

Let's Honor Albert Camus

by Michael Curtis



Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more...it is a tale, signifying nothing.

Few would have thought that a banana, in similar fashion to the toilet of Marcel Duchamp, was a work of art. But a sculpture, a banana duct taped to the wall entitled *Comedian* by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan exhibited at the Art Basel Miami Beach art fair in December 2019 drew thousands of spectators, as well as being sold for more than \$120,000. Differences of opinion exist over what can be considered "art," and in this case whether the exhibition of a banana can be so described, or whether it was a political statement against the commodification of art, or a joke, a manifestation of the "absurd."

Whatever the answer about conceptual art, the event in Miami in pretentious fashion may revive an interest in the concept of absurdism, a philosophical inquiry fashionable 50 or 60 years ago, centering on the question of the intrinsic meaning of life in a purposeless universe. Among those who addressed the problem of absurdism and incorporated it in their literary and artistic work was the French-Algerian writer Albert Camus.

Albert Camus was born in Mondavi (present name Drean), Algeria on 1913 in humble circumstances and died as a world-famous celebrity on January 4, 1960 as the result of a car accident. He was a writer, journalist, playwright, director, translator of Shakespeare and other English writers, accomplished soccer player, café philosopher, and resistance fighter against the Nazi occupation of France. He was a handsome man, attractive in his Humphrey Bogart-like trench raincoat, akin to a French Rick in *Casablanca*, a smoker, a prince of cool, admired as a moral hero, and a public intellectual who, together with Jean-Paul Sartre, self-described "ugly" person with whom he later broke, was expected to provide solutions to the problems of his day and be examples of high morals, or provide the post-war era with an ideology.

Though he could not fulfill these ambitious expectations, Camus was a man of integrity and sincerity, whose writing was a curious mixture of realism and indulgence in abstraction, and whose stance, often against political opponents, was for freedom, acceptance of limits on behavior, and moderation. Contrary to post war French leftist intellectuals, especially J.P. Sartre, Camus stressed the value of rebellion and noble struggle, even if unsuccessful, rejected revolution as the path to progress, and indicated the danger of revolutionary illusions.

Though commentators have sought to characterize Camus as libertarian socialist, or anarcho-syndicalist, or existentialist philosopher, he does not fit in any category.

Camus during his lifetime and ever since was a misunderstood and complex figure. He has been neglected in recent years as a writer, and his writings and thoughts appear archaic, but two events may bring him back to general notice. One is that the 60th anniversary of his death is at hand, though there appears to be no official commemoration in his honor. In this case he is being ironically treated as an outsider in life, resembling one of the major themes of his writing, especially in *L'Etranger*, translated as *The Stranger* or *The Outsider*.

Camus was a major French writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, the second youngest recipient after Rudyard Kipling. It would be fair to suggest that those in power were divided over him. This was shown when President Nicolas Sarkozy's proposal to reinter Camus in the Pantheon on the 50th anniversary of his death was rejected by the political left. This negative response and much of his legacy rests on his attitude to Algeria, and to the Soviet Union as if he were for opponents the proponent of French cultural imperialism. There will also be no official commemoration of him in Algeria, though he was the first African born winner of the Nobel prize for literature. Camus is not named on the list of African and diaspora Nobel prizewinners, a list that contains Toni Morrison and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

The other event is an astonishing new French book about the event of his death. The world has long known that Camus was killed at age 46 on January 4, 1960 in an accident in a car, a very expensive Facel Vega, driven by Michel Gallimard, his publisher, in the small town of Villeblevin. The manner of his death, a car crash, perhaps caused by a blowout or a broken axle, into a tree by the vehicle travelling at high speed along a long stretch of straight road seemed to bear out the truth of Camus' concept of absurdism.

However, the new book by the Italian author Giovanni Catelli argues that he was killed by the KGB, because of his anti-

Soviet writings, his support of the Hungarian uprising against the Communist rulers in 1956, and his support of Boris Pasternak. According to Catelli, Camus' death was not due to an accident but was political assassination. He also implies that the French state, which was anxious for closer relations with Russia, as the visit of Nikita Krushchev to Paris in March 1960 showed, may have been involved in the murder. All this is absurd conjecture, though Camus did have critics, even enemies, who were hostile to his ideas or actions: the Soviet Union, Algerian revolutionaries, French Communists, French reactionaries, the U.S. OAS.

Camus purported to be a philosopher and was analyzed as such. But this claim was not really justified. He presented his ideas using metaphor and pagan myth and concepts of absurdism and existentialism, more significant sixty years ago than today, rather than by outright rational argument. His works therefore allow for ambiguity. The philosophic concept of the absurd, idea emanating from the work of Soren Kierkegaard, rests for Camus on the tension between the tendency to seek value and intrinsic meaning in life and the inability to find any in a meaningless and purposeless world. There are three choices: the easiest way out of absurdity is to escape existence by suicide, an act which declares that life is not worth living; a second is to accept help from a higher power, religious or political and experience the danger of revolutionary illusions; and the third is to accept one's absurd condition. Camus' essential position was the third; that people should embrace the absurd condition of human existence and the lack of meaning while also continuing to search for meaning.

His first major books and play, *L'Etranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *Caligula*, attempt to illustrate this problem of the absurd with intellectual honesty. In *L'Etranger*, the central character Meursault rejects the suppositions on which the weak rely. He is condemned because he does not play

the game. Before he dies, Mersault expresses his indifference to the world and the lack of meaning he sees in everything.

Sisyphus was condemned to repeat the same meaningless, ceaseless, and pointless task of pushing a rock up a hill only for it to fall every time after it reached the top. Sisyphus' plight, eternal, useless struggle is seen as a metaphor for human existence and a search for meaning. There are no absolute guidelines and no certain course of action.

He wrote his next works, *The Plague*, and *The Rebel*, while the Nazis were attacking North Africa. The setting of the plague is full of terror, poison, struggle, acquiescence, alliance. Basic is Camus' inherent argument, to be human, with or without heroism.

The book is not a roman à clef. But it may have been affected by two factors. Camus was suffering from another bout of tuberculosis from which he had always suffered. He wrote most of the book in 1942 in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a village of Huguenot Protestants who between December 1940 and September 1944 bravely saved over 5,000 people, including 3,500 Jews from the Nazis.

Most of the criticism of Camus rests on two factors: his attitude to the French-Algerian war and the charge of cultural imperialism; and his dispute with Sartre. On the first issue, in spite of his leftist views, Camus identified with the "pied noirs" such as his own family, and he defended French government action to put down the revolt. He saw the issue less as one of poor Algerians seeking independence from France, but as one involving Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism and Arab imperialism, and the intrusion of the Soviet Union. He was an advocate of the new Mediterranean culture and coexistence between Europeans and Algerians.

Camus was not a cultural imperialist or colonial oppressor, he was a man of the moderate left, a critic of non-democratic

regimes such as Franco Spain, and above all the Soviet Union, the issue that broke his friendship with Sartre. Camus resigned from his association with UNESCO in 1952 when it accepted Franco Spain as a member. He was critical of the use of nuclear weapons and of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was against capital punishment and wrote an essay on it in collaboration with Arthur Koestler. He supported European integration, and founded organizations calling for a democratic and economically progressive Europe.

Camus and Sartre were the two intellectual stars of post war France and agreed on the fight against injustice. But they were to disagree philosophically, Camus always refused to accept the label "existentialist," and politically. In his book *L'homme revolte, The Rebel*, of 1951, Camus expounded the difference between rebellion and revolution. Violence might be appropriate in extreme times but not generally. He favored rebellion, insistence on limits and moderation in action, and condemned revolutionary violence and "absolute freedom." Sartre disliked the book, and argued for perfect justice and freedom, ideals that would be found in communism, and by revolutionary violence. For Camus, absolute justice led to suppression of all contradiction. Unlike Camus who denounce the Soviet camps, Sartre admired the Soviet Union.

The dispute is still relevant today. At the heart is insistence on freedom, protest against injustice by peaceful means, in the light of political reality and on observance of limits. Absolutism is not the way forward. Camus should be honored.