ANTONIN ARTAUD: THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Antonin Artaud was born in 1896 and died, insane and in poverty, in 1948. All his attempts to create a theatre of magic, beauty and power that would change the hearts of people ended in failure. Yet since his death, Artaud’s extraordinary, imaginative ideas have been a major influence in the world of theatre, and have given us completely new ways of perceiving reality and communicating with other people.

Artaud began his career as an actor in the theatre in Paris, and was also one of the most brilliant young poets of his time. However, from the early 1920s onward, his main interest was in directing. In 1927 he formed his own theatre company with the writer Roger Vitrac. Their theatre opened on 1 June 1927 with a one-act play by Artaud and a full-length play by Vitrac. Lack of success and money quickly put an end to this theatre.

From the earliest days as an actor and director, Artaud had been experimenting with new theatrical forms. In 1931 he saw a group of dancers from Bali performing at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris. Their use of movement, music, costume and sound stunned him. All his revolutionary ideas about theatre and about life crystallised into a single dramatic theory that Artaud called the ‘theatre of cruelty’. He wrote a series of essays, letters and articles about it, which were published in 1938 as a book entitled The Theatre and Its Double.

Artaud’s theories had a profound influence after his death, but in his lifetime he had very little chance to put them into practice. In 1935 he was able to raise the money for a play he wrote and directed, and in which he acted the leading role. The play was a critical and financial failure. The rest of Artaud’s life was spent largely in poverty and despair, marked by long periods of mental illness. In many ways, his was a failed life, yet his legacy changed the world of theatre and left us with ways of seeing and communicating that enlarge our understanding of ourselves and others.

THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Artaud saw the world he lived in as one in desperate need of change, a world of people all mad, desperate and sick. It is important to remember that Artaud’s perception of the world was not uncommon in Europe in the 1930s. His generation had lived through the First World War—‘the war to end all wars’—in which some 15 million people had died. They had already experienced the Great Depression, when the economies of the world’s richest nations had suddenly disintegrated in 1929, leaving tens of millions of people unemployed, homeless and hopeless. Worst of all had been the rise to power of ruthless dictators—Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, Franco—who threatened to destroy human liberty and world peace.

Artaud’s view of the world as being full of lies, aimlessness, meanness and hypocrisy closely echoes the philosophy of existentialism. This philosophy was based on the writings of various philosophers including the Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote plays as well as novels and philosophical works. Sartre believed that human life has no intrinsic meaning. He totally denied the existence of any God, any reason for living, any pattern to human life. We are born with nothing, and return to nothing. Sartre argued that human beings must face up to the pointlessness and absurdity of their lives, and then they will be free to take actions and make decisions that reflect the terrible reality of existence.

While Artaud shared this view of the world, he believed that it was possible to change that world through his theatre. Artaud saw a direct connection between
the theatre and life: he thought of them as mirrors, or ‘doubles’, each reflecting the other. If civilisation was sick, then so was the theatre that reflected it and both must change. Artaud believed that if the world of theatre could be transformed by him, then the outside world, which he found so desperate, would be altered as well by his theatre of cruelty.

**ARTAUD’S TECHNIQUES**

**Visual poetry**

When Artaud watched the Balinese dancers in 1931, he saw performers using movement, gestures and dance instead of words to communicate with their audience. Combined with music and different sound effects, this stylised movement, which Artaud called visual poetry, had an enormous emotional impact. It communicated feelings about the great human mysteries of creation, growth and death in ways that words could not. This does not mean Artaud wanted to eliminate words altogether, but he insisted that they should only be used when they were totally necessary and important.

![The movement and gestures of Balinese dancers influenced Artaud's work.](image)

Artaud said: ‘The true purpose of the theatre is to create Myths, to express life in its immense universal aspect’. He believed that theatre could be used to reveal the truth about human existence.

Artaud’s fascination with Balinese dance was part of an increasing interest in Asian theatre and culture in the early 1900s in Europe. Asian dance, art, design, architecture and food all influenced the lifestyles of many Europeans at this time.
Assaulting the senses

Artaud argued that the great mass of people had been brutalised and desensitised by the world they inhabited. There was no point in appealing to their understanding or intelligence. So he wanted the theatre of cruelty to hypnotise them as a snake-charmer hypnotises a snake, putting them into a trance in which they could be shocked into confronting themselves, their way of life and the meaning and mystery of all existence.

To do this, Artaud planned ‘an assault on the senses’—using lights, music and sound in the same way as modern rock concerts do. He believed that the theatre should have all the expensive equipment that film-makers use, and should employ it just as skilfully.

Creating a dream world

Through the use of masks, ritual objects, and traditional and striking costumes, Artaud hoped to remove his audience from their everyday cares and preoccupations. He wanted no scenery in his theatre, just symbolic objects sometimes strangely distorted into nightmare shapes. Combined with the use of movement, lights and music, these things would affect the audience in the way dreams do, working directly on the emotions and the subconscious mind.

Involving the audience

In the theatre that Artaud imagined, the audience would be seated in the centre of the auditorium and the action of the play would take place all around them, and even among them. Instead of being spectators, the audience would be made to feel part of everything that happened.

The skill of the actor

Artaud insisted that actors should be highly trained and able to use their voices and bodies with great skill. Most of all, they must be totally committed to their work, so that the intensity of their emotions is felt by the audience. This is similar to the total involvement Grotowski demanded of his actors. Artaud believed that actors should be emotionally involved in their work and convinced of the truth of it.

Deliberate cruelty

When he used the word ‘cruelty’, Artaud meant it. Not physical cruelty, which draws blood, but an attack on the emotions designed to shock the audience and totally involve them in the drama. To do this, he suggested the use of violent, terrifying and shocking actions and images, designed to ‘pulverise’ the audience’s feelings.

It is very important to note that Artaud did not intend to use shocking actions or effects purely for their own sake. He meant them to be used as all his techniques were to be used, to change the way people perceived their world.

Improvising the play

There were to be no scripts in the theatre of cruelty. Artaud planned to improvise, basing the process on important events, serious human concerns or important themes taken from existing plays. An example he gave was an improvisation based on the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. Artaud said he would use this to demonstrate the horror of the extermination of one race by another, and to make people feel how destructive religion can be when it is used for the wrong reasons.
Using the techniques

To use the techniques of theatre of cruelty properly, you must first begin by looking closely at the world you live in and decide what important elements in it you feel most strongly about, both good and bad. Once you are totally committed to the emotional truth of your perceptions, then you can make effective use of Artaud’s techniques to share with other people your own heartfelt understanding of one facet of human life.

WORKSHOP: THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Exercise 1: Working in small groups, create a piece of mime, movement or dance that is designed to convey a single strong emotion, such as love, hate, fear, joy etc., just through the use of stylised movement.

Exercise 2: Using music, sounds, voice (but very few words), extreme physical movement and lights (if available), create improvisations that convey the emotion associated with a certain state of being, such as blindness, loneliness, death, triumph or power.

Exercise 3: Using neutral masks, symbolic costumes (such as white cloth for birth or purity, black cloth for death) and the other techniques already explored, create a dream or nightmare sequence with a strong emotional content. The improvisations must be as unreal and dreamlike as possible.

Exercise 4: Work in pairs. Each pair works out a short improvisation involving a strong emotion. The major aim of the improvisation is to involve an audience directly in both the action and the emotion of the improvisation, so you can use an improvisation from a previous exercise as a starting point. For example, using blindness and the emotional sense of insecurity it creates, you might both improvise being blind and going to the audience for help. Then you might blindfold the audience and make them move around, unable to see, so that they experience the sense of deprivation for themselves. Once you have created your improvisations, join with other pairs to make groups of four and take it in turns to be performers and audience.

Exercise 5: In pairs, work to create a short improvisation based on a personal experience with a strong emotional content. You must use Stanislavski’s and Grotowski’s techniques for achieving total commitment to the improvisation, as well as theatre of cruelty techniques. Join your pairs into groups of four, and act in turn as performers and audience.

Exercise 6: Working in groups, create an improvisation based on a subject such as child abuse, persecution or brutality, which makes use of violent, terrifying and shocking actions and images to create a strong emotional impact. Remember: the technique must be used with discrimination or it is counter-productive. The improvisations must incorporate Artaud’s other techniques as well.

WORKSHOP: CRUELTY IN PERFORMANCE

Exercise 1: Working in groups of four, choose a subject for improvisation which, in Artaud’s sense, reflects the violence and unrest of contemporary society: for example, terrorism, poverty, prisoners of conscience, the threat of nuclear war, child abuse. The exercise is to prepare an improvisation on a subject using theatre of cruelty techniques as variously and effectively as possible. Use as many resources as possible, such as music, masks, clothing, props and lighting.

Exercise 2: Each group improvises its theatre of cruelty, using the rest of the class as an audience. Assess the effectiveness of your group’s use of techniques from their impact on the audience.

Exercise 3: As a class, discuss the success of the improvisations and their impact on the audience.