

ANTONIN ARTAUD AND THE AVANT-GARDE THEATRE ¹

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I SHOULD like to begin with a short retrospective glance at Antonin Artaud as he was some thirty-five years ago. I was still a student when I came across an article in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* entitled "Theatre and Plague". It was a long time ago, in the early thirties, but I can still remember the sort of electric shock, sharp and lasting, I got from this first contact with the prose of Antonin Artaud, and the feeling that here was the giving away of a secret, a glimpse of the times to come. To be quite honest, I must confess that the message was amplified by the medium. In Paris literary life of the thirties, the *N.R.F.* was the enfant terrible of literature, pioneering new shifts in fads, making obsolete the once fashionable, ever casting new seeds to the wind, launching previously unheard-of writers. And, as if that were not enough, the very name of the *N.R.F.* could shock and disturb our elders and betters, namely our professors. With the *N.R.F.* everything was combining to prove that Nemesis was on our side.

Some time after this first occasion, I read some more papers by the same writer, whose name, Antonin Artaud, was quite unknown: "Theatre and Cruelty", "Production and Metaphysics", "Theatre and Alchemy", "Oriental and Western Theatre". I tried to find out who was this Antonin Artaud, and I discovered that he was not completely unknown. He had been a member of the Surrealist group in the heyday of the movement, but he broke with them early on. He then tried to carry out his own theories about the avant-garde stage by establishing—but without any success—an experimental theatre of his own, the theatre Alfred Jarry, and by producing some extravagant plays, namely the *Cenci*, which were a free adaptation from Stendhal and Shelley.

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 14th of October 1970.

Curiously enough, I had seen the Cenci some time before, but I had completely forgotten the name of the director. As a matter of fact, this performance had been for me a very interesting experience, but it was marred, unfortunately, by the dreadful antics of one actor, whose howlings and gesticulating recklessly verged on the laughable. Re-reading the programme I found out, to my great surprise, that this ham was none other than Antonin Artaud. I could not believe my eyes: the brilliant and cranky stage manager, the remarkable writer, and the wretched actor were the same man.

I was told that he always wanted to be an actor against all odds, against his father, a respectable and well-to-do shipowner from Marseilles with whom he broke; against his master, the greatest French producer of the time, Dullin, who was by no means convinced that he had any talent for acting; against the advice of some of his doctors, for he had a mental breakdown when he was 19. He was supposed to have been restored to health, but was, in fact, to have several relapses. After the failure of the Cenci, which was his own failure as a producer and as an actor, he decided on escape from Europe. He fled to Mexico to try his luck and to discover the secrets of a new civilization, of a decolonized country searching for its roots in the Indian past. He delivered some lectures there, wrote some papers, tried to study the customs and the rites of some Indian tribes without succeeding in spelling out the vital secrets he was anxiously looking for. This was the last straw. When he came back to France in November 1936, he was a broken man, and after a time his reason began to fail. From 1938 onwards, he was to drift through the rest of his life with no settled abode, except mental homes and the casual hospitality of some faithful friends, continually on or over the verge of insanity, with several periods of relapse.

I saw him for the last time during one of these lucid intervals. A lecture by Artaud at the Vieux Colombier being advertised in the newspapers in January 1947, I snatched this opportunity. The pocket theatre was overcrowded, and you could spot in the stalls famous people like Albert Camus, André Breton, André Gide, Henri Michaux, Jean-Louis Barrault, Gérard

Philippe. As far as attendance was concerned, it was a great day. Everybody was waiting for a message. But what followed reads like a scene of Ionesco: Artaud began, with increasing difficulty, to speak of his favourite topic, the theatre of the future. Then he tried over and over again to articulate, opening his mouth without saying anything, muttering incoherent syllables, at last virtually reduced to a sort of gibberish. He was mopping his brow with a handkerchief all the time, darting glances about the audience and sweating. Suddenly jumping to his feet he drew himself up and exclaimed, with a very clear voice this time: "I can see what you feel, and I can't blame you: you have not to be interested at all by what I say." Then he turned his back, and off he went.

It was his last speech in public. He died the following year, when he was scarcely 52, and he did not even die of his mental illness, but of the most horrible kind of cancer.

Now that Antonin Artaud is no longer passed off as "gifted but a crank", he is acknowledged as one of the leading figures of European theatre in the twentieth century. But it is by no means easy to understand how he managed to write so many essays and letters during the periods of lucidity of his sad and tragic life, when he was not wrestling with insanity. His main contribution to the theory of the Avant-garde theatre is to be found in the remarkable series of articles published by the *N.R.F.* in the thirties and collected in a book translated into many languages: "The Theatre and its Double." In these fourteen essays written after the collapse of his honeymoon with Surrealism, all the components of a doctrine of the Avant-garde theatre can be traced, and this doctrine could be seen as a sort of time-bomb which was to blow up some thirty years later.

One of the underlying concerns of most of Artaud's topics is the liberation of the subconscious, the attempt to reach back to a pre-conscious, dream state, from which the treasures of the subconscious could be captured. The stage, if well managed, could give us an opportunity of disrupting the levels of thought and giving us the awareness of an unreality concomitant with reality. But in order to succeed, the overriding obstacle of language must

be overcome, for language is the medium of all our rational patterns.

The main trouble with Western theatre for Artaud is that the words count for everything, theatre being a mere branch of literature to such an extent that we can hardly tell the script from the play. This supremacy of the written text is to be challenged. Theatre should be considered as an art in its own right, just as music, dancing or painting.¹

Unfortunately, it is not plain sailing, because we are under the spell of the set masterpiece, and such a worship is typical of middle-class conformity. And if we conform in this way, we confuse real things with the forms they have taken on through the ages. It is no good accusing the public's bad taste as long as we have not given it a worthwhile show. "The general public is no longer interested by the literary masterpieces because they are couched in forms no longer responding to the needs of our time."²

Of course, you could object that without the set forms and the set language, a play would be denied the ways and means of elucidating characters or psychological problems. "But who said that theatre was to define characters or to resolve conflicts?"³ For Artaud there is a flavour of decadence in any psychological play. Theatre is not a place for discussion or hair splitting, but the right place "to topple the masks, to shake off dullness, to disclose to some social groups their dark and hidden powers, urging them to face their Fate with more spunk".⁴ Stage psychology is doomed, because a twentieth-century play should rise to a social level and question our social and ethical system, should be in a position to blow up the surface of things with all the means of true poetry and humour. What matters is that our sensibility should be put into a deeper and subtler state of perception, it should be provided with a sort of "truthful distillation of dreams where our taste for crime, erotic obsessions, downright barbarity, whims, utopias, cannibalism would burst forth on an inner level".⁵

¹ "Théâtre oriental et théâtre occidental" in *Le Théâtre et son double*, ch. V.

² "La Mise en scène et la Métaphysique", *Ibid.* ch. II.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Le Théâtre et la Peste", *Ibid.* ch. I.

⁵ "Le Théâtre de la Cruauté" (Premier manifeste), *Ibid.* ch. VIII.

Seen from such a viewpoint, modern theatre should be a way of rediscovering Myth. But by Myth he does not mean the dead imagery of ancient myths, but the unformulated myths to which the great mass of the people of our time have consented, without any knowledge of what a myth is or is not.

Just as our own dreams react on us and reality reacts on our dreams, so too the audience will believe in mythical dreams, "provided they are taken for dreams, and not for a duplicate of reality",¹ and they could then release the magic freedom of day-dreams.

For the quest of Myth is the quest of a hidden reality. That is why modern theatre should by no means be considered as the double of everyday life, "but the double of a hidden and dangerous reality, where the fundamental principles, like dolphins, come up just for a glimpse before hurrying to hide in the mysterious deep".²

To work out such a plan meant for Artaud bringing to the foreground the idea of total theatre and recovering lost ground from the cinema, music hall, circus, and life itself. "You cannot separate body from mind, senses from the intellect, especially in a field where jaded senses call for shocks to revive understanding".³

Being a physical place—which is the main difference from the book—the stage must speak to our physical nature, not simply to the mind, for there is a poetry for the senses just as there is one for speech, and this sort of poetry works beyond the bounds of any language. The stage being the only place in the world where man's physical make-up can be involved in a mental process, things being what they are in our times of mass neurosis and sensuality, the audience must be hit through its own neurosis and sensuality.⁴

In Artaud's two manifestos on "The Theatre of Cruelty" there is a vivid description of what the theatre of tomorrow is going to be :

¹ "Le Théâtre et la Cruauté", *Ibid.* ch. VII.

² "Le Théâtre alchimique", *Ibid.* ch. III.

³ "Le Théâtre et la Cruauté", *Ibid.* ch. VII.

⁴ "En finir avec les chefs-d'oeuvre", *Ibid.* ch. VI.

Every show will have its share of physical ingredients perceptible to all. Shouts, groans, apparitions, surprise, dramatic turns of all kinds, the magic beauty of the costumes drawn from ritualistic patterns, bright lighting, vocal, incantational beauty, rare harmonies, colours, rhythms . . . surprising appearance of masks, puppets many feet high, lighting changes, the physical action of lighting stimulating heat and cold, and so on. . . .

The old duality between author and stage manager will go, to be replaced by a single Creator using and handling this new sort of language.

The *auditorium* will have no partition, so that a direct contact will be established between the audience and the show, the audience being seated in the centre of the action, and encircled by it.

Scenes will be acted in front of washed walls designed to absorb light. In addition, overhead galleries will run around the room: they will enable the actors to pursue one another from one corner of the hall to the other. The action will expand in all directions at all levels of perspective in height and depth. A shout could be transmitted by word of mouth from one end to the other with a succession of amplifications and inflexions.

Decor: No decor. Hieroglyphic characters, ritual costumes, a thirty foot high effigy of King Lear's beard in the storm, musical instruments as tall as men, objects of unknown form and purpose are enough to fulfil this function.¹

On such a stage speech won't be banned but provided with a lesser status. "We must get rid of our western ideas about speech", said Artaud, "we must turn words into incantations, manipulate them like objects, expand the voice, use vibrations and vocal qualities, with trampling rhythms and pounding sounds".² That will liberate a new lyricism surpassing verbal poetry, and give to the words something of the significance they have in dreams. Finally, it will raise play-acting to the dignity of exorcism.

It would be futile, remarked Artaud, to say that this sort of theatre calls on music, mime and dancing. Of course it uses rhythms, sounds, movements, but only "to the point where they can co-operate in a kind of pivotal action . . . which is real theatre".

The more we read Artaud, the more we are struck by the contrast between the acuteness, the prophetic insight of his conceptions and his inability to actualize his ideal—for his adaptation of the Cenci cannot be considered as the fruition of such a powerful theatrical theory. Illness, war and a perpetual struggle against insanity prevented him from achieving his aims. On the other hand, Artaud's illness was not entirely a liability. It contributed much towards his image, that of a romantic genius,

¹ "Le Théâtre et la Cruauté" (Premier manifeste), *Ibid.* ch. VIII.

² "Théâtre oriental et théâtre occidental", *Ibid.* ch. V.

of a sort of prophet pacing along the ramparts of Jerusalem and proclaiming the doom of western civilization.

But in Artaud's growing prestige, more than twenty years after his death, there is more than the simple radiation of an image. It is "The Theatre and its Double" which should be seen as the main factor of this success. This book has been an inspiration for two generations of writers and producers. The first generation was mainly French, or French-speaking, with Pierre-Jean Jouve, Beckett, Ionesco, Jean-Louis Barrault and Blin. The second generation is much more international, with playwrights like Arrabal and Pierre Bourgeade, producers like Peter Brooke, Grotowski, Jasper Johns, the Living Theatre; musicians like John Cage. All these people cannot be considered as disciples of Artaud, but they have drawn in one way or another much of their impetus and lasting effects from Artaud.

Of course, the real success came too late, as happens more often than not with prophets. But let us not forget that in the twenties the credibility gap between Artaud and the general public was much wider than nowadays. The western cultural world was much more self-confident than it is in 1970, and Artaud's call for destruction of our western thought patterns and social behaviours fell flat; it sounded like the wishful thinking of a crank.

It should also be said that the status of written French was sound and beyond doubt. French literature had not yet been infiltrated by spoken language, and Artaud's statements on languages and social order seemed much farther from reality than they now appear to us. The doom of western culture hinted at in Artaud's works looked simply unbelievable when prevailing colonialism was generally accepted as a matter of fact and never put to doubt. Now that Asia and Africa have achieved their political and cultural independence, with China as a threat to Russia, and Japan as the third economic power in the world, the general outlook is different, and Artaud's views do not look so freakish.

To build up his counter-culture and carry on his action against the western world, Artaud drew heavily from the domains of anthropology, linguistics and psychiatry, and it so happens

that linguistics, anthropology and psychiatry are the main roots of the new philosophical school of structuralism, whose leading exponents are Chomsky, Levy-Strauss and Lacan. Curiously enough, his works are at the cross-roads between two diametrically opposite camps: the extreme anti-rationalists of the Living Theatre, pop culture, junkies, anarchists on the one side, and the super-rationalists of the new philosophical school on the other.

Against all probability this odd fellow who was a social failure, a guinea pig for psychiatrists, a misfit, a wash-out, became after his death something far beyond his youthful dreams: a key-man.