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# Pequeño Teatro Dido as Introducer of Theatre of the Absurd in Spain

Maša KMET

Universidad Complutense de Madrid  
[mkmet@ucm.es](mailto:mkmet@ucm.es)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Born in Ljubljana (Slovenia) in 1995. She did a double master's degree in Spanish and English Studies at the University of Ljubljana. She is currently following the doctoral programme on Theatre Studies at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Her main lines of research are independent theatre, university theatre and 20th and 21st century theatre.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the beginnings of the Theatre of the Absurd in Spanish theatres. It introduces the independent group Pequeño Teatro Dido, which was active between the years 1954 and 1963. This was the first group to perform Spanish and foreign Theatre of the Absurd plays, especially by Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. In the second part of the article we present the plays by those two playwrights that debuted on the stages of Madrid thanks to Dido: *The Lesson*, *The Bald Soprano*, *The Chairs* and *Jack, or The Submission* by Ionesco and *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett. The objective of this article is to show where and when these plays were staged and mention their translators and directors, but especially to analyse the reaction of the audience and critics. The research is based on programmes and reviews in the newspapers together with other publications and interviews that contain relevant information.

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**Keywords:** Pequeño Teatro Dido, Theatre of the Absurd, theatre criticism, Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, *The Lesson*, *The Bald Soprano*, *The Chairs*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*

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## Pequeño Teatro Dido as Introducer of Theatre of the Absurd in Spain

### Introduction

The theatre scene of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s was marked in both Europe and the United States by the Theatre of the Absurd. Within this current, essential for the history of the theatre, playwrights on both continents produced plays in which they stress incongruity and repetition. These pieces, which at first glance do not seem to make sense and lack a logical explanation, nevertheless provide a universal and timeless message. The axis of this literary movement was formed, in particular, by the playwrights Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, but also by some Spanish writers such as Miguel Mihura and Fernando Arrabal. However, due to Franco's censorship, which prohibited the performance of these types of plays, in the 1950s and 1960s Spanish audiences would have been deprived of the Theatre of the Absurd if it were not for Pequeño Teatro Dido, one of the experimental groups that dominated the independent scene in that period. Trino Martínez Trives, who directed most of the Theatre of the Absurd plays that Dido produced, described in an interview his first experience with the Theatre of the Absurd in Spain:

As I was in contact with the groups that were doing independent theatre in Spain, the first thing that occurred to me was to tell them about these playwrights and translate them, so that the groups operating in Madrid and Barcelona could perform them. My first surprise sprang from the arguments used for deciding not to include these plays in their repertoire: almost all of them were based on the low culture of their audiences (1965: 126).

This quote is a first example of a certain rejection by the Spanish audience of the Theatre of the Absurd, which will be the central theme of this article. Obviously, in the 1950s, audiences in Spain had no contact with this type of theatre, even if they were enthusiasts living in the capital or other large cities. Furthermore, there is an obvious relationship between audience opinion regarding these plays and the criteria established by theatre critics

in the press. Neither did most of these critics have a broad knowledge of the Theatre of the Absurd, so they generally assessed these plays as boring, meaningless or even of poor quality. Given the importance of theatre criticism for the future of the Theatre of the Absurd in Spain, this article will look at the premieres of some plays by Ionesco and Beckett that Dido brought to the stage and analyse the reaction of the audience and, above all, the critics to these productions, since their views conditioned whether they remained in or were withdrawn from Spanish theatres.

However, it is essential to first introduce the Pequeño Teatro Dido group and its merits in the development of independent theatre and the expansion of theatre on the stages of Madrid, since, despite having been very successful in its time, it has never been the object of academic research.

### Pequeño Teatro Dido

Dido began its life on the Madrid stages in 1954 with the performance of the play *Presagio* by Luis Delgado Benavente. The group, led by Josefina Sánchez Pedreño,<sup>1</sup> did far more arduous work than other independent and university groups that emerged in the same years, since Dido remained on the independent scene for much longer.

Like other independent groups, Dido was also born out of a desire to put within the reach of Madrid audiences prohibited Spanish and foreign plays and perform them in official theatres. Although the censorship did not usually allow plays of the Theatre of the Absurd or avant-garde theatre, it approved some of these censored pieces in unique performances for a limited audience associated with the independent theatre group that had requested permission. Therefore, Dido was the first group to perform major plays such as Camus' *The Misunderstanding*, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and *The Three Sisters*, Pinter's *The Caretaker* and Genet's *The Maids*, among many others.

The group usually performed their plays in a wide range of theatres or other venues, since, as was the custom, independent theatre companies did not have a fixed space at their disposal but had to move for each play. The most usual thing was to use the official theatres on Mondays, which was commonly the day of rest for commercial companies, or other days of the week in night performances after the official shows programmed in that theatre had ended. On the other hand, they programmed these performances in halls of residence or schools that allowed them to use their small halls and, on some occasions, the pieces were premiered at the auditorium of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the Complutense University of Madrid. Among the most frequent venues used by Dido in the capital were the Teatro Bellas Artes, the Teatro María Guerrero and the Teatro Goya. For most of the performances, the group moved around the Madrid stages; however, there

1. It should be noted that the fact that the group was directed by a woman was not at all common in the period when Dido was active. The other independent or experimental groups known, such as Tábano, Los Goliardos and Els Joglars, were all directed by men. Therefore, the research on Pequeño Teatro Dido and the analysis of its productions is even more valuable and necessary.

are unique cases when Dido left the capital, as with *Waiting for Godot*, which was also performed in Barcelona, at the Teatro Windsor.

From what we see in the programmes and press clippings, the group was not made up of a regular company, but there are many examples of actors and actresses who only participated in one of the many plays that Dido staged. Its members also included famous actors such as Miguel Narros, Carmen Bernardos, Margarita Lozano, Jaime Blanch, Lola Cardona and Jesús Puente, among others, who began their professional careers in independent and university groups.

The group also had a variety of directors, since they used what Josefina Sánchez Pedreño called a “rotation system”; in an interview in the magazine *Primer Acto*, she explained why they decided to use this system: “There are playwrights like Chekhov and Ionesco with such a different spirit that, undoubtedly, need directors with a similar and, therefore, different sensitivity” (1957: 69). Consequently, Dido worked with several renowned directors such as Alberto González Vergel, Miguel Narros, Luis Balaguer, José María de Quinto and Trino Martínez Trives, among others. Like the actors and actresses, the directors also used these unique performances as a way to reach the official stages and on many occasions they managed to do so.

In this way, in around ten years, Dido put on some 50 productions, among which there was no shortage of performances of young Spanish playwrights who at that time did not have the possibility of taking their plays to commercial venues. Thus, Dido was the first group to stage Fernando Arrabal’s *Los hombres del triciclo* in 1958 or Lauro Olmo’s *La camisa* in 1962.

Another major achievement for Spanish theatre was the establishment of the Valle Inclán Award created by Dido in 1959 so that the winners had the possibility to premiere plays that otherwise would not have seen the light of day. Although the winners did not receive any remuneration for their plays, “with the staging by Dido Pequeño Teatro, the ‘Valle-Inclán’ was already reward enough” (De Quinto, 1960: 20). Although the contest was only active for a few years, the award was re-established for the *El cultural* supplement of the newspaper *El Mundo* in 2006 and became important among 21st century playwrights.

Dido’s essential role in the theatre of that time is clear, since the group revolutionised the Spanish stage by introducing numerous foreign playwrights and creating a space in which new Spanish playwrights could premiere their plays. However, as José María de Quinto explained in *Primer Acto*, “the greatest contribution of Dido and Josefina Sánchez Pedreño to the cultural field of theatre was the discovery, for Spain, in Spanish and directed by Martínez Trives, of the plays of Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett” (2001: 77).

## Pequeño Teatro Dido and Eugène Ionesco

### *The Lesson and The Bald Soprano*

Dido Pequeño Teatro was a very productive group, especially if we consider the time it was active and the fact that it was a non-professional group with

few financial resources. In addition, it almost always chose pieces that were barely acceptable to censors, which made its work even more demanding. A fundamental part of its repertoire were undoubtedly Theatre of the Absurd plays, more specifically, the dramas of Ionesco and Beckett. For its second show in the 1954 season, Dido chose Ionesco's *The Lesson*, which they performed under the direction of Trino Martínez Trives, who was also responsible for the Spanish version of the play. The piece was performed at the Teatro Salón of the Asociación de Diplomados of the Instituto Internacional de Madrid. Unfortunately, so far no review of this premiere has been found but it can be assumed that the audience's reception was positive since Dido performed it again six months later, in January 1955 at the Teatro del Instituto Nacional de Previsión in Madrid. On that occasion, they staged both *The Lesson* and Ionesco's first play, *The Bald Soprano*, on the same night. Like the first time, *The Lesson* was directed by Martínez Trives and had the same cast that had performed it six months earlier, and *The Bald Soprano* was directed by Manuel Gallego Morell.

With these two plays Ionesco debuted in Spain and this was probably the first time that the Madrid audience encountered a type of theatre based on repetition and, above all, incoherence. Therefore, the opinion of the audience that witnessed this Ionesco debut and especially the comments of the theatre critics were essential not only for the future presence of the Theatre of the Absurd in Spain but also for the development of this movement among Spanish playwrights. Admittedly, the overriding reaction to Ionesco's theatre was far from positive, as critics did not recognise the value that either *The Lesson* or *The Bald Soprano* deserve.

Unfortunately, only one review has survived that we can use to analyse how the premiere of the two plays was received. The review published in the newspaper *ABC* in January 1955, written by the reputed critic Alfredo Marquerie, is curiously entitled "Se inauguró el 'Pequeño Teatro de Madrid' con el estreno de dos obras de Ionesc[o]" ('Pequeño Teatro de Madrid' opened with the premiere of two plays by Ionesc[o]), despite the fact that it was not Dido's first performance – but its fifth – and nor was it the premiere of *The Lesson*, since, as already explained, Dido premiered the play as early as 1954.

Later Marquerie pointed out that "this way of doing theatre 'to épater the bourgeois', 'to scandalise the Philistines' is absolutely nothing new. For this reason and because of its lack of constructive ambition we do not like it and, furthermore, and what is worse, it bores us to excess" (1955: 41). It is important to bear in mind that theatre reviews at that time were far less argued than today and were based more on the strictly personal assessment of their writers. What Marquerie says evidently does not reflect any deep knowledge of the work of Ionesco or the Theatre of the Absurd, which is understandable, since it was a recent movement at that time to which the Spanish had had almost no access until the premiere in question.

Despite Marquerie's obvious rejection, he noted that the two plays received a great ovation, suggesting that the pieces were well accepted by the audience. As this was the first appearance of this type of theatre in

Spain, the positive reaction among the audience was essential, since in this way the Dido group received a type of feedback that encouraged them to choose other Theatre of the Absurd plays that they premiered on the Madrid stage.

### *The Chairs*

After sounding out the country with the performance of *The Lesson* and *The Bald Soprano*, in 1957 Dido offered the Madrid theatres another play by the Romanian-French playwright, *The Chairs*. Although the first contact with the Theatre of the Absurd was not a success among critics, the group boldly continued along the path to introduce more plays of this type on Spanish stages. On this occasion Josefina Sánchez's group was also the first to perform this Theatre of the Absurd piece in Spain. Again, it was translated by Trino Martínez Trives, who also directed the play performed at El Círculo Catalán, in Madrid.

The director and translator was aware that Ionesco's theatre was not yet recognised and well accepted enough for the audience to welcome *The Chairs* with open arms, but he still insisted on translating the play and working with Dido to stage it at least for a minority audience. In a piece that Trives wrote for the newspaper *Ya*, he stressed that "three years after presenting *The Lesson*, there are still groups in our country that are unconvinced by the work of this great playwright" (1957a: n.p.). The group's stage director or director usually published a short text in the press to announce the premiere and explain why he or she had chosen to stage a given play, which was a valuable element for the show. These pieces served not only to promote the play and stimulate the curiosity of potential audiences but also to introduce it into theatre circles since they usually included information about the playwright, his aesthetics and sometimes even the plot of the play, so that people knew what they could expect from the production.

As in the case of *The Lesson* and *The Bald Soprano*, some members of the audience showed a high level of approval when they saw the premiere of *The Chairs*, but that opinion was not shared by the entire auditorium. Adolfo Prego commented in *Informaciones* that "there were many and prolonged applause and also vigorous protests. As it should be, in the case of such an experiment" (1957: n.p.). This shows that the audience opinion was divided and that there were obviously still individuals who did not understand the play or were not comfortable with the aesthetics of the Theatre of the Absurd.

On the other hand, the critics' opinion was unanimous, since both Adolfo Prego and Gonzalo Torrente Ballester agreed on several points of their respective reviews. It is curious that they both declared that the play did not seem like anything new to them and Torrente Ballester even pointed out that the piece "is not original, but almost, almost a plagiarism" (1957: n.p.). The aforementioned comment is especially surprising, since it was a recent movement at the time and more so in Spain. However, the writer showed knowledge of the subject by drawing lines between Ionesco and writers and comedians such as the Quintero brothers, Camus and the Marx brothers. He even emphasised that *The Chairs* seeks to show incommunicability among

people but that Ionesco did not want to express it clearly, which is still an opinion based on subjectivism. However, in contrast to the review of the premiere of *The Lesson* and *The Bald Soprano*, in this case it is clear that Torrente Ballester had a broader knowledge of the subject, which shows a change, albeit small, in the attitude of Spanish critics towards Ionesco's theatre.

Despite these not at all positive reviews, it should be noted that both critics agreed that their negative opinion was aimed at the playwright and *The Chairs* and not at the director or cast. Prego wrote in his conclusion that "if there were any need for evidence in favour of the defeat that Ionesco suffers at the hands of his little play, we would mention the admirable performance that María Abelenda and Victórico Fuentes offered us, who expended intelligence in the execution of their roles" (1957: n.p.) and added that the work of the director was excellent. On the other hand, in the newspaper *Arriba*, Torrente Ballester ended in a similar way by saying that "the comedy was daringly performed by María Abelenda, Victórico Fuentes and Bonifacio de la Fuente. They were directed with equal courage by Trino [Martínez] Trives" (1957: n.p.).

### *Jack, or The Submission*

Despite the abundant negative reviews that appeared in the press after the premieres of Ionesco's plays, *The Chairs* was not the last piece of the Romanian-French playwright that Dido introduced to the Spanish stage. In 1962 they put on *Jack, or The Submission* at the Teatro Bellas Artes and, again, the translation and direction were by Trino Martínez Trives. Although the title of the show and the press only mentioned *Jack, or The Submission*, in a short article for the magazine *Primer Acto* Martínez Trives explained that it also included the second part, called *The Future is in Eggs*. The director explained that in the two plays he used "the same set with small changes, the same actors and even, although Ionesco sets the action three years later, the same costumes" (1963: 35). The director also wrote that the aim of the work was to create a non-traditional and indefinite time, which could be both the present and the past or the future or even the memory of a dream. This universal time allows freedom of action and does not compel the audience to identify with the characters in the play. Then the director described his vision of the play and explained his staging: "*Jack* had the following themes: the generation struggle, a poet misunderstood by the society around him, paradise lost. I had to balance the derisive and the poetic; I did not want to do comedy, or, at least, in the style of the Marx Brothers, which is a different thing" (1963: 36).

Martínez Trives clearly defended the value of these two plays and stressed that five years had passed since the last Ionesco premiere, but the critics' attitude regarding the Theatre of the Absurd had improved very little. On the other hand, it should be remembered that the reviews that are available to us belong to a small number of newspapers, so the writers of these texts were usually the same. In the case of *Jack, or The Submission*, there are the reviews of Adolfo Prego and Nicolás González Ruiz, contributors to the newspapers *Informaciones* and *Ya*, respectively. As in the aforementioned plays, this time the criticism focused again on the quality of the play rather than on the work of the director or cast. The two critics praised the acting

and direction, especially Prego, who believed that “the actors performed their tasks perfectly” (1962: n.p.) and also expressed satisfaction with the set. The director also agreed that “José Jardiel’s set [was] excellent, expressive and relevant. Only the essential furniture. Only Jack, the grandfather and grandmother were sitting. [...] It was essential for everything to revolve around Jack; at least that’s how I saw it” (1963: 36).

However, Prego’s impression of Ionesco’s play was again negative, as was González Ruiz’s when he noted that “the play is pure arbitrariness and it is useless to try to find any meaning or sense in it,” adding that the audience “didn’t understand anything, but for that reason it was perhaps more conducive to applause” (1962: n.p.). In other words, in the five years that had passed since the last Ionesco premiere in Spain, theatre critics, or these critics in particular, had not changed their perspective at all and continued to condemn Ionesco and the Theatre of the Absurd to failure.

After recognising that Ionesco’s plays were so negatively received among critics, Josefina Sánchez’s point of view on the matter is curious. The director of the group mentioned the subject of criticism in several interviews, but especially in the dialogues of the magazine *Primer Acto* in which she participated in 1963, a year after the premiere of *Jack, or The Submission*. First, she commented on the criticism of Ionesco’s plays in general and tried to find the reasons for this very negative position: “I think that most critics have not bothered to read Ionesco’s theatre. They don’t know it. And, of course, they cannot really destroy something they have not bothered to study and understand” (Monleón, 1963: 3). Obviously, this was true in the case of several critics but not all since, among others, Prego demonstrated in his articles a good knowledge of Ionesco’s theatre and his non-literary texts, but he was not convinced by his dramaturgy. He explained to the reader that, in his opinion, Ionesco “is a good dialectician and an excellent critic, with a clear mind and a convincing pen. But when it comes to offering us not literature about his comedies, but his comedies, we miss that clarity and that strength of conviction” (1962: n.p.).

In the aforementioned dialogues, Josefina Sánchez specifically talked about reviews of *Jack, or The Submission* and expressed her disappointment by saying the critics were:

[...] almost inconsiderate not only in relation to Ionesco, but in relation to the company that has made the tremendous effort to put on a play like *Jack* to educate and inform, and, above all, because we believe in the values of Ionesco’s theatre. This inconsideration is what hurts us the most, because it can be criticised, you can like or not like *Jack*, but Ionesco is an important playwright, although a few gentlemen insist on not knowing him. And it is important to make the effort to present it on a Spanish stage against all the odds (Monleón, 1963: 3).

Despite the fact that the critics expressed general disapproval of *Jack, or The Submission* and that the director of Dido, Josefina Sánchez, seemed to be one of the few people to see the importance of Ionesco’s theatre, Ricardo



Doménech shared her opinion and wrote some joyful words about the premiere of this play. He described the show as a phenomenon, since according to his account there was no audience protest against the play but it was received with strong unanimous applause. This is important, especially due to all the negative criticism that Ionesco's plays had received in the past. Doménech concluded positively by saying that "in Spain the audience is beginning to accept the so-called avant-garde theatre, particularly Ionesco's theatre. I know that it is a minority audience, and that the day after the premiere some snobbish reviews insisted on rejecting this type of theatre. But it does not matter. Avant-garde theatre has already been accepted by us" (1963: 54). It seems that Doménech had another perspective concerning the audience's opinion of these plays, since he described it as positive and approving, but what stands out most from his comment is the change in the critics' perception that he noted had occurred between the first appearance by Ionesco in Spain in 1954 and 1962, confirming that even the most demanding audiences had gradually become accustomed to the Theatre of the Absurd.

### Pequeño Teatro Dido and Samuel Beckett

As we have seen, critics did not share the taste for the plays of Ionesco that Dido put on because they were not used to a theatre of this type. However, over the years the group managed to change their opinion, at least slightly. This was an achievement of great importance, since in this way the independent group marked the future of the performance of not only Ionesco's plays but any Theatre of the Absurd play in Spain. During the same years, the group also performed plays by another similar playwright, Samuel Beckett. Altogether, Dido brought three of the Irish writer's plays to the stage: *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*. The three plays debuted on the Spanish stage thanks to Dido. *Waiting for Godot* was the first of the three they performed but we will first look at the other two, which in the Spain of that time had fewer repercussions than Beckett's most famous play.

#### *Endgame*

*Endgame* premiered in 1958, just one year after its publication in France. From the outset the play aroused much curiosity among non-professional groups, since two groups were interested in being the first to bring Beckett's work to Spanish theatres. The play caused quite a few conflicts, as the Dido group fought with another non-professional group called Nuevo Grupo Los Independientes to premiere *Endgame*. Alfredo Castellón mentioned in his review that Los Independientes (AAT, 1999: 30) won in the end, but this is contradicted by the press and the Centro de Documentación Teatral in Madrid database. Dido performed the play on 11 June at the Teatro Bellas Artes and only twelve days later it was brought to the stage of the Teatro Recoletos by Los Independientes. In the case of Dido, it was directed by Alberto González Vergel and translated by Luce Moreau de Arrabal.

Compared to the critics' comments about Ionesco, the relatively positive review of Torrente Ballester for the newspaper *Arriba* seems surprising:

“*Endgame* belongs to an art that is not made to be liked. Therefore, I did not like it. But it is made to interest, and it interested me” (1958: 19). This comment shows that at the same time that Ionesco’s work was met with critical rejection, Beckett’s plays were far more accepted from their first appearance. Despite the fact that at first glance the review does not seem entirely positive, Torrente Ballester concluded by thanking Dido and Josefina Sánchez for having “been able to witness the most controversial play in current theatre” and added that “this is the true mission of independent theatres” (1958: 19). With this phrase, the writer and critic emphasised how valuable independent theatre was, and still is today, since it allowed Spanish audiences to come into contact with the fundamental plays that were published and performed in other countries at that time. Hence, it is apparent that, although critics like Torrente Ballester did not necessarily like the plays of Ionesco and Beckett, at least they understood the need to have access to them in Spanish theatres.

Unfortunately, not all critics understood the importance of Beckett and his way of writing. Elías Gómez Picazo, in the newspaper *Madrid*, said that “the version of the play [was] quite successful” (1958: 15) and also praised the acting and directing. However, he frankly criticised the play saying that “it is sad and depressing to see how some of us [...] get excited about plays like this” (1958: 15), which clearly shows that despite some optimists the path to success for these plays would continue to be very long.

As in the case of Ionesco’s plays, according to Torrente Ballester, in this premiere, audience opinion was also divided and the show was received with both applause and stamping (1958: 19), a reaction already very common for Theatre of the Absurd plays. On the other hand, Gómez Picazo presented the reaction of the audience in a completely different way, since he did not mention the applause but commented that “the stamping that occurred [...] at the end of the performance was quite unanimous and clear” (1958: 15), by which he was probably suggesting that the audience agreed with him that it was not worth seeing Beckett’s play and reinforced his rejection of it.

### *Krapp’s Last Tape*

Unfortunately, the premiere of *Krapp’s Last Tape* is not very well documented, so we can only rely on a few reviews. It is known that Dido performed this Beckett play in 1962 at the Teatro Bellas Artes and that this was its premiere in Spain, since Josefina Sánchez mentioned it in several interviews. However, according to data from the Centro de Documentación Teatral in Madrid, the first group to perform *Krapp’s Last Tape* was the Teatro de Cámara y Ensayo, which creates confusion that is not uncommon when it comes to independent groups, due to inaccurate reporting of their names in the press.

Despite the confusing information that we have been able to find, we can be sure that the premiere of *Krapp’s Last Tape* was the work of Dido, which is shown by the mention made by the director of the group in her interview with the actor and director Ítalo Ricardi, who was praised by all the critics, who do mention that the production was organised by Josefina Sánchez’s group.

Another point that stands out in this premiere is the set. The decision to do the play on a rotating stage was praised, which Francisco García Pavón described in the newspaper *Arriba* as an “art that makes you experience new sensations” (1962: 16). However, the play’s reception in general was again negative. In *Ya*, Nicolás González Ruiz commented that the play “is the worst we have seen of Beckett” (1962: n.p.) and in *Informaciones* Adolfo Prego wrote that even “the most extreme supporters of the playwright are left cold, indifferent. There were no protests — only a lone person made his disapproval against it — but there was no enthusiasm either” (1962: 7). In other words, *Krapp’s Last Tape* received the same reproaches as Ionesco’s plays and Beckett’s *Endgame*, despite the fact that it premiered several years after other plays by them. Again we see that the focus of criticism as always was on the actors and the set design, but the comment on the play itself occupied little space in the newspapers, with which the critics ensured that the plays had little success in Spain, something also reflected in the few times it has been staged since its premiere.

### *Waiting for Godot*

Lastly, we want to focus on Dido’s premiere of *Waiting for Godot* for various reasons. To begin with, it was one of the first plays that Dido chose to produce, thereby underlining its importance not only among Beckett’s plays but for world theatre. Its translation, by Martínez Trives, was published in the first issue of *Primer Acto* and Trives also directed it. In his article “Mi versión de *Esperando a Godot* y su estreno en España” (My version of *Waiting for Godot* and its premiere in Spain), the translator and director explained that they wanted to perform it together with *The Lesson* and *The Bald Soprano*, but it was not possible. He commented that the play was premiered with many difficulties in the auditorium of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the Complutense University of Madrid in May 1955. Subsequently, there were two more performances: the first in Barcelona at the Teatro Windsor in February 1956 and the second at the Teatro Bellas Artes in Madrid in March of the same year. This reflects the fact that this show was one of the few productions by Dido that was staged outside the Madrid theatres.

In this case, there is also some confusion about which group was responsible for the Barcelona performance. Although the newspaper *La Vanguardia* attributed the performance to the Teatro de Ensayo de Barcelona, we know that it was really Dido, given that it had the same cast as in the Madrid performances: Ramón Corroto, Alfonso Gallardo, Victórico Fuentes, Bonifacio de la Fuente and Luis Sáenz.

It is surprising that the reviews on this occasion were not negative as in the other cases. Although in Barcelona they did not recognise the value of the play, the Madrid critics made positive comments. González Ruiz wrote in *Ya* that Dido “has done very well in putting on this play. It is vividly current, important and significant; it has achieved in London what seems most difficult for such a play: audience success” (1956: n.p.). In *ABC*, Marquerie referred to his review of the premiere of the play in the auditorium of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, so for the review of the performance at the Teatro Bellas

Artes he only repeated his positive impression: “today we only need to record the success of this version and praise the work of the performers as it deserves” (1956: 39). Even Torrente Ballester, who had been the fiercest of all critics, expressed his positive opinion saying that “it is incredible that a dramatic work built on repetition can maintain the interest of the audience without having to resort to external action, change; in a word, to the theatrical” (1956: sp). For the newspaper *Informaciones* Adolfo Prego confirmed that “the audience closely followed the play and applauded everyone who participated in it, although there were signs of protest from some who disagreed with the way Beckett writes theatre” (1956: n.p.), confirming that most of the audience was satisfied with both the play and the work of the director and actors. Furthermore, although this was one of the first plays performed by Dido, and therefore also one of the first Theatre of the Absurd productions that the Spanish audience had the opportunity to see, the critics did not reject it as they had done with the pioneering versions of Ionesco’s pieces. In other words, despite the fact that it is a similar kind of theatre, Beckett’s plays, especially *Waiting for Godot*, were more successful from the outset.

However, in a debate, Jerónimo López Mozo recognised a curious fact about this performance. As the audience was unfamiliar with Beckett, in the interval everyone got up and left. He mentioned that “an actor had to run after them to tell them that the play was not over; yes, we had applauded, but we had not understood anything” (AAT, 1999: 36). Josefina Sánchez, on the other hand, had a completely different experience to López Mozo. In 1957 she revealed for *Primer Acto* that she had conducted an experiment in one of the performances of *Waiting for Godot*: “For the performance of *Waiting for Godot* I experimented by inviting a group of workers; I wanted to see to how far they could ‘stand’ the performance; I can say that they not only ‘endured’ it, but also broadly understood the thesis developed by Samuel Beckett in this play” (Marco, 1957: 68). From this we can deduce that, although in the press comments it was suggested that almost nobody could understand these Theatre of the Absurd plays (since they are meaningless), there are accounts that affirm that some of the audience understood the general lines of Beckett’s theatre.

Finally, *Waiting for Godot* is very important for the Spanish scene because it was the first Beckett play, after these unique productions performed by Dido, to transfer to a commercial theatre in Spain. In 1967 the play was performed at the Teatro Beatriz under the direction of Jaime Jaimes and was well received by audience and critics.

## Conclusions

It is clear that Pequeño Teatro Dido carried out a very difficult, albeit necessary, task at that time by offering audiences in Madrid – and sometimes Barcelona – unusual and even prohibited plays on official stages. The members of the group dared to stage plays by playwrights that the Spanish audience of that time did not know but which were usually performed on the stages of other European countries, especially France and the United Kingdom.

Thanks to Dido, Madrid audiences got to know the plays of essential playwrights in the history of the theatre such as Camus, Pinter, Genet and Chekhov. In addition, it must be emphasised that the group felt it was very important to perform Theatre of the Absurd plays and especially those of Ionesco and Beckett, shown by the fact that they continued to choose them despite the negative criticism they received.

We have seen that audience opinion was almost always divided, which was normal in Theatre of the Absurd productions, since they did not know these playwrights and were not prepared for such experimental theatre. However, it seems that as the years passed they got used to the new theatre movement and in some cases those who accepted the plays even prevailed.

The critics' opinion, on the other hand, was almost always unanimous and, in most cases, negative. As exceptions we can highlight *Waiting for Godot* and *Jack, or The Submission*, although in the case of the latter only some appreciated the value of the play. The show that was best received was probably *Waiting for Godot*, which, consequently, was performed a greater number of times — three —, even far from the stages of the capital. Similarly, *Waiting for Godot* was the first play by Beckett to be performed on an official stage in 1967 and, unlike on other occasions, the radical piece by the Irish playwright was well received. Furthermore, it can be seen that Beckett's plays in general were more successful than Ionesco's, probably because the plays of the Romanian-French playwright arrived first, when the Spanish were still unfamiliar with pieces of an absurd nature and also because Ionesco's plays are even more radical than Beckett's.

Despite all the negative criticism the group received at the beginning of their journey, it is possible to appreciate a gradual improvement in the reception and the comments in the press that at least almost always praised the work of the directors and actors in each premiere. Hence, Dido not only introduced experimental and innovative plays of European theatre in Spain and managed to adapt them to the framework of the theatre during the dictatorship, but also managed to get the Spanish scene to gradually accept the Theatre of the Absurd and begin to understand its philosophy. Contrary to expectations, Dido managed to get these plays performed and successfully opened a new path for the Spanish audience, which is reflected both in the impact these plays had on the development of theatre in Spain and in the numerous versions and productions of almost all of these plays over several decades and even today.



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