Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty: Crash Course Theater #43

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there. I'm Mike Rugnetta, and this is Crash Course Theater.

Yorick, you are looking especially dead today. How fitting, because today it's the Theatre of Cruelty, a style developed by the French genius, Antonin Artaud, a guy who believed that theatre in the West had become way too hung up on realism. He wanted theatre to get out the living room and return to its origins: magic, myth, and ritual.

Today, we'll be looking at Artaud's life, and his influential book of essays and one of his plays, the show about scorpions crawling out of a wet nurse's vagina that you never knew you needed. Lights up!

[Intro]

Antonin Artaud was born in 1896 in Marseilles. When he was four, he came down with meningitis. He survived, but his health was seriously weakened. Artaud was a depressed teenager. He had his first breakdown at sixteen, and his parents arranged several sanitarium stays for him. In 1916, he was briefly conscripted into the French army, but soon discharged for sleepwalking. He went back to the sanitarium, where his doctor prescribed opium, which is, A, not helpful for depression and, B, a really bad idea because it's opium! He developed a lifelong addiction.

In his twenties, Artaud moved to Paris and hooked up with surrealists, acting in a couple of films and writing the scenario for at least one other. But, the surrealists rejected him, which is not cool, surrealists. Artaud is surreal as heck. Apparently, they were miffed, because Artaud wouldn't renounce theatre as a bourgeois commercial art form. You tell them Artaud! But, if you consider Artaud's theories and subsequent theatrical career, this failure to renounce the commercialism of theatre is legit hilarious, because there's un-commerical and then there's Artaud.

From 1926 to 1928, he co-ran the Theatre Alfred Jarry, producing work by August Stindberg. In these years, he started to develop the theories he would explain in "The Theater and Its Double" - more about that in a minute. And, he tried some of them out in his staging of Percy Shelley's incest-heavy verse drama, "The Cenci," which did about as well with critics and audiences as you would expect an incest-heavy verse drama staged to actively unhinge the spectator to do.

Then, Artaud went to Mexico, took peyote, wrote some memoirs, and detoxed from heroin (though her would later re-tox). He returned to France, went to Ireland and was brought back to France in a straitjacket, literally, because he'd suffered a major psychotic break and tried to attack some people. He was diagnosed with incurable paranoid delirium, and underwent electroshock treatment.

Eventually, he was released, and his friends paid for him to stay in a private psychiatric clinic. He continued writing, including poems and a script for a radio broadcast that French radio never aired, because it was strange and rude. Diagnosed with cancer, Artaud died in 1948.

Ok, so he may have had a dramatic life, but why are we devoting a whole episode to a guy who did a little acting, a little directing, took peyote, and wrote a play or two before confronting extreme mental and eventual physical illness? Well, it's because his theories are still a huge influence.

Looking at the portrait we've painted over the last number of episodes, you'll maybe have noticed that modern theatre had a nonstop identity crisis about how to capture real life. Sometimes, theatre is like, we're going to make this as real as possible. Those toilets onstage are going to flush. And, sometimes, theatre is like, heck no! The only way to capture real life is with myth and magic, poetry and violence. Everything on stage is a metaphor for toilets.

On the anti-realist side, Artaud is pretty much kind.

In 1938, Artaud published "The Theater and Its Double." The book and its theories had a lot of important influences: surrealism, symbolism, the works that he helped produce at the Theatre Alfred Jarry, as well as the works of Jarry, himself. All super significant. But, maybe the strongest influence was a performance by a troupe of Balinese dancers that Artaud had seen at the Paris International Colonial Exposition in 1931. The dance consisted, he wrote, "of everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on a stage and that is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind as the language of words."

Now, to be accurate, Balinese dance does have words, and stories, and specific meanings. Artaud was doing the thing that a lot of Western artists did, and continue to do, where they see what they want to see in Eastern cultures. In Artaud's case, he wanted a performance style that transcended psychological realism, which he called "psychological and human stagnation." Inspired by the dance, he imagines a style that would restore the theatre to its original destiny, a mix of dance, song, and pantomime fused together in a perspective of hallucination and fear. Real talk? Count me in.

Artaud called his new form the Theatre of Cruelty, a place "in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theatre as by a whirlwind of higher forces." Now, Artaud wasn't talking about actual physical violence - well, he wasn't only talking about actually physical violence - but rather a violent impulse tha would rupture ordinary perception and the boring norm-core way that most people conduct their day-to-day lives. Society, he thought, had become sick, complacent, lulled by bourgeois illusion. People needed ceremony and ritual, a magic exorcism, to heal.

Artuad believed that the theatre had learned all the wrong lessons from Aristotle, with his emphasis on plot and language and his meh attitude toward spectacle. The Theatre of Cruelty was going to be all spectacle, all the time. It would use music, dance, and certifiably bananas lighting design that would wake up the audience to how bizarre and violent real life actually is. He wanted a theatre that would leave an ineffaceable scar.

In his words, "the Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theater a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can this be identified with a kind of sever moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid." Catharsis! Let's book a babysitter and go.

Artuad called for a style of performance that would emphasize the mise-en-scene; lights, sound, costumes, basically everything that isn't text. And yet, he didn't really believe in sets or props. He wanted actors who would operate not from a place of psychological realism, but from a place of emotion, sensation, and pure physicality. He called these actors "Athletes of the Heart." He envisioned a theatre in which the audience would sit in the center, helpless, and the play would surround them in an act of "organized anarchy." Take that, proscenium arches.

Oh, and what's the double after "Theatre and it's..."? That's tricky and it's not completely articulated in the essays, but the basic idea seems to be that it's life, or what life could be if we allow theatre to work on our senses and awaken us to something better, truer, stronger, and way more intense that life as we know it. To Artuad, good theater should actually be more real than boring everyday life.

Let's put these theories into blood-splattered practice by looking at Artaud's early play, "The Jet of Blood" or "The Spurt of Blood." Guess it all depends on how you like your high-velocity blood flow. The play was written in 1925, maybe in a single day.

Help us out, Thought Bubble.

A young man and a young girl, who may be brother and sister, are being all lovey-dovey, then a hurricane arrives. And, here's a fun stage direction, Two stars are seen colliding, and from them fall a series of legs of living flesh with feet, hands, scalps, masks, colonnades, porticoes, temples, alembics, falling more and more slowly, as if falling in a vacuum. Then, three scorpions, one after another, and finally a frog and a beetle which come to rest with desperate slowness, nauseating slowness. Then a knight comes in, pursued by a wet nurse who is holding her swollen breasts. The knight eats some cheese and chokes. Night falls, the earth quakes, lightning flashes, and an enormous hand comes out and grabs a prostitute by her hair and shouts, "...lok at your body." The prostitute shouts, "Leave me alone, God!" And, she bites him. Cue enormous jet of blood. That title was not a metaphor. More lightning, because God does not like to be nibbled upon, and then everyone is dead, except for the prostitute and the young man; they fall into each other's arms. The wet nurse, who doesn't have breasts anymore, re-enters, dragging the corpse of the young girl. Scorpions crawl out from underneath the wet nurse's dress. And here's another fun stage direction: Her vagina swells up, splits and becomes transparent and glistening like a sun. The young man and the prostitute run away, at which point, the young girl sits up and says, "the virgin! Ah, that's what he was looking for." And scene.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

A lot going on there, and it all happened in about three pages of text. The whole history of the universe, from the Garden of Eden to the apocalypse, in three gonzo pages. I'm going to go ahead and say, yeah, that's the Theatre of Cruelty. I don't know about you, I definitely feel fused together in a perspective of hallucination and fear. "The Jet of Blood" was scheduled for the Theatre Alfred Jarry season of 1926 and '27, but it was never produced in Artaud's lifetime.

Artaud spent a lot of his life in various institutions and various states of mental discombobulation. His writing and art, especially in his later years, is cryptic, strange, and sometimes gross. Still, he's been a huge influence on theatre-makers and theatre companies who feel let down by realistic writing and Stanislavski-style acting. Jean Genet, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, the Living Theater - all big fans. Also, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and even Jim Morrison. As legacies go, not too cruel.

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next time when we explore yet one more way to give the theatrical finger to realism. We're going to meet the mostly Marxist, totally dialectical, often smelly, theatrical mastermind, Bertolt Brecht. It's going to be epic. But, until then, curtain.

[Outro]

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows, like BrainCraft. BrainCraft is a show about psychology, neuroscience, and why we act the way we do.

Crash Course Theater is filmed in Indianapolis, Indiana, and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Café.

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