

DRAMA *Works*

Artaud Through Practice

EXTRACT

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
THE FIRST LESSONS	6
PART ONE: EXPLORING THE THEORIES	
CRUEL TO ONESELF	8
LARGER THAN LIFE	13
FROM RHYTHM TO RITUAL	18
BREATHING	24
THE PROBLEM WITH LANGUAGE AND WESTERN THEATRE	28
LANGUAGE - THE LESSONS OF SURREALISM	35
FINDING A CONCRETE LANGUAGE OF SYMBOLS	42
HUMOUR	46
THE AUDIENCE 1]: THEATRE AS LIFE	48
THE AUDIENCE 2]: TOWARDS TOTAL THEATRE	52
PART TWO: APPROACHES TO TEXT	
APPROACHES TO TEXT	55
WORK ON 'METAMORPHOSIS'	57
WORK ON 'AGAMEMNON'	65
WORK ON 'THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER'	68
WORK ON 'WOYZECK'	75
CONCLUSION	79

INTRODUCTION

Of all the main twentieth century practitioners of the theatre, Artaud seems to frighten many teachers the most. This is because he doesn't set down a system of acting or production that one can follow through and which makes sense in a logical satisfying way, as Stanislavski does. Nor does he have a clear political and social aim which results in a style and manner of production to further that aim, as does Brecht. No, Artaud writes like a poet and visionary, sending off arrows of fire into the night: he fires up the reader as he has fired up many theatre practitioners, such as Grotowski and Brook. He generates excitement in those who seek to follow his ideas, acting as a catalyst, a liberator, and it is that which makes him both frightening and fascinating.

Stanislavski has his system of acting, which has become the backbone of twentieth century theatre craft. Brecht allows theatre to have a social usefulness; he liberates theatre from slavish imitations of life and allows different styles of acting to co-exist: naturalism gives way to clear outlines, comic exaggeration and a collage approach to production, to put over a particular message. What does Artaud offer which is so exciting and which, arguably, is more influential to modern day theatre than either of the former?

Where Stanislavski and Brecht address real life in their different ways, Artaud talks of dreams, archetypes, the inner life of mankind, his hopes, fears and secrets. Encountering practicality, efficiency and an ever-increasing understanding through logical analysis of our day-to-day psychological motivations it is no wonder that theatre turns to such as Artaud for stimulus and liberation. It is the same tendency as lures the practical office-worker into New Age beliefs. We need our dreams; we need our rich and wild emotional life, even if we only get it in our fantasies. And in the realm of the theatre, Artaud offers it to us.

Translating Artaud's ideas into a practical followable form for a teacher and class of students is challenging, not because the work itself is difficult, but because at best any practical work we propose is guesswork. Would Artaud have proposed this way of working? Would he, if given the chance to form a System, have translated his visionary ideas into this exercise or that? We have no way of knowing.

My comfort is, always, that everyone else, including Brook or Grotowski, has been in the same position. In their cases, certain aspects of Artaud intrigued them and out of their exploration of these aspects they formulated their own unique ways of working and moved on. Their interpretation of Artaud became simply a stepping-stone to something else. Perhaps this is best how Artaud should be viewed: as a stepping-stone, a liberator, influencing much of modern theatre either directly or indirectly.

Thus I make no excuses for the fact that many of these exercises are inventions. I have genuinely attempted to understand and translate Artaud's writings into workable and practical exercises that build into a logical and recognisable 'style'. Aspects of this 'style' can be found in Physical Theatre, Visual Theatre and other similar theatre forms in current practice today, but none really embrace the Total Theatre of Artaud's visions. Perhaps because it is impossible, or unworkable or simply would be 'too, too much.' Any interpretation or effort at 'translation' into ordinary workable terms is, of necessity, a reduction and I am very

conscious of that. But, at the end of the day, students must write about him and so his ideas, to be made embraceable, have to be reduced, interpreted, translated, into normal theatre language.

In any case, there is, of course, a consistency of style and approach inherent in Artaud's writings. He is consistently against literary and psychological, slice-of-life theatre. He proposes a theatre that overwhelms the reasoning capacity of the audience, since reasoning prevents them reacting on an emotional and sensory level. And he wants a type of theatre that crosses the barriers of language and the veneers of civilisation to awaken the common primitive roots of shared humanity the world over.

As always, despite the reductions and simplifications that any interpretation must invite - and I was just as aware of this when ordering Stanislavski and Brecht into 'bite-size pieces' - I have sought to deliver Artaud in a form which is not only understandable but also exploratory in practical terms. I know that students remember far more what they experience for themselves so have sought to come up with exercises that are feasible and will give room for expansion and discussion.

I always try to put in the introductions to these handbooks some reminders or 'hooks' from which the theories hang, so that you as teachers can state briefly at the start of your course what the practitioner stands for and the recognisable features of his style. All of these features are then explored in greater detail, through practical work, in a logical order for study and with a view to clarifying and demystifying the practitioner's own theories.

1. Artaud's starting point is a pessimistic view of Man and society. In a Europe hurtling towards war and the cruel extremes of Fascism he sees western civilisation as an 'abcess' which needs to be lanced. Citing the excesses in which civilised beings will wallow in times of plague as his proof, he shows that humanity has not changed much since the times of Boccaccio. In fact one of Artaud's main premises is that humanity does not change: whether we are native Australians, tribesmen of the Amazon jungle or 'civilised' Parisians we are the same under the skin. Given a situation in which the normal rules of society are overturned, like a town overrun by plague, or besieged by an enemy, we will do extraordinary things. We will murder, rape and pillage in these situations because law and order is out of the window and, after all, why not? Might we not be dead tomorrow? Artaud shows us how close is the savage under the skin.

2. Much follows on from this premise. If we are all savages under the skin then something must be done to both release this poison and contain it. Brutalising other human beings, releasing our secret desires to 'sin' is unacceptable behaviour but by containing these things in the theatre, living them with and through the actors we may both lance the 'abcess' and translate the energy created through the shared excesses of actor and audience into a higher form.

Note that it is not enough just to lance the abcess; in simple terms that would be to offer an equation: allow the audience to 'participate' in the actor's brutal murder of a rival and their own desire for brutality to another is drained away. That simple solution is only part of the equation. It is also necessary for the audience to find their higher selves, to be in some way transfigured, as the actor is himself, when he builds passion up on stage but does not release it in a real act of, say,

murder. Once again, it is clear that Artaud intends the audience, as far as possible, to experience the same as the actors, actually to be carried along with the emotions the actors generate into that higher state. Thus, Artaud sees theatre, literally, as a regenerative power. And also, though a pessimist about his own society, he does hint at the possibility of a higher state. Man may be redeemable.

3. In consequence of the need to carry an audience along, to make them share the extreme passions of the actors - and extreme they must be, because nothing less will disturb the civilised skin we have grown over our naturally savage selves - an extreme style of acting is needed. This style must be comprehensible to all human beings who, after all as we have seen, are the same the world over. Hence, language is a problem for two main reasons:

- a. it defines a particular people in a particular place and is thus limiting and
- b. it is inadequate to express the extremes of human passion. Better would be sounds - howls, sighs, groans - expressions of emotion wrenched from the innermost core of the human soul.

4. Verbal language is only one area of the actor's expression. To make a universal language, understandable anywhere, the actor must use symbols. Thus we have 'concrete language': a language of visual symbols that are understood on an instinctive level by the audience. So, rather than explaining in words, to give a simple example: "I feel great sympathy for you. I am sorry for you in your pain.", one actor might curl his body in a warm protective shape over the hunched sobbing body of another. The audience understands immediately and without having to use language to explain his understanding; he would understand from wherever in the world he came.

5. It is clear that in consequence of this, theatre that is rooted in words, especially the psychological very wordy theatre of 'slice-of-life' drama is the antithesis of Artaud's style. The plays he likes, Greek tragedies, the macabre works of such as Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore', have this in common: they deal with men and women in extreme states of passion, living on the knife-edges of their existences. They are forced by circumstances to overthrow the rules and conventions of their societies and in so doing, out of their defiance, they become superhuman: heroes or anti-heroes, but in any case more than just ordinary folk.

6. Artaud called his new theatre two names: Theatre of Cruelty and Total Theatre. Both are equally true but 'Theatre of Cruelty' refers to the idea of pushing actors and audiences to extreme states of experience out of which they may transcend themselves. Total Theatre refers to the means by which this heightened state might be achieved. Modern 'civilised' human beings have an innate capacity to reason themselves out of situations, to 'explain away' emotional or spiritual experiences. Aware of this, Artaud wanted to bombard them with so much sensory experience at once that the mind was literally battered into submission. Hence 'Total Theatre', which means combining all the elements of light, sound, colour, costume, music, mask, and acting, which is only one element, into a sensory experience of gigantic proportions which assaults the audience from all sides at once. The brain is thus softened up and the audience's inner selves, their 'doubles', can be freed.

Extract One

Words are interpreted and physicalised.

7. The group should stand in a circle. In turn, each should take a word of their choice expressing the sense of that word both physically and through vocal inflexion. For example, the word 'heavy' could be expressed by lowering the body to the floor showing strain in every muscle, whilst at the same time saying the word in a deep ponderous way. Or 'cold' could be expressed by hugging the body and shivering all over, whilst stammering the 'c-c-c-c-co-o-l-d' as if shivering.

Whatever language you spoke, or your audience spoke, these words would communicate their sense in this way.

8. Have the group milling around the room in a random fashion. As they come across others they should greet them, not with actual words, but with polite sounds of pleasure. Instruct the group that they like everyone in the room. Very much. In fact, gradually, the liking starts to turn more intense until it reaches love and finally adoration. All the while it is sound that accompanies their actions and expresses the increasing intensity of their feelings. At the peak of 'adoration', their feelings change to hatred and end with keeping as far away as possible from everyone else in the group.

Repeat the exercise using the word 'Hello' along with the sounds.

8. Now with the group working in pairs, take the following words and express them physically and by using the sound of the word to enhance the meaning:

**message
insanity
order
formality
captivity
meticulous
blossoming
distance
partnership**

Some of these words, of course, have more than one meaning. Hopefully, the brighter ones will see that and bring the added richness of layers of meaning into their interpretations.

Already it should be seen that words used in this way are less confined and work as much by suggestion as they do by too precise - and therefore limiting - an interpretation.

9. Using words that are the names of weapons or that are to do with fighting, create a fight sequence in pairs or small groups in which

words, sounds and movements work together to form an impression of violence and brutality.

10. Follow this by a final exercise in larger groups in which places are suggested by using words, sounds and action which will build up a physical impression of that place as well as an emotional reaction to it.

For instance, you could decide to set a scene in a hospital operating theatre, showing how cold and impersonal such a place might be. The vehicle by which the audience will monitor what is happening emotionally could be a 'breathing machine' which registers the distress of the patient and, through the infectiousness of the rhythms it builds up, will lead the audience response. The words in the scene are not used in their normal conversational way but may be used as ways of identifying the location, e.g. using the word 'cut' to focus on the surgeon's actions. Or they could be used as part of the emotional content of the scene, along with sounds, for example, using the word 'distress' in rhythm with the ragged breathing of the 'machine', as we follow the patient's reaction to what is happening to him.

Good starting points are:

- the political hustings
- candidates waiting for an interview or audition
- the schoolroom
- evacuees on the train platform
- a prison
- trapped in a room whose ceiling and walls are slowly closing in

Like an earlier exercise, in 'From Rhythm to Ritual', when the students had to create a machine out of an emotion, for this to work as a final piece for this section, suitable for showing to the rest of the group or for feedback from an audience, the work will need organising, even choreographing, to gain effect. Find ways of using members of the group sometimes as a chorus, to set a scene or to enhance an emotion, sometimes focusing on the plight or the feelings of an individual.

By the end of this section, the students are well on the way to discovering the meaning of 'concrete language' for themselves. In fact, 'concrete language' merely means language made physical. But the kind of physicalising we have been exploring in this section is only part of the way there.

So far, what we have explored is how to make words physical by accompanying them with body language or gesture, which, along with sound, interpret the real meaning of the word. Artaud's 'concrete language' really means language turned into visual symbol, and it is this that we will explore in the next section.

FINDING A CONCRETE LANGUAGE OF SYMBOLS

Images or symbols have the power to evoke an emotional response which is often not logical. The intellect tends not to rationalise 'I am feeling this and this because of the powerful suggestiveness of the image I have read or seen'; it just feels. As in the word association game played in the last section, imagery sets up a chain reaction of emotional responses in each of us that is both individual and universal. That is why it is so potent in poetry. For example, the word 'night' sets up a chain reaction of responses which are shared in most areas of the world: darkness, death, fear, destruction, evil, etc.

Test out the connotations for your students with the following series of words.

horizon
tree
water
sap
sea
flower
cloud

Each of these, if they are prodded a little, should evoke responses which are not literal. For instance, I would expect 'horizon' to stimulate ideas of goals, aims, adventure, etc. 'Tree' might provoke Christian responses as well as ideas of strength.

How much more powerful does this all become when it is visual, not tied just to a word or words in a particular context. The poet works often by appealing to the visual inner eye of the listener or reader but Artaud proposes bringing that rich world of allusion to the visual art form of the theatre. And this proposal is enormous in its repercussions; the effect on the audience of visual imagery is extraordinary, providing it is accompanied by all the other areas of Total Theatre: light, sound, colour, etc, to help block out the impulse to question. Visuals work intensely on the brain and are far more memorable than anything heard. Test this out by asking, after the class have seen any show, what they remember about the show. It will nearly always be something visual; very rarely a memorable line or speech. Couple, then, the power of visuals with the ability the brain has to spiral off into its own series of allusions, sparked off by a particular image, and you have an extraordinary ability to influence and affect the audience, as it were subliminally - that is, bypassing the intellect which would seek to explain and thus reduce the effect of what it has seen.

I remember the billowing black cloth that engulfed the stage and swallowed the actors, as an image of the Holocaust, in Théâtre de Complicité's 'The Street of Crocodiles'; I will never forget it. Nor shall I ever forget Peter Schumann's huge sorrowing female puppet figure as the symbol of Vietnam, when I caught his 'Bread and Puppet Theatre' at the end of the 1960s. Images stick.

Practical Work

1. After an initial discussion about symbols and their connotations, as suggested above, divide the students into smallish groups, 4 or 5, and ask them to come up with visual symbols for the following stimuli. From the beginning encourage the use of sound where appropriate.

anger; sympathy; frustration; despair; boredom;
deceit; defensiveness; rejection; loneliness

It might be a good idea to brainstorm a few first. Encourage the use of the word 'like' Boredom is 'like' a clock ticking very slowly a droning fly underlined by the droning voice of a teacher leaves drooping in heat etc.

2. Now take this a little further. A symbol for non-conformity might be a group of people marching, or doing a strict routine of movements in a robotic repetitive manner, with one person beginning to dance slowly and dreamily.

Adding sounds to this, extend the idea. What happens next? How do the conformers react to the non-conformist?

Using wherever possible the whole of their small group, find more extended symbols to show:

the sudden flaring up of a street-fight
a group of friends trying to calm the anger of one of their
number
idealised romantic love punctured by reality
captivity followed by liberation
the protectiveness of mother love
courtship of an innocent by a practised seducer
someone suspecting their friends of treachery

Symbols can be mixed. For instance, an argument could involve the slinky moves and hisses of big cats at one time, the snarling and howling of a dog-fight at another, the fizzing and explosiveness of a match igniting at another. The idea is to hit the audience hard and fast with a whirligig of impressions, not all of which will resonate for every person but enough will.

Discuss what other additions might have helped too - sounds, lights, visual images back-projected on the cyclorama, props, costumes, colour washes, or anything else. It is time to start feeding them towards the idea of Total Theatre.

3. Try now expressing a whole simple story-line in a symbolic way. The idea used in the First Lessons section could be re-explored. It might be useful to compare the results of the work then with the present, now that so much more has been learned. Or, one of the following ideas might work:

Boy meets girl. They fall in love. Angry parents try to keep the two apart. The two find a way of escaping and run off together.

A young girl is seduced by an older man who then deserts her, leaving her pregnant. Her brothers vow revenge. They track down the man and murder him. Meanwhile the girl has her baby. The brothers want to take the baby from her but she fiercely protects it.

Bored by the humdrumness of his life, a young man rebels, overthrowing all the chains of work, family and society.

Before beginning, the students need to talk through how to prepare a storyline in an Artaudian way. The story cannot be approached in a logical, naturalistic manner, with single characters allocated to individual members of the group. Certainly two people have to be, for instance, the young lovers but the rest of the group will be taking an active part throughout, expressing symbolically the emotional states of mind of one or other of the lovers, as well as taking on parts of the storyline as other characters where necessary, even becoming physical things such as doors slamming, bubbles bursting.

Remind them too of the arsenal of other tools they have already learned about for making a physical piece effective: breathing, rhythm, sound, repetition, chanting, music, ritual, masks, words used as sounds, concrete language.

- a] Break down the story into small sections.
- b] Brainstorm each section looking for startling and individual ways of expressing something symbolically. Make each symbol as complete as possible, i.e. if the use of a large black cloth would enhance a particular image, then try as far as possible to provide that. It is important that the students feel free to use the whole range of potential theatrical effectiveness and if it cannot be done in your particular space, then they should at least be aware of what they want and how it could be achieved in more ideal circumstances.
- c] Choreograph each section to maximise the use of the whole group as they move from image to image, from impression to impression. Check that physical expression is large enough.
- d] Add whatever can be added in your particular circumstances

- to enhance the action and the moods: amplified sound, light or whatever, bearing in mind that the group themselves can probably do a lot of at least the sound live.
- e] Aim for a finished piece of around ten minutes. Make it as powerful as possible and finish by trying it out on an audience, in a lunchtime perhaps.

The insistence throughout this study programme on performance and trying ideas out on an audience is for a number of reasons. Firstly, Artaud himself is concerned with trying to affect an audience in a very profound way. He tenders many experimental ideas as to how this effect can best be achieved, some of which we have explored already but many are to come in the next few sections. Mainly, though, some of his ideas are so extraordinary that it takes a particular type of courage to carry them through. This attitude of daring, of risk-taking, must be built in to the students from as early as possible. It is inherent, I believe, anyway, in any form of theatre - actors put themselves on the line by the very nature of live theatre, which can fail for any number of reasons and is for ever changing, subtly, from performance to performance [something which frustrated practitioners like Craig intensely - he wanted to pin theatre down to exactitude and consistency, refusing to accept the volatile changeability of actors and of audiences]. On top of the natural fluctuation of atmosphere between actor and audience, Artaud imposes another risk: the risk of the extraordinary and the extreme. So as not to cripple your students with fear, they must become used to performing throughout the course, even if it is just little snippets to other groups of their peers. They must understand that sometimes things will not work, but instead of feeling foolish, they should use the whole experience as an ideal opportunity for discovering why things work or do not, and for pushing themselves into braver and braver experiments.