

**Revisiting the Theatre of the Absurd in Christopher Durang's  
*For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls* (1993) and *Desire, Desire, Desire* (1995)**

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**Abstract:**

Contemporary American playwright and actor, Christopher Durang (1949- ) has carved himself an important niche in the American theater. He has been awarded several writing fellowships and grants. Noted for his outrageous and absurd comedy, his plays have been produced nationally and internationally. He has been influenced by Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) and Tom Stoppard (1937- ). His plays satirise preconceived ideas and institutions which lend themselves to the Theatre of the Absurd that deliberately parodies all the traditional assumptions of Western culture. This present study attempts to read Durang's *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls* (1993) and *Desire, Desire, Desire* (1995) as different manifestations of the Theatre of the Absurd. The former play is an eccentric comedy about a troubled parent-child relationship which spoofs Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). As to the latter play, it is a parody of several Tennessee Williams' plays: *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) as well as Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother* (1983). It tackles a tensed marital relationship. Thus, through the deft use of parody, Durang satirises man's difficulty of accepting reality and the impossibility of true escape. As a result, it is perceived that Durang has delineated the Absurd Theatre from extreme farcical boundaries through parodying the inconsistencies in institutions and the human condition.

**Keywords:** absurd, comedy of errors, memory play, parody

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The purpose of this paper is to revisit the Theatre of the Absurd through Christopher Durang's (b. 1949) two plays: *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls* (1993) and *Desire, Desire, Desire* (1995). The researcher will introduce the Absurd Theatre from a different perspective employed by Durang who uses parody as a tool to impart his message. He spoofs a number of Tennessee Williams' plays in an endeavor to pinpoint his own point of view. Durang's plays are compared and contrasted to Williams' in an attempt to satirise preconceived ideas and institutions.

**Introduction: Reflection on the Absurd Theatre**

It is the Second World War that has brought about the radical changes in all aspects of life. As a result, existentialists have emerged and proposed that man perceives life as meaningless and futile. They delve deep into man's sense of futility and nihilism which stems out of the catastrophic aftermath of World War II. It is the strong influence of the traumatic horror of the 1945 nuclear annihilation that has resulted in the birth of the Absurd Theatre. According to Carter & McRae (1997):

the subject matter is still, essentially, the human condition, but the means and the methods of exploring it are infinitely richer and more varied than ever before .... There is the individual; solitary, responsible for his or her own destiny, yet powerless when set against the ineluctable forces of the universe (p. 449-450).

According to Arnold (2001: 194,) the Absurd Theatre was established by a group of international playwrights: Samuel Beckett (Irish), Eugène Ionesco (Romanian), Arthur Adamov (Russian), and Jean Genet (French) who lived in Paris, as he adds, "... found traditional value systems bankrupt. They wrote about the meaninglessness of human existence and the inability of language to communicate in an effective way ..." (p.194).

The term 'Theatre of the Absurd' was derived from the French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus' (1913-1960) seminal essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), where he asserts that man is in a continuous conflict between what s/he needs to find in the world and what s/he eventually finds. Sisyphus is a Greek mythology figure who was punished to keep pushing a rock up a mountain to see it roll down again. To surpass this ordeal manifested via this absurd situation, he has to accept it. He elaborates that man's continuous search for order, values, and security is doomed to failure for s/he finds nothing but a meaningless universe. Camus, therefore, endeavors to solve this conflict by proclaiming that man should accept to live in a world which has neither meaning nor purpose. This has given rise to the feeling of absurdity which has been overwhelming during this period. According to Carter and McRae 1997: 449, "The sense of fragmentation developed into a sense of absurdity, of existential futility ...." as they add, "... There is a veritable explosion of expression around the question of the atomic bomb, around the possibility that all life could end at a moment's notice ..." (p. 449).

Camus (1975) proclaims that suicide is not the opted solution to man's absurd reality. To overcome despair, Camus calls for revolt which entails acknowledgement, acceptance and

accomplishment. By acknowledgement, Camus means that man should acknowledge the absurd as neither foreign nor unpleasant (p.11). Then man has to accept this absurdity which is a more difficult step. It is this inner revolt that will eventually lead to Sisyphus' success from falling into the abyss of despair. Camus (1975) elaborates:

At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock ... Sisyphus, the proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is not fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (p.109)

Moreover, 'The Theatre of the Absurd' is a term coined by the critic Martin Esslin (1918-2002) who says that "The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (1961, p.24). In his introduction to *Absurd Drama*, Esslin (1965) explains that the Absurd Theatre "attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation"( n.d.).

Furthermore, the term 'Absurd' is defined by Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) in reference to the man who "is devoid of purpose ... [c]ut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots." He adds that the "man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd. in Carter, 1991, p. 140). Extremely baffling and overwhelming is the world perceived by the absurdists. They hold the view that life is sated with uncertainty, thus shunning away any hope for a better life. Furthermore, they envision a world bereft of any values. Consequently, man has become an aimless wanderer in a meaningless universe who encounters nothing but despair. As a result, man's deplorable status in the universe is the material tackled by the absurdist dramatists.

As to the form, absurdist writers do not follow a particular structure as they portray nihilistic ideas: "The plays themselves lack a formal logic and conventional structure, so that both form and content support (while emphasizing the difficulty of communication) the representation of what may be called the absurd predicament" (Cuddon, 1976, p. 968). The absurd plays aimed at shocking the audience through an unconventional form. In an online article, Culik, 2000, defines:

[A]bsurd plays assumed a highly unusual, innovative form, directly aiming to startle the viewer, shaking him out of this comfortable, conventional life of everyday concerns. In the meaningless and Godless post-Second-World-War world, it was no longer possible to keep using such traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity.( n.d.)

In other words, absurd playwrights broke away with the shackles of conventional theatre form.

The language employed is that of normal daily life routine; nevertheless, it is a language uttered by absurdists who fall into the abyss of despair. Carter and McRae (1997) believe that

“Their language is more naturalistic and shows gaps, repetitions, silences, and incoherences, modelled on normal conversation” (p.451). Not only this, but also language was perceived as “a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication ...”(Culik, 2000). The Absurd Theatre was totally antithetical to the conventional theatre; therefore, Absurd drama “uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which distorts, parodies and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns... [it is aimed to] make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically” (Culik, 2000). Speaking in the same vein, Esslin (1961) remarks:

The Theatre of the Absurd ... tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends and often contradicts the words spoken by the characters. (p.26)

Therefore, the object is much more important than the language in the absurd theatre. Culik (2000) elaborates “...what happens transcends what is being said about it. It is the hidden, implied meaning of words that assume primary importance in absurd theatre, over and above what is being actually said. The Theatre of the Absurd strove to communicate an undissolved totality of perception - hence it had to go beyond language...”

Being defiant to the traditional dramatic theory, the Absurd Theatre shuns away with Aristotle's notions of plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle. There is no plot with a beginning, middle and an end as absurdists hold the belief that life is not necessarily outlined as such and is not shaped according to a climax. The objective of the absurdist writers is to delineate life and highlight man's ordeal. Therefore, characters come to the fore in absurd drama to reflect the inner workings of the mind. Culik (2000) expounds:

Absurd dramas are lyrical statements, very much like music: they communicate an atmosphere, an experience of archetypal human situations. The Absurd Theatre is a theatre of situation, as against the more conventional theatre of sequential events. It presents a pattern of poetic images. In doing this, it uses visual elements, movement, light. Unlike conventional theatre, where language rules supreme, in the Absurd Theatre language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery. n.d.)

Moreover, absurd writers employ satire mixed with parody. Parody is a mimicry of an established concept, idea or a person, unlike satire which involves mockery not mimicry. Parody is reckoned a fundamental art form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which reflects the divergence between modernism and postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon (1989) holds the belief that postmodernism is “...self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (*Politics*, p.1), which could be manifested through the use of parody. Dino Felluga remarks: “One way of creating this double or contradictory stance on any statement is the use of parody: citing a convention only to make fun of it.” Hutcheon (1985) in her book *Theory of Parody* asserts that parody in the twentieth century “is an integrated structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inverting, and ‘trans-contextualizing’ previous works of art” (p.11).

In view of this, parody is an important functional tool employed by postmodern writers. Hutcheon argues that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (*Politics*, p. 93). Felluga points out, "Parody de-doxifies, to use a favorite term of Hutcheon's; it unsettles all doxa, all accepted beliefs and ideologies." Similarly, Dan Harries asserts that postmodern parody revolutionises previous texts and dominant modes of thought and consequently has "an almost emancipatory function by jolting people out of their normatively-constructed compliance with social rules and norms" (127).

### Revisiting the Absurd through the Eyes of Durang

Contemporary American playwright, Christopher Durang (b. 1949) is known for his outrageous and absurd comedy. Influenced by the Absurd Theatre, Durang goes beyond the nihilism of conventional absurdity in order to disseminate his message. He deftly employs parody as a tool to mock all preconceived notions, such as parochial religion, popular culture, literature, theater, and middle-class familial relationships. This paper attempts to revisit the Theatre of the Absurd through the focal lens of Durang depicted in his two plays: *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls* (1993) and *Desire, Desire, Desire* (1995) in which he spoofs the plays of Tennessee Williams (1911-1983).

Durang parodies Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) in his *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls* (1993). Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is a 'memory play,' a term coined by Williams "to describe non-realistic dramas ... in which the audience experiences the past as remembered by a narrator, complete with music from the period remembered, and images representing the characters' thoughts, fears, emotions, and recollections projected on a scrim in the background." (superglossary). A seven-scene play is ridiculed in a one-act play by Durang (1995) who remarks that his play is "... a parody spin-off of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*" (p.10). He spoofs Williams' memory play by turning it into a play performed, not reminiscized by its characters.

Although Williams (1982) prefaces his play with an appeal for a new form of realism, he remarks that the use of untraditional techniques to delineate reality does not shun away reality. It rather entails finding new means of expression (*Menagerie*, p. 1). He elaborates

... The straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. (*Menagerie*, p. 1)

Nevertheless, Durang has changed the realistic setting delineated by Williams into a two-line vague, unclear and unrealistic one through the use of the word "maybe" twice. The play opens with a very short description: "Scene: A warm, fussy living room setting. A couch, a chair, homey and warm. **Maybe** a fringed throw over the couch. **Maybe** a vase of jonquils" (*Southern*, p.12). This highlights Durang's rejection of realistic setting which implies that everything is

meaningless and not as clear cut as depicted by realists. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that Williams' *Menagerie* is a memory play which is nonrealistic as voiced out by Williams' himself, he carefully and meticulously sketches the setting as follows: "The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those **vast hive-like** conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as **warty growths** in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population..." (*Menagerie*, p.5). Here Durang finds that the meticulously sketched setting by Williams is meaningless and should be crossed out.

Music is another element of drama highlighted by Williams as he believes in the importance of the role played by music in drama. He employs a tune "The Glass Menagerie" which is repeated throughout the play to add an emotional impact. He explains:

This tune is like circus music, not when you are on the grounds or in the immediate vicinity of the parade, but when you are at some distance and very likely thinking of something else. It seems under those circumstances to continue almost interminably and it weaves in and out of your preoccupied consciousness; then it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest. It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow. (*Menagerie*, p. 3)

Unlike Williams who employs music, Durang has no music in his play because absurd means "out of harmony" in a musical sense.

From the vantage point of an absurdist, Durang holds the belief that a play should dispense with linear narrative manifested via the Aristotelian plot which has a beginning, a middle and an end. Comparing the absurd drama to others, Esslin (1961) elaborates:

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. (p. 21-22)

### **Durang Spoofs Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie***

*The Glass Menagerie* revolves around the Wingfield family who lives in a shabby apartment in St. Louis. Amanda Wingfield, the mother, works from home selling magazine subscriptions to earn money to support her family after being deserted by her husband years ago. She always thinks in retrospect of her past when she was young and had a lot of callers; nevertheless, she cannot forget her indigent hard life. As to Tom Wingfield, he is Amanda's son and the narrator of the play. He works at a shoe warehouse to support his family. He is a frustrated young poet. Whereas his sister, Laura Wingfield, is fragile and slightly crippled. Unable to cope with reality, she lives in a world contrived by her. She escapes reality through her

glass animals and old phonography records. In addition, Jim O'Connor, who works with Tom at the shoe warehouse, is the gentleman caller that both Amanda and Laura will be waiting for.

Through the visit of Jim O'Connor, Williams outlines the parent-child conflict; "through his [Williams] unique alchemy transforms a single incident- the visit of a dinner guest- into a universal revelation about parent-child conflict and brother-sister bonding" (Griffin, 1995, p. 21-22). Tom narrates the story and introduces others characters in the play, namely, his mother, Amanda, and sister, Laura. Amanda refuses to accept her children as they are. She refuses to admit that Laura is crippled. Moreover, she rejects the idea that Tom might be a creative writer and deems the books he reads hideous. Therefore, she keeps reminiscing about her past and her many gentlemen callers. The visit does not go as they have wished for as O'Connor turned out to be engaged. Laura goes back to her glass animals. The play ends with Tom, after the passage of many years, fired from his job and joined the Merchant Marine.

Durang spoofs the tensed parental-filial relationship delineated in Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. He replaces Williams' Laura with the hypochondriac hypersensitive son, Lawrence who escapes his reality through his collection of glass cocktail stirrers instead of Laura's glass animals. Jim O'Connor, the gentleman caller, is replaced with Virginia Bennett (Ginny), the feminine caller, who has a hearing impairment and is overfriendly. Whereas Amanda Wingvalley is the frustrated Southern belle mother who wants to change her children's reality into a better one. Durang finds Laura's character in William's play the most annoying and frustrating. In his Note, the author points out: "It's out of this irritation with Laura's sensitivity- a feeling greatly at odds with Williams' original – that I seem to have written this parody, *For Whom the Southern belle Tolls*" (*Southern*, p.10). In other words, it is Laura's character that has provoked Durang to parody Williams' play.

Durang satirises the character of Laura through Lawrence. He finds her ridiculous; therefore, he adds to Lawrence's limping problem other ones, such as eczema and asthma. He ridicules Laura's glass animals by replacing them with a collection of glass swizzle sticks. When his mother tells him that he looks lovely, Lawrence brings up his silly ailments; "I have a pimple on the back of my neck" (*Southern*, p. 12), which reflects teenagers' silly obsession with their appearance. He pinpoints Lawrence's silly apprehension: "It upsets my stomach to meet people, mama" (ibid, p.12). "I don't like the world, mama. I like it here in this room" (ibid, p.13). When Amanda asks Lawrence to make himself a living by getting a job, he tells her: "I can't work, mama. I'm crippled" (ibid, p.13). He ridicules the silliness of Laura's obsession with glass animals as he declares in the Author's Note: "as an adult I started to find Laura's sensitivity frustrating. I mean, how hard was typing class really? ... I felt restless with her little hobby. Did she actually spend hours and hours staring at them? [glass animals] Couldn't she try to function in the world just a little bit" (*Southern*, p. 10)?

Durang is a constructive critic as Howard Stein writes in his introduction to Durang's *Twenty-Seven Short Plays*:

Durang shouts for reason in an unreasonable universe and in an unreasoning society. He is, in the best sense of the critic, attempting to be corrective while fulfilling his primary purpose of entertaining his audience. He has to be offensive

to be effective...That offensiveness is in the service of an objective to aid an audience to see not only its follies and vices but also its misplaced values, its lies and deceits, its infirmities, even its cruelty and callousness. Only by having such conditions razed in front of us can we begin the process of building, of correcting. With his uncommon talent, Christopher Durang lights a candle rather than curses a darkness. (*Southern*, p.viii)

During lends himself to Camus who invites man to stand up against his futile, absurd reality through 'acknowledgment', 'acceptance' and eventually 'accomplishment.' Speaking in the same vein, Esslin (1961) remarks: "... For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions- and to laugh at it" (qtd. in Hinchliffe, 1969, p.12-13). Thus, the reader is invited to reconsider the Theatre of the Absurd, and to perceive it from a different vantage point as that perceived by Durang.

Characters are of prime importance for absurd writers. Not only does Durang replicate and parody Laura's character, but also he overdramatises Jim O'Connor's by replacing him with the female character, Virginia Bennett (Ginny). Ginny is described by Durang as "a vivacious, friendly girl dressed in either factoryclothes, or else a simple, not-too-frilly blouse and slacks" (*Southern*, p.15). She is the most absurd character in the play. Unlike in Williams' play, Jim is a realistic ambitious character, "I'm planning to change. I'm right at the point of committing myself to a future that doesn't include the warehouse and Mr. Mendoza or even a night-school course in public speaking" (*Menagerie*, p. 62-63). Durang mocks Jim by having Ginny raise her voice to demonstrate her public speaking skills. She tells Amanda, "You're asking why I am speaking loudly. It's so that I can be heard! I am taking a course in public speaking, and so far we've covered organizing your thoughts and speaking good and loud so the people in the back of the room can hear you" (*Southern*, p. 15-16).

Moreover, Ginny seems to be Durang's mouthpiece, unlike Tom who narrates the story in Williams' play. Through Ginny, Durang ridicules Laura's obsession with glass animals through Ginny who mistakenly abuses Lawrence's collection of swizzle sticks. When Lawrence holds up a swizzle stick and explains: "I call this one Stringbean, because it's long and thin" (*Southern*, p. 18), Ginny puts it in her glass and stirs. When Lawrence shows Ginny another one and says: "I call this one Q-tip, because I realized it looks like a Q-tip, except it's made out of glass and doesn't have little cotton swabs at the end of it" (*Southern*, p. 19), Ginny puts it in her ear. Nevertheless, he keeps showing her the rest of the collection: "I call this one Pinocchio because if you hold it perpendicular to your nose it makes your nose look long" (ibid). He adds, "And I call this one Henry Kissinger, because he wears glasses and it's made of glass" (ibid). When Lawrence offers Ginny one of his cocktail stirrers as a souvenir, saying: "I want you to keep this. It's my favorite one. I call it Thermometer because it looks like a thermometer" (*Southern*, p. 21), Ginny throws it away and calls him 'queer.' Thus, in a sharp jab at the stupidity of man who does not face reality, Durang does not sympathise with Laura (Lawrence).

It is the futile human condition that Durang endeavours to criticise which lends itself to Camus' analysis of man's meaningless life in a world of no beliefs. Camus (1942) in his seminal essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* believes that

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however, faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (qtd in Esslin *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1965, p.23)

Nevertheless, he calls for standing up against one's bitter reality instead of falling into the abyss of despair. He ridicules Laura through Lawrence and Ginny who is his spokeswoman.

He parodies Amanda, the south belle mother, who reminisces about her past all the time as she has been deserted by her husband years ago. She is one of the most absurd characters who hates her reality. She has to live with her "weird" children as she calls them. She tries to set him up with a girl who works with his brother Tom at the warehouse. She hates her life:

I suppose it's unmotherly of me, dear, but you really get on my nerves. Limping around the apartment, pretending to have asthma. If only some nice girl would marry you and I knew you were taken care of, then I'd feel free to start to live again. I'd join Parents Without Parents, I'd go to dinner dances, I'd have a life again. Rather than watch you mope about this stupid apartment. I'm not bitter, dear, it's just that I hate my life. (*Southern*, p.14)

After the visit of Ginny who ridicules Lawrence's silly collection of cocktail stirrers by throwing away one of them, Amanda realises that she has to accept her reality. In spite of the mother-son tensed relationship, Amanda decides to have a wish similar to her son's. She asks him to make a wish because she can see the evening star. When Lawrence wishes for more swizzle sticks, Amanda says that she also wishes for more swizzle sticks: "The same thing, honey. Maybe just a little happiness, too... but mostly some swizzle sticks" (*Southern*, p.27). The play ends on an acceptance note that Durang calls for. In other words, he has parodied Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* from an absurdist vantage point.

### **An Analysis of Durang's *Desire, Desire, Desire***

Not only does Durang parody Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, but also he spoofs *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) as well as Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother* (1983) in *Desire, Desire, Desire* (1995). He begins the play with "Scene: A shabby New Orleans apartment" (*Desire*, p.183). Unlike Williams who starts off on a detailed delineation of the setting as he sketches the setting as follows:

The exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elsyian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly **white** frame, weathered **grey**, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables to the entrances of both. (*Streetcar*, p.1)

The setting sets the tone of the play for Williams. On the contrary, Durang does not believe in the importance of a setting as nothing is utterly real. He downsizes Williams' one-page setting into one short sentence which merely mentions the location. Durang who writes absurd comedy gives the characters absolute importance to impart his message.

Moreover, Williams deftly plays with music as a tool to describe the characters' emotions. The reader can 'hear' music in all scenes of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as it is mentioned through the stage directions. He makes use of two types of music: the blue music and the Varsouviana Polka. The blue music is employed to reflect any feelings of distress, sadness and death. When Blanche speaks about the loss of her family and Belle Reve, (beautiful dream) her house, the blue music is played in the background. Williams explains from the beginning of the play: "In this part of New Orleans you are particularly always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This "blue piano" expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here" (*Streetcar*, p.1). When Blanche informs Stella that they lost Belle Reve, the stage direction reads: "The music of the "blue piano" grows louder ..." (*Streetcar*, p.21). At the end of the play, when Blanche is taken to a mental institution, Stanley and his friends resume the poker game and the blue piano music plays again. Finally, the play is permeated with this music going up and down to mirror the characters' feelings and emotions.

Whereas the Varsouviana Polka is run when death or disaster is mentioned. When Blanche reminiscises about her past, the Polka music is played. When she talks about Allan, her husband, who committed suicide, the polka music is heard. "Polka music sounds, in a minor key faint with distance. We danced the Varsouviana. Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few moments later- a shot! (The Polka stops)" (*Streetcar*, p.115). The polka music is linked to Blanche's state of mind. When she realizes that she is not welcome anymore by Stanley as he gives her a ticket back to Laurel, she feels imminent disaster. "The rapid, feverish polka tune, the "Varsouviana," is heard. The music is in her mind; she is drinking to escape it and the sense of disaster closing in on her, and she seems to whisper the words of the song..." (*Streetcar*, p.139). Thus, through the polka music, Williams depicts Blanche's workings of mind.

Unlike Williams who makes use of music, Durang rarely employs it. In *Desire, Desire, Desire*, there is no mention of either the blue music or the Varsouviana Polka music. Nevertheless, the play ends on a sad note with the stage directions reading, "Mournful saxophone music-as in the soundtrack of the *Streetcar* movie. Blanche sadly puts the rabbit head on her own head. She sits there, tragically, sadly. Lights dim. End" (*Streetcar*, p.193). So, music is not a pivotal element for an absurdist writer.

Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* has a realistic, well-developed plot. Blanche Dubois is the protagonist who arrives at her sister's Stella Kowalski in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood of New Orleans, on Elysian Fields Avenue. Stella is not thrilled to meet her sister as she is afraid of her husband's reaction. Blanche explains to her sister that their Southern plantation, Belle Reve in Laurel, Mississippi, has been lost due to the epic fornications of their ancestors. She adds that as an English teacher, she is given a leave by her school supervisor to forget about her loss. Nevertheless, she has been fired because she has had an affair with a

seventeen- year-old school boy. Not only does she have this defaming affair, but also she is engaged in other seductive affairs. Therefore, she escapes to Laurel and falls into the abyss of illusions and despair.

Blanche's presence has caused the Stanely-Stella marital relationship tensed. Stanely manages to know about Blanche's defamed past from a co-worker who has travelled to Laurel. He informs Harold Mitchell (Mitch), Blanche's would-be suitor, about her past. Stanely confronts Blanche with her past, and finds her pretense despicable. He rapes her which results in her nervous breakdown. Consequently, she ends up in a mental institution. Apparently, Williams has a traditional plot with a beginning, development, climax and dénouement which conforms to the norms of a traditional play.

Unlike Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* which has a well-knit plot, Durang's *Desire, Desire, Desire* has no beginning, development, climax, and dénouement; nevertheless, it is situational. He parodies a bunch of characters from different plays which he points out in his Note to the actors: "Blanche, Stanely, Stella and the Young Man are from Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Big Daddy and Maggie are from Williams' *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. Cora is a character from O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh...*" (*Streetcar*, p.194). In *Desire, Desire, Desire*, the male protagonist is Stanley Kowalski, whereas his wife Stella is replaced by Blanche DuBois. The play starts with Stanley yelling "Stella!" continuously until he renders Blanche on the verge of a nervous breakdown as she points out. Then the doorbell rings and a census taker shows up, and starts to ask about the number of people who live in the house and whether they are democrats or republicans. Meanwhile, instead of responding to the census taker's questions, Blanche flirts with him.

In addition to these situations, Blanche is interrupted by Big Daddy and Maggie from *A Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* as Maggie says that she wants to have a child because Big Daddy is dying of cancer and they (Maggie and Brick) do not want other people to inherit all the money. Afterwards, Cora from *Iceman Cometh* enters to speak about "pipe dreams" illusions. Then Blanche decides to eventually use the ticket Stanely bought her. She feels extremely lonely. Stella, her long gone sister, comes back with a cherry coke instead of a lemon coke. A Rabbit comes in who turns out to be Stanely who asks about Stella. The play ends on a sad note as Blanche puts on the rabbit head and sits alone. In fact, Durang does not write a traditional play with a clear plot; however, he criticises characters that he could not stand in other plays. He parodies scenes from a number of plays to point out his own point of view.

As to the language employed, it is a simple everyday language in addition to the some sentences that he takes from other plays to poke fun at. Unlike Williams who employs as Griffin (1995) elaborates: "The language, symbolism, and theatrical effects create the extra dimension Williams sought, beyond realism. The heightened language only sounds realistic, for Williams excels in creating dialogue that is unique and individual to its speaker. Stanely's idiom is made up of army and conventional slang, trite expressions..." (p. 63). In other words, Stanely uses army-related expressions. Williams also makes Blanche an English teacher which allows him "full play for lyricism and literary allusions, which are quite in character" (Griffin, 1995, p.63). Thus, Durang does not focus on language to impart his message. He highlights what characters do and how they think rather than on how they talk.

It is obvious that Durang imparts his message through the characters he parodies. Stanley Kowalski is Blanche's brother-in-law, unlike in Durang's play, he is Blanche's wife. Williams, in an interview, describes Stanley as "pretty primitive and primordial in his instincts, but in many ways defensible. He was reacting with an animal's instinct to protect its own, its own terrain from invasion, by that element that he could not comprehend, which happened to be Blanche" (Brown, 1986, p.266). He does not like Blanche staying around. He tells Stella: "Wasn't it all okay? Till she showed here. Hoity-toity, describing me as an ape" (*Streetcar*, p.137). He is cruel to her from the very beginning as he has been rude to her at the first interview, then when he buys her a ticket to go back to Laurel, and finally when he rapes her which has caused her down fall. Therefore, Stanley is delineated as a mean well-developed character in Williams' play.

In Durang's play, Stanley is the careless, undedicated husband not the brother-in-law. He keeps calling Stella declaring that he misses her throughout the play. He pays no heed towards his wife's flirtation with the census taker. He either pretends that he does not hear her, or pokes fun at her sexual innuendos. He even buys her a bus ticket to travel to Glengarry Glen Ross, a place that Blanche does not like which amounts in her augmented feeling of loneliness. He tries to explain to Blanche that nothing is perfect. Durang jabs at Stanley by turning him from a loving aggressive husband into a homosexual one who has an aberrated affair with his friend, Skipper. He ridicules him as he could neither tolerate the presence of his sister-in-law nor live with her promiscuous past. In Durang's play, it is Stanley who falls into mental disorder. After spending some time with Skipper, his friend, he goes back home dressed up like Harvey as Blanche asks him "Are you Harvey From the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Mary Chase" (*Desire*, p. 192)? Harvey is the imaginary friend of Elwood P. Dowd in Mary Chase's comedy of errors, *Harvey* (1944). Due to Elwood's eccentric behavior, Veta, his sister confines him to a mental asylum in order to avoid embarrassment. Nevertheless, in spite of his mental illness, he is accepted by Blanche who will put on the rabbit's head which lends itself to *Harvey's* ending when Veta stopped the doctor before giving Harvey an injection that was going to turn him into a normal human being as a sign of acceptance.

The female protagonist, Blanche Dubois, in Durang's play is a parody of Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. However, he has changed the role she plays from the sister to the wife. Her name is symbolic and significant. "Blanche" is a French word which means 'white' and is a symbol of purity, innocence and chastity. Ironically enough, her name is a mask of her true real character. In Williams' play, she pretends to be a woman of virtue and endeavours to conceal her defamed past experiences by making up stories in order to maintain her social status among family, acquaintances and friends. When this contrived image falls apart by Stanley, she could not stand this exposure and as a result she falls into the abyss of mental disorder. Blanche is a round character that undergoes different phases in the play.

Durang criticises Blanche's character as she could not stand up against Stanley and broke down. He gave her the role of Stella, the oppressed wife, in order to jab at her. In Durang's play, Blanche is startled to death by her husband, Stanley, who keeps yelling Stella! and the play starts off on a melancholic note as Blanche says: "Oh Lord. There's no hope" (*Desire*, p. 184). Unlike Blanche in Williams' play who incessantly hides her promiscuous nature, Blanche in Durang's play bluntly flirts with the census taker in front of Stanley. She says that he reminds her "of someone young and tender who touched my [Blanche's] heart when I was a young girl at Belle

Reeve ...” (*Desire*, p.184). She also tells him that “Did anyone ever tell you you look like a Prince out of the Arabian night” (*Desire*, p.184)? The word ‘desire’ is repeated three times at the end of almost every sentence she utters. As a reaction to her flirting, Stanely pretends that he does not hear her or pokes fun at what she says. When the census taker asks her whether they are registered democrats or republicans, she answers him by saying that she is registered a southern belle. She wants everybody to flirt with her since she is a beauty.

Blanche is a typical twentieth century desperate, hopeless woman who finds life futile due to her husband's carelessness. She decides to leave and commit suicide. She tells Stanely: “I am making an exit, but it's going to be a final one, Stanely. Because it's So Long, Sam; it's good-bye, Charlie; it's night, mother...” (*Desire*, p. 188). This line is taken from Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother* (1983). The play is about Jessie who tells Thelma, her mother that she will commit suicide in the evening and be dead by morning. Blanche then reads from a long sheet of paper the whereabouts of all items at the house:

Now I've made a list of where everything is so you won't be confused. The paper lanterns are in the top shelf in the bedroom closet, along with broken dreams and extra filters for the vacuum cleaner. The little white tie-things that go with the plastic garbage bags are up above the refrigerators in an empty Nestle Quik box ...” (*Desire*, p. 188)

Durang explicitly explains in his To the Actor Note that follows the play:

Most people who know theatre well will get the allusions I'm making in this play, but in case there are some who don't, I'm going to risk being obvious and just out tell you who's from what... When Blanche gives a long mundane list of “where everything is” for Stanely to know after she's dead, this is a reference to and parody of Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother* .... (*Desire*, p. 194)

Nevertheless, Blanche is reluctant as she tells Cora, a prostitute from Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), and Stanley: “Isn't anyone going to try to talk me out of suicide” (*Desire*, p.188)? She gives a silly reason for wanting to kill herself: “say you've been on a streetcar a long time. It's hot and it's bumpy and noisy, and you want to get off, but your stop isn't for fifty more blocks when it reaches Elysian Fields. But then you realize maybe the streetcar may not ever get to Elysian Fields, so you figure, why not get off the streetcar now?” Durang shows how shallow Blanche is as she declares that “I want poetry and art and music, and if I can't have them, I'd rather be dead” (*Desire*, p.189). She asserts: “I don't want realism, I want magic” (*Desire*, p. 189)! In other words, she wants to live in her fantasy world rather than to stand up for herself and try to solve her problems.

She goes through the acknowledgement mode that is voiced out by Camus as she admits: “A woman with illusions shattered, livin' in a place where death is as close as you are, and where the opposite of death is desire. Desire, desire, desire” (*Desire*, p. 189). She has acknowledged her problem and that desire is her way out. Afterwards, she moves on to the acceptance phase when her sister, Stella, who has been absent for six years comes back for a short visit, then leaves again to get her a lemon coke instead of a cherry coke. “She's gone. I'm all alone. For six years

at least. All alone. Oh desire, desire, desire. Desire under the elms; desire under the arms. Farewell to arms. For whom the belle tolls. For whom the southern belle tolls. Waiting, waiting..." (*Desire*, p.192). Durang's Blanche is different from Williams' although they both say the same words at the end. "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (*Desire*, p. 193). Nevertheless, she does not go crazy as Williams' Blanche. She accepts her 'unpleasant reality' which depicts Durang's message.

### Conclusion:

Durang has spoofed a number of Tennessee Williams' plays from an absurdist vantage point to depict the ridiculousness of man who overrates his bitter reality in a world bereft of meaning, value or purpose. He adopts Albert Camus' theory of acknowledgment, acceptance and accomplishment. Camus has held the belief that man is incessantly going through a conflict between what s/he seeks to find in life and what s/he eventually finds. He asserts that man should not commit suicide as a way out of this meaningless, futile universe. Nevertheless, man should surpass this ordeal through the suggested triad.

In *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*, Durang has parodied Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* to depict through the acknowledgement, acceptance and accomplishment process that man can prevail and transcend the difficulties encountered in life. He imparts his message through Ginny, his mouthpiece, who jabs at Laura's unjustified obsession with glass animals through an elaborate parody. He replaces Laura with Lawrence who escapes reality through a collection of cocktail stirrers instead of facing and standing up against an unreasonable world. He deftly acts as a beacon of light for his audience to show them that man has to accept all negative facades of life. He shakes his audience out of their bolted chairs to acknowledge reality, accept it and eventually begin to accomplish. Nevertheless, he does not forget his primary task which is to entertain his audience.

Similarly in *Desire, Desire, Desire*, Durang has basically spoofed Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and he also evokes characters from other plays, such as *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* and Mary Chase's *Harvey*. He jabs at all characters that cannot live in a world void of either meaning or purpose. He ridicules Blanche DuBois, a Tennessee Williams' character, who could not forget about her past and falls into the abyss of despair when her defamed past experience is revealed. He parodies Blanche's character highlighting the workings of her mind and converting her into a daring person. As a result, she goes through the acknowledgement phase where she admits that she is a woman with illusions. Afterwards, she reaches the acceptance phase as she accepts her reality, unlike Williams' Blanche who could not live with it, got a mental breakdown, and ended up in a mental institution. Influenced by Camus' suggested acknowledgement-acceptance-accomplishment triad to find a way to face the absurd futile life, Durang has parodied the inconsistencies in the human condition with an unprecedented humorous talent.

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