pursuits. The conflict between the two generations and the dichotomy between words and action in the younger are deftly brought out. The play is also noted for its well-knit construction and brilliant dialogue.

In the last few years there has been quite a rush of one-act plays written mainly by university and college students and teachers, and performed by amateurs. Besides the universities and colleges in the State, the All Assam One-Act Play Association has greatly encouraged the writing and acting of such plays. While attempts at holding drama festivals with full-length scripts have not been effective, there have already been a few one-act play festivals in the State. All this undoubtedly points to the increasing popularity of this dramatic genre. But, as one of our leading playwrights and dramatic critics has pointed out, it is not yet time to make a critical and objective study of the one-act

19. Ebelār Nat, p. 35
20. Assamese Drama and Theatre, p. 36
21. Manchalekha, p. 282
play in Assamese. Most of the plays, as has been noted already, are either not published or scattered in journals and periodicals. It is, of course, a fact that while there is an increase in the number of one-act plays, very few of them show real merit, either in characterization or conception of situations. Yet the one-act play has a future in Assam where there are few or no professionals and many amateurs. With amateur players increasing their dramatic activities, the one-act play stands a good chance of developing.

II

The Theatre of the Absurd

A separate section on the Theatre of the Absurd might seem superfluous in view of the fact that not many plays have appeared in Assamese which show decided influence of this great post-War phenomenon in Western drama. Yet something must needs be said on this, since in recent years we find at least one playwright who betrays unmistakable signs of such an influence. He is Arun Sarma, who, before trying his hand at this new theatre, has already popularized himself with such realistic plays and Jinti (1962) and Purus (1964).

The term 'Theatre of the Absurd', as is well known now, is "applied to a group of dramatists in the 1950s who did not regard themselves as a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes towards the predicament of man in the universe;

22. Maheswar Neog, op.cit., p. 195
essentially those summarized by Alburt Camus in his essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942). It was Martin Esslin who first applied the term to drama in his book The Theatre of the Absurd (1961), but it "has since become a catch-phrase, much used and much abused." It may be noted that the major playwrights associated with this theatre—Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, and Genet—did not make an organized movement; it is only by virtue of certain common fundamental features in their works that they come close together. These plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries. The salient features of a well-made play—characters, dialogue, plot—are hardly to be found in these plays. They are a characteristic product of the West where life at the present times suffers from disillusionment and loss of certitude. The number of people for whom God is dead has greatly increased since Nietzsche published Also Sprach Zarathustra (1882), and after the two terrible wars there are many who are searching for a way in which they can, with dignity, confront a universe deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle. The Theatre of the Absurd is one of the expressions of this search. As such it has two aspects. Its first and more obvious role is satirical when it pillories a society which is inauthentic and petty. Its other and more positive aspect is revealed when it faces up to "a deeper layer of absurdity—the
absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certitude.  

Such an attitude to life is certainly basically not Indian, because a sense of despair and disappointment is contrary to a way of life in which faith in God has played a predominant role. But Indian life, as noted already, has undergone tremendous changes since the beginning of the Western impact. A tragic sense of life, which was almost anathema in pre-British Indian thought, now informs much of our literature. The last great war and the events following Independence have markedly upset life in India, so that the Indian, too, no less than the Westerner, suffers from a sense of loss of purpose and direction. The study of such thinkers as Camus and Nietzsche has also undoubtedly contributed to the development of such an attitude to life in the younger generation of Indians. So the growth of a dramatic form, modelled on the Theatre of the Absurd, is not something purely unrelated to our life at present. It was in the sixties that the Theatre of the Absurd came to exercise a definite impact on Indian theatre, particularly the theatre of Bengal. Badal Sarkar's 

27. The Theatre of the Absurd, pp. 289-292

28. Bangla Nātaker Itiḥās, Vol. II, pp. 684-685. Dr Bhattacharyya also points out in these pages how 

Evam Indrajit (And Indrajit, 1965) in Bengali was the first to be widely recognized as a play belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd.  

The play, he says, wants to focus on the point that life is a nothingness. Consequently, the action or characters do not develop. The drama has no beginning, middle or end; it ends where it begins. Sometimes, the dialogue itself disappears, so that silence becomes the medium of expression.
It was in the late sixties that the Theatre of the Absurd began to have some impact on Assamese drama. Shri Nivāran Bhattāchāryya (1967) by Arun Sarma is the first play to show signs of such an impact. The play shows the tragedy of an artist who fails to convey his message to the people because nobody comes to see his plays. Yet in his zeal for expressing himself, Shri Nivāran Bhattāchāryya, the artist, goes on writing and performing plays even if he finds no audience. He writes his twelfth play and makes elaborate arrangements to perform it before five hundred guests, all of whom he has personally invited. But when the curtain rises, the playwright finds that all the chairs before him are empty. In utter frustration, he goes on reading the address of welcome, which he has so painstakingly prepared, before five hundred vacant seats. As he speaks, he walks across the stage and then up the broken staircase. The staircase gives way, and Nivāran Bhattāchāryya falls down dead.

There appears to be no absurdity in the theme inasmuch as it shows the tragedy of an artist whom the world fails to understand. But the influence of the absurdist technique, particularly that of Ionesco's The Chairs, is very much in evidence. In The Chairs, two old people, husband and wife, aged 65 and 64 respectively, live in a circular tower on an island. The couple is expecting a crowd of distinguished visitors whom the old man has invited to listen to the message that he wants to pass to posterity before he dies. The old man is no orator and so he has engaged a professional orator to speak for him. Imagining that the guests arrive in increasing numbers, they go on bringing more
and more chairs on to the stage. They also engage themselves in polite conversation with the imaginary guests, who go on increasing in number. They also imagine that the emperor himself comes to listen to the message which is now ready to be delivered by the orator engaged for the purpose. Satisfied that the message will be delivered, the old man, followed by his wife, leaves the stage, and jumps to his death into the sea. The orator stands up before the rows of empty chairs, but he is deaf and dumb and makes only some inarticulate guttural sounds. He writes down something on the blackboard, but it is a jumble of meaningless letters.

We get much the same thing in Nivāran Bhattacharyya also. The playwright, an old man, lives in a dilapidated room with a heap of odds and ends of articles used in theatrical performances, lying about the entrance door. He writes the last play in his life through which he hopes to hand over to posterity the message of his life. He has invited five hundred responsible people from different walks of life to listen to his message. His daughter and sons are seen busy arranging the auditorium where the guests are to be accommodated. But none of the invited people arrives and the old man speaks incoherently before the empty chairs. Then he goes up the stairs, falls down and dies. Thus the parallels between the two plays are clear. It is true that Nivāran Bhattacharyya dies accidentally, while the old man in The Chairs willingly jumps into the sea with a sense of satisfaction. Yet in the Assamese play, as in The Chairs, the theme is that of what Esslin calls, "The incommunicability of a lifetime's experience." 20

29. The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 142
The playwright in Shri Nivaran Bhattacharyya fails to deliver the message because nobody turns up to listen to him, and in The Chairs, the message remains undelivered because not only the chairs are empty but the orator himself is deaf and dumb.

All this shows how Shri Nivaran Bhattacharyya is influenced by Ionesco's play. But this is not a play that can really be called an absurd drama. While the situation in the play is to some extent absurd, the dialogue is much of a realistic type with nothing of the silent language that is so characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd. In his next play, Ahar, Arun Sarma not only employs absurdist methods but also deals with a theme characteristic of this theatre. Four persons—a writer, a businessman, a revolutionary, and a drunkard—have stolen the dead body of a woman from the morgue of a hospital. They are all waiting for an opportune moment to bury it under an ancient monument not far away from a public road. The stage has five platforms with a passage connecting them. The four characters are at first seen together trying to pass the time in talks and drinks, but later, one of them is discovered alternately alone on one of the platforms talking of his own experiences in life. As the darkness thickens, the woman rises from the dead body and appears on the middle platform successively in the roles of the writer's lover, the businessman's wife, the revolutionary's mother, and the drunkard's prostitute. She talks to the four characters separately in her four different roles and the past of all four

30. Published in Samlāp, ed. Rhaben Barua, Vol. 1, No. 1
in relation to the woman is eerily revealed. It is only in the subconscious that these men meet the woman with whom they spent their time in different ways when she was living. And when they come back to consciousness, they hastily try to dig the ground to bury the dead body, but are caught by the police.

The play reveals most of the characteristics associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. It begins with one of the four characters, Kamal, vomiting as he fails to stand the stink of the dead body. And yet all of them go on chewing fried groundnuts. This is one of the means used by them to pass the time. Yet they find the waiting tedious and use other means to make the time move: the writer tries to read a book; the drunkard continues smoking narcotic drugs; the businessman looks at his papers carried in a bag, and the revolutionary murmurs to himself about the inevitability of social change. The playwright appears to give much stress on the situation of waiting and the monotony that accompanies it. In this he is obviously influenced by Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot where the pair, Vladimir and Estragon, play between themselves farcically to pass the time. "We are bored to death," says Vladimir, 31 because they have been waiting and have to wait indefinitely for Godot to come. In Āhār, the four people are waiting for the night to fall, so that they can safely bury the dead body. Their waiting is obviously not indefinite, but it is no less monotonous because they have not only nothing else to do but also are disturbed all the time by the sense of fear of being detected. Waiting as a human situation is

often referred to in The Theatre of the Absurd. While it is the theme of Beckett's play, Ionesco makes one of the characters in Amedee or How to Get Rid of It speak thus: "Oh dear, I'm used to waiting, waiting, waiting, long uncomfortable years of waiting, that's what life has been ..." In Āhār, one of the men, Nabin, says that waiting is very boring, and yet they wait because so many other people—Ahalyā, Urmilā, Buddha, Vladimir, Estragon—have waited. Such an attempt at dramatizing a static situation is a new thing in Assamese, and is undoubtedly a result of the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd.

There is novelty in the dialogue also. Sentences are often short, and sometimes words almost disappear, so that silence itself becomes more expressive than spoken words. An instance of this is found when the four characters are trying to find out where the stink comes from. At one time three of them remain erect and speechless smelling around, while the fourth goes on talking to them. The language, if not obscene, is surely not such as is expected by a moralist in a play to be performed on a public stage. This is meaningful: it shows how the society that appears to be all right is in reality all rotten.

In fact, the play itself appears to have a deeper meaning. The woman, who appears in four different characters may be a symbol of man's evil deeds done in the past. However much he

33. Āhār in Saṃlāp, p. 37
34. ibid., p. 18
tries to bury the dead past in oblivion, its nauseating effects on the mind are bound to continue. In his subconscious state of mind, man may try to forget the sinful past, but when he regains consciousness, conscience pricks him and renders him unable to do away with a past that has been so much a part of his existence. The woman in her four different capacities provided the four men both with physical and mental food (Ahār), and now that she is dead the four people have nothing to fall back upon but fried groundnuts and narcotic drugs. The continuous chewing of groundnuts may be symbolic in two ways: it may, on the one hand, symbolize the four people's ruminating over the past, and, on the other hand, it may indicate their utter helplessness in a world where their beloved woman is dead.

Ahār is thus a novel play in Assamese much different from the realistic, well-made play in characterization, presentation of situations as well as in dialogue. It is the first real drama consciously and sincerely modelled on the Theatre of the Absurd. But the audience in Assam is not yet fully prepared to appreciate such plays. This is not something surprising. When Ionesco's The Chairs was first put on the boards of the Théâtre Lancrey, most of the chairs in the auditorium were empty, "and there were evenings when only five or six tickets were sold."

And yet the Theatre of the Absurd has almost dated now in the West. It is mainly because of the lack of response from the.

35. The Theatre of the Absurd, pp. 149-150
36. William Oliver, 'Between Absurdity and the Playwright' in Modern Drama, ed. Travis Bogard and William Oliver, New York, 1965, p. 8
theatre-goers that the Theatre of the Absurd has not found enthusiasts among the younger playwrights of Assam. It is a fact that a theatre like this can flourish only among metropolitans or at least people having much of sophistication. And except perhaps a small segment living in the urban areas, the audience in Assam generally is far from being such, so that a drama modelled on the Theatre of the Absurd is unlikely to cause a stir among them. Consequently, such a work, if written at all, is bound to be a closet drama rather than a play to be performed in a public theatre.

37. It is significant that while Jean Genet is a Frenchman, the other three major absurdist playwrights, the Irish Beckett, the Russian Adamov, and the Rumanian Ionesco also chose to be Parisians.