

Antonin Artaud, "Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto)"

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Artaud, Antonin. "Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto)." *The Theatre and Its Double*
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The Theatre and Its Double appeared in the Métamorphoses Collection (Gallimard) on 7th of February 1938. This work contains Antonin Artaud's collected essays on theatre dating from 1932; texts published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, lectures, manifestos and excerpts from letters. Artaud considered collecting these texts into one volume in 1935, at the time when he wrote *The Cenci* and was looking for a theatre where he could stage this tragedy. Once the performances of *The Cenci* at the Folies-Wagram had closed, Artaud had only one desire-- to leave for Mexico. Before leaving he also wrote: *Oriental and Western Theatre, An Affective Athleticism, Seraphim's Theatre* and a note on Jean-Louis Barrault's production *Around a Mother*, all texts he wanted to add to the volume in preparation. On board ship bound for Mexico, he wrote to Jean Paulhan on 25th January 1936 that he *had found a suitable title for the book*; it was *The Theatre and Its Double*. On his return from Mexico and before plunging into the Irish escapade, Artaud corrected the proofs, but when *The Theatre and Its Double* appeared, he was confined in Saint-Anne mental hospital, near Rouen in Normandy. (Victor Corti)

We cannot go on prostituting the idea of theater whose only value is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger.

Put in this way, the question of the theater ought to arouse general attention, the implication being that theater, through its physical aspect, since it requires expression in space (the only real expression, in fact), allows the magical means of art and speech to be exercised organically and altogether, like renewed exorcisms. The upshot of all this is that theater will not be given its specific powers of action until it is given its language.

That is to say: instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought.

This language cannot be defined except by its possibilities for dynamic expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialogue. And what the theater can still take over from speech are its possibilities for extension beyond words, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility. This is the hour of intonations, of a word's particular pronunciation. Here too intervenes (besides the auditory language of sounds) the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried to the point of becoming signs, making a kind of alphabet out of these signs. Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theater must organize it into veritable hieroglyphs, with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnections in relation to all organs and on all levels.

The question, then, for the theater, is to create a meta-physics of speech, gesture, and expression, in order to rescue it from its servitude to psychology and "human interest." But all this can be of no use unless behind such an effort there is some kind of real metaphysical inclination, an appeal to certain unhabitual ideas, which by their very nature cannot be limited or even formally depicted. These ideas which touch on Creation, Becoming, and Chaos, are all of a cosmic order and furnish a primary notion of a domain from which the theater is now entirely alien. They are able to create a kind of passionate equation between Man, Society, Nature, and Objects.

It is not, moreover, a question of bringing metaphysical ideas directly onto the stage, but of creating what you might call temptations, indraughts of air around these ideas. And humor with its anarchy, poetry with its symbolism and its images, furnish a basic notion of ways to channel the temptation of these ideas.

We must speak now about the uniquely material side of this language-- that is, about all the ways and means it has of acting upon the sensibility.

It would be meaningless to say that it includes music, dance, pantomime, or mimicry. Obviously it uses movement, harmonies, rhythms, but only to the point that they can con-cur in a sort of central expression without advantage for any one particular art. This does not at all mean that it does not use ordinary actions, ordinary passions, but like a spring board uses them in the same way that HUMOR AS DESTRUCTION can serve to reconcile the corrosive nature of laughter to the habits of reason.

But by an altogether Oriental means of expression, this objective and concrete language of the theater can fascinate and ensnare the organs. It flows into the sensibility. Aban-doning Occidental usages of speech, it turns words into in-cantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds. It seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility. It liberates a new lyricism of gesture which, by its precipitation or its amplitude in the air, ends by surpassing the lyricism of words. It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language, by conveying the sense of a new and deeper intellectuality which hides itself beneath the gestures and signs, raised to the dignity of particular exorcisms.

For all this magnetism, all this poetry, and all these direct means of spellbinding would be nothing if they were not used to put the spirit physically on the track of something else, if the true theater could not give us the sense of a creation of which we possess only one face, but which is completed on other levels.

And it is of little importance whether these other levels are really conquered by the mind or not. i.e., by the intelli-gence; it would diminish them, and that has neither interest nor sense. What is important is that by positive means the sensitivity is put in a state of deepened and keener perception and this is the very object of the magic and the rites of which the theater is only a reflection.

THE PROGRAM: We shall stage, without regard for text:

1. An adaptation of a work from the time of Shakespeare, a work entirely consistent with our present troubled state of mind, whether one of the apocryphal plays of Shakespeare, such as Arden of Feversham, or an entirely different play from the same period.
2. A play of extreme poetic freedom by Leon-Paul Fargue.

3. An extract from the Zohar: The Story of Rabbi Simeon, which has the ever present violence and force of a conflagration.
4. The story of Bluebeard reconstructed from historical records, containing a new idea of cruelty and eroticism.
5. The Fall of Jerusalem, according to the Bible and history; with the bloodred color that trickles from it and the people's feeling of abandon and panic visible even in the light; and on the other hand the metaphysical disputes of the prophets, the frightful intellectual agitation they create and the repercussions of which physically affect the King, the Temple, the People, and Events themselves.
6. A Tale by the Marquis de Sade, in which the eroticism will be transposed, allegorically mounted and figured, to create a violent exteriorization of cruelty, and a dissimulation of the remainder.
7. One or more romantic melodramas in which the improbability will become an active, tangible poetic factor.
8. Büchner's Wozzek, in a spirit of reaction against our principles and as an example of what can be drawn from a formal text in terms of the stage.
9. Works from the Elizabethan theater stripped of their text and retaining only the accouterments of period, situations, characters, and action.

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