

Critical Assessment of a Theory of Staging Drama

Antonin Artaud was a 20th century theatre theorist, director, and actor, and co-founder of the Alfred Jarry Theatre, which lasted for only three years, staging four productions. Artaud's essays outlining his proposals for a reshaping of theatre are published in the collection *The Theatre and its Double*¹. In these essays Artaud expresses a need for a revival of the art, and a move away from the contemporary popular form of performance which aims to mimic reality. Artaud also proposes numerous theories on how to achieve this revival, which suggest a need for more consideration of the sensory experience for the audience. For Artaud it was not enough that the audience watch and understand a play, theatre needs to be an experience that has a more overt and effective impact by engaging the full psyche of its spectators. A key source of inspiration for Artaud's ideas is the Balinese theatre, which he first saw at the Parisian Colonial Exhibition in 1931. In Balinese theatre the performances incorporate elements such as movement and sound into their language to create a narrative that is not reliant on words.

In Artaud's essay *Theatre and Cruelty* he says that psychological theatre has had a detrimental effect on the art, and emphasises a need to re-theatricalise the form to create a type of theatre which is both inclusive and impactful. Psychological theatre tends to focus on the inner psychic conflict of an individual, teasing out theories founded in logic to explain these conflicts. The issue with these productions is that they embody rationalist and individualistic ideologies, and most often cater to a bourgeoisie disposition on the function of theatre by presenting the daily lives and psychological experiences of the middle to upper classes. Contemporary theatre conventions as a result have 'rendered [the audience] unaccustomed to the direct, violent action theatre must have'². What Artaud proposes is that 'In taking theatre back to its pre-logic, pre-rational, pre-individualistic origins, the theatre will... initiate a process of healing in the spectator'³. This healing element is what Artaud wants to achieve through the use of cruelty, by attacking the audience's senses to evoke a cathartic process.

The way in which Artaud plans to achieve this sensory cathartic process for his spectators is by creating a new experience of consciousness that will awaken them to the false sense of reality that psychological theatre perpetuates. His theories aim to turn theatre into an 'instrument of the revitalisation of Western man who had become a stranger to himself and his crumbling culture'⁴. This new form of consciousness occurs when the audience is awake but in a dream-state. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's collected essays *The Interpretation of Dreams* can provide insight into how it is possible to achieve Artaud's visions by inducing a dream-state. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud suggests that 'every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance'⁵, because dreams are symbolic manifestations of our unconscious being. For example when an individual represses

¹ Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Victor Corti (Surrey: Alma Classics, 2010)

² Artaud, p60

³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Theatre of the New Man' in *History of European Drama and Theatre*, trans. by Jo Riley, (London: Routledge, 2002) pp 284-352, p295

⁴ Fischer-Lichte, p296

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* trans. by A.A. Brill (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997) p5

memories of a traumatic event this event can become source material for their dreams. Freud's attempt to interpret dreams is an attempt to uncover the unconscious processes of his patients. For Artaud what is manifested in his spectator's dream-state is less significant than the simple fact that the unconscious is being made conscious. If theatre can create this experience of consciousness then spectators could be purged of previously repressed thoughts and emotions.

Artaud proposes that one of the major changes that needs to occur in order to undo the damage of psychological theatre is a shift in the dominant mode of communication. A new language of theatre must emerge, one which does not place value on words as the sole or primary means of expression. This new language, Artaud suggests, should be a language of movement where the actor's body becomes a moving hieroglyph delivering a narrative to spectators. A language of movement will be more useful in trying to create this dream state than a verbal language; words, unlike movement, have specific associations that determine the audience's understanding and that therefore may warp writer's intent. John Martin, a New York Times critic, in reference to dance expression 'argues that the viewer, on witnessing the dancing body, is inspired to feel equivalent kinaesthetic sensations'⁶. The notion of this kinaesthetic mirroring is one which is of interest to physiologists in the 19th and 20th century, who discuss them not necessarily as conscious movements but internal senses that affect areas of the body the spectator sees the performer using. The effect of this mirroring is that 'the dancer's body becomes a vessel for the dance's message and the viewer receives that message by being moved by it'.⁷ Without words, relying solely on this kinaesthetic connection between performer and audience, the actor is able to deliver an effective narrative using their body as well as or instead of dialogue. The primal force of the choreographer, the emotions they want to convey⁸, are understood and felt by the audience through this process of mirroring. In this way the language of movement helps to create the dream-effect and cathartic process discussed in the previous paragraph by engaging the audience's unconscious senses, such as their unconscious kinaesthetic sense that activates when watching another moving body.

Unfortunately Artaud did not manage to achieve his theatre of cruelty in his lifetime. The production of Artaud's play *Les Censi*, put on by he and the Alfred Jarry Theatre, is the closest that Artaud came to completing his vision. During the performance of *Les Censi* a wide range of recorded sounds were used; the bells of the cathedral at Amiens, machine noises, trumpet fanfares... and voices calling out'⁹, putting a focus on sound and musicality rather than just words. However, rather than become a tool for engaging and creating a new consciousness within the audience, the production received scathing reviews. Artaud himself was an actor in the play, providing him a unique opportunity to put into practise the theories he proposes in *The Theatre and its Double*, but his movement is described as being enacted with an 'absurd intensity'¹⁰. If these absurd movements are able to convey any message it is lost in the distraction of the noise, with reviews suggesting the play was 'impossible to

⁶ Susan Leigh Foster, 'Movement's contagion: the kinesthetic impact of performance' in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* ed. Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) pp 46-59, p48

⁷ Foster, p53

⁸ Ibid, p49

⁹ Fischer-Lichte, p297

¹⁰ Ibid

understand acoustically, the noises terrible, the music cacophonous'¹¹. What Artaud achieved in his lifetime in practise was not an effective reformation of theatre, but a theatre that left the audience confused.

It is still possible to find examples of contemporary theatre that effectively uses sound independent of words and movement to convey a narrative, for example in Balinese theatre, a key source of inspiration for Artaud. In his essay *On Balinese Theatre* he says that Balinese theatre performances use a 'theatrical language foreign to every *spoken language*... beside which our exclusively dialogue productions seem like so much stammering'¹², describing their dance as 'intense scenic poetry, [a] many-hued spatial language'¹³. Balinese theatre manages to combine sound with a precision of movement, free from improvisation, and 'in this systematic depersonalization... everything produces, conveys the utmost effect'¹⁴. Behind every move the actor makes is a specific and overt intent that the audience is able to comprehend. The director of Western theatre must begin to utilise these features of sound and movement as the Balinese theatre does if the revival of theatre is to occur. What Artaud witnesses at the Parisian Colonial exhibition is the use of a language that is both spatial and poetic, active and musical, and tells a comprehensible story, a language that he later proposes will be a key feature of his theatre of cruelty.

Artaud's theories of what theatre should be and how it should affect the spectator radically differ from the way in which contemporary theatre functions. That his theatre of cruelty was not achieved in Artaud's lifetime, and his attempts to revive theatre appeared to have failed, does not mean that there is not value in his suggestions. Much of what he proposed can be found fragmented in different forms of theatre, such as the use of a language of movement in Balinese theatre, but there is no one form which encompasses all of his ideas that has become popularised in modern theatre. The element of his proposal which is perhaps most significant but has had the least effect on Western theatre in general is this language of movement. While it is not possible to suggest that movement is irrelevant to theatrical language, generally dance performance is still considered a separate entity to theatrical performance, and with the exception of musicals the two are not generally merged. This is perhaps because of uncertainty as to how to create this specific language so that it is both comprehensible and able to assist in creating a new sense of consciousness in the audience. If a director is able to pull together the entirety of Artaud's proposals, taking into consideration the effect he intends the theatre of cruelty to have, it is possible that a revival of Western theatre can occur.

Bibliography

¹¹ Fischer-Lichte, p297

¹² Artaud, p41

¹³ Ibid, p45

¹⁴ Ibid, p41

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