

Albert Camus' *Caligula*

By Simon Lea

Caligula is a play within a play. What the absurd emperor is attempting is a dramatic and deadly demonstration of a simple reality: that people die and they are unhappy. What is [Camus](#) attempting to demonstrate? To answer this we need to understand how Camus worked. From the earliest days of his writing career, Camus talked of his 'works'. These would come in cycles: the absurd; revolt; and love. He did not live to complete his plan. [Caligula](#) belongs to the absurd cycle along with the novel *The Stranger* and the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Each cycle is made up of three complementary works, a novel, an essay and a play. The second cycle on revolt consists of *The Plague* (novel), *The Rebel* (essay) and *The Just Assassins* (play). His unfinished novel, *The First Man* along with an essay *The Myth of Nemesis* and a play *Don Faust* would have made up the third.

Caligula was written in 1939 and Camus originally intended it to be performed by the Théâtre de l'Equipe, a group he helped found, with him playing the lead. However, the play did not open until 1945 at the Théâtre Héberot where it ran for a year. Between 1939 and 1945 *Caligula* underwent many changes. Indeed, Camus would continue tinkering with the play as both his ideas and the world changed over time. During his lifetime there were three revivals of the play in 1950, 1957 and 1958. More recently, *Caligula* was performed in London at the Donmar Warehouse in 2003 and today by the Ashes and Diamonds Theatre Company in 2012. Just as Camus made changes to his play to meet the changes the world was undergoing, so have others modernized the play to match their environments. The Parisian postwar audiences couldn't fail to see a Hitler-like dictator in *Caligula*; Michael Grandage styled his *Caligula* after Prime Minister Tony Blair. Despite these changes, the play at its core remains the same. *Caligula* is not a political play concerned with the dangers of extreme politics nor is it a condemnation of dictatorship. Camus is concerned with philosophical absolutism. In particular, he is concerned with the philosophy of the absurd.

What is the absurd? Something is absurd when there is a contradiction between aspiration and reality. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus talks of the absurdity of a man armed with only a sword attacking a group of machine guns. It is the 'disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view'. This man's desperate charge is absurd but it is not *the absurd*. In order to put a 'the' in front of 'absurd' there must be something universal, some aspect of the human condition that is absurd. This universal aspect is the seriousness and importance we attach to our lives and the values we hold - despite the knowledge that these things may have been chosen completely arbitrarily.

If we hold the universe to be meaningless, it is absurd to search for meaning in this universe. However, this is what Camus is attempting to do. But if all things are meaningless, if we are left to attribute meaning based on... what? How can we attach great importance to any value we hold, given that we may simply value this or that based upon a whim, or because we were told to for reasons unknown, or simply because it's easiest to go with the flow? We express our moral beliefs; talk about what is right and wrong, every day.

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But in a universe offering no guide, no standard by which we can judge our actions how can we know for sure that what we think and say are true? When faced with a tyrant like Caligula, Hitler, or even just a Tony Blair what justification do we have to oppose them, and if we do what limits, if any, can we impose on ourselves?

The absurd is experienced as part of the human condition. Rather than a slowly creeping realization the absurd bursts forth. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus gives several examples: suddenly becoming aware on your birthday that you are situated in time (the horror of confronting your worst enemy); the jolting question 'why?' that interrupts your unconscious daily pattern ('Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm); suddenly seeing the world as 'dense' and no longer clothed with the illusionary meaning it had been previously given ('For a second we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we attributed to it before hand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again.')

Camus' essay passes through three stages. First he looks at how the absurd is experienced, then at how these experiences ought to be interpreted and finally why the various solutions currently on offer are inadequate. He is particularly concerned with those who would 'conjure away' the problem by seeking an escape from the world and the human condition. Camus was familiar with Gnostic ideas; his dissertation was on Christian Metaphysics and Neo-Platonism. He recognized in both Christianity and Marxism a Manichean approach to the problem. Both see the world as hostile and its inhabitants in need of saving. Both rely on messianic forces, Jesus Christ and the Party, or Proletariat. Finally, both see history building towards a final endgame, Judgment Day and Kingdom come for the Christians and the withering away of the State and pure communism for the Marxists. What comes with this approach is an ethic that holds anything that works to bring about the end, Paradise on Earth (whether it be God's Kingdom or a Workers paradise) is morally good. For Camus this leads to justifications for concentration camps, inquisitions, show trials and bloody executions. But if Camus wants to oppose this, and he does, in a meaningless universe on what grounds can he say 'this is repugnant'?

A popular misconception of Camus is that he denied the existence of any transcendent values. While he is partly to blame for this view, *The Myth of Sisyphus* lays out his approach to discovering authentic values. The absurd, for him, is always a starting point, never the end. For this, he is full of hope, not the nihilist he is sometimes mistaken for. Meursault in *The Stranger* and Caligula in *Caligula* illustrate two possible approaches to the absurd, both wrong. It is worth noting at this point that Camus' characters are often taken, mistakenly, to be representations of their author. Camus is not Meursault and he is certainly not Caligula. In fact, Camus' own position is most closely reflected in Cherea, the character who will violently murder the emperor, stabbing him in the face. At times Cherea speaks lines expressing views very similar to those expressed by Camus in his *Letters to a German friend*.

Caligula is not just a murderous tyrant. Nor is he merely an insane dictator. For sure his is murderous and quite insane but there is clarity to his method. When he is told that the treasury is the most important thing - he treats it as the most important thing. All subjects

are to rewrite their wills, disinheriting their children and leaving everything to the state. The brothels are to be expanded; the patrician's wives are to work there. Medals will be given to those who frequent the brothels most often, death to anyone not winning a medal. He does nothing to help himself politically. Most tyrants spend their time trying to avoid being killed or overthrown; Caligula does nothing to appease the people or patricians. He murders fathers and deliberately starts a famine. Everyone around him is humiliated and abused, but why? What is he hoping to achieve? The answer is nothing less than the transfiguration of the world.

Caligula wants to hold the moon in his hands. To do so is impossible. Sending his friend Helicon out to find the moon, to see it floating on the surface of a lake and dredge it out of the water, is absurd. He knows he is asking for the impossible. It would be just as impossible, in his mind, to send Helicon out to find meaning in the universe, a justification for living one's life this way or that. If he can not get the moon in his hands, and he knows he can not, then he will settle for having everyone understand the truth of the world: 'I shall make them a kingly gift - the gift of equality. And when all is leveled out, when the impossible has come to earth and the moon is in my hands - then, perhaps, I shall be transfigured and the world renewed; then men will die no more and at last be happy.'

I said that *Caligula* is a play within a play and it is through a series of dramatic speeches, demonstrations and macabre vignettes that Caligula tries to get his message across. But he is wrong and he fails. From the start - three days after the death of his sister, and lover, Drusilla an experience from which awareness of the absurd bursts forth - Caligula was on the wrong road to freedom ('I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn't the right one...')

If Caligula's path is the wrong one then the question asked by the play is - which is the right one?