Dada, Surrealism, and Symbolism: Crash Course Theater #37

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=Fx0Z6y2HmlM
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/Fx0Z6y2HmlM

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Theater, and today's episode should be in the form of a manifesto because we've reached the 20th century. And, pretty much every new movement comes with multiple mission statements at this point. But, do those mission statements include animated sequences and one charming cranium co-host? They did not.

Today we'll be explore symbolism, surrealism, and dadaism, the movement that argued how in a random and senseless universe, the only approach is to be more random. Astroid, several ducks in a giant teapot, cuff-links, roll title.

[Intro]

Writers like Ibsen, Strindberg, and Checkhov turned to symbolism later in life, although the movement's main proponent was the almost all Symbolist, almost all the time, Belgian playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck. Symbolism argues that poetry is superior to reality, and that out of the chaos and evanescence of human life, a quieter and more lasting truth can be discerned. The movement got going in the 1860s and 1870s with folks like the famous poets Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire.

It was formally announced in the 1886 manifesto published in the French paper, Le Figaro; here are some of symbolism's basic tenets: truth in excess and extravagance, truth in apparent chaos and insanity, truth in subjective experience, platitudes and natural banality are dangerous, we need to be constantly ever more audacious.

The movement was anti-realism and resisted concentrating on the nitty-gritty of daily life. Instead, Symbolists focused on poetic ideals and mysticism, investigating the profound mystery of human existence.

The first Symbolist theatre was the Theatre D'Art, founded by the 18-year-old, Paul Fort, in 1890. This move got him expelled from high school. A few years later, that theatre became the Théatre de L'oeuvre, led by the director Aurélien Lugné-Poe.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

He produced plays by Maeterlinck, Ibsen, and Strindberg.

Where realism had accustomed theater-goers to a more lifelike style of acting, the Théatre de L'oeuvre was big on non-representational sets and acting that looked like sleepwalking and lines that weren't spoken as so much as chanted. Maeterlinck wrote that he went to the theatre "hoping that the beauty, the grandeur, and the earnestness of my humble day-to-day existence would, for one instant, be revealed to me, that I would be shown the I-know-not what presence, power, or god that is ever with me." Honestly, seems like a big ask, but, hey, small ambitions, small successes, am I right?

Dadaism had less lofty goals, but, man, it did have a giant impact on the arts and the world at large. The movements emerged in the cabarets of Zurich, Switzerland at the tail end of World War I. The main idea was that if logic can lead to a global war, then art should abandon logic and reason in favor of nonsense, intuition, and anarchy. You want to get nuts? Let's get nuts. Tristan Tzara, a former Symbolist and the movement's main spokesperson, put it like this: "the beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of art, but of disgust."

Hugo Ball, Emmy Hemings, and Richard Huelsenbeck were early adherents, but in 1916, Tzara created maybe the first Dada performance at the Cabaret Voltaire. This was a cavalcade of clowns and stilt-walkers that featured Tzara, himself, distributing balled up pieces of paper to onlookers while he sang a song.

Oh, and no one agrees on what the word Dada means. Some Dadaists claim it was chosen from the dictionary at random. Dada was big on randomness, or what you can call the aleatory, the thing left up to chance. Tzara's favorite mode of composition was to cut a bunch of words out of a newspaper, put them in a hat, and then pick them out at random to make a poem.

[Mike puts on two hats and begins pulling paper out of a third]

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Renaissance. Powerful. Artist. Probably.

As he wrote in To Make a Dadaist Poem, "The poem will resemble you. And there you are - an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd."

Dada made no distinctions between high and low art, mastery and amateurism, or sense and nonsense. At a typical Dada performance, a bunch of things would be happening all at once, a poem in a made-up language, a song, a dance, some very weird costumes, and it was up to you to make sense of it, or you could just jeer and leave. Upsetting the audience, especially the bourgeois audience, was part of the fun, maybe even most of the fun.

In the 1920s, the writer André Breton broke with Dadaism, because he thought it was silly and Breton wasn't wrong, per se. Breton started surrealism, borrowing the term from the playwright Guillaume Apollinaire, who called his 1903 drama "The Breasts of Tiresias: un drame surréaliste" or a drama greater than realism. So, that settles that. Very surreal.

Surrealism looked back toward symbolism for a form that would unlock some greater truth of existence. The movement was influenced by the nascent theories of Freud, and an emphasis on the unconscious, as well as the world of dreams. Surrealist theatre sought a way to synthesize, as Breton wrote, "life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low," so that these things, "ceased to be perceived as contradictions." There were a lot of surrealist factions, splits, and fights, but the basic idea was to merge the internal subjective world and external reality into one awesome super-reality.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Like Dada, surrealism found logic drab and boring. Where Dada favored the random, surrealism went big for automatism, an idea that the artist should just write or do whatever came into their head; sort of like stream of consciousness but with even less control.

In the first surrealist manifesto, Breton defined the movement as "pure psychic automatism, by which one intends to express verbally, in writing or by any other method, the real functioning of the mind." This, the surrealists hoped would help the artist tap into something powerful, elemental, and something fundamentally, unflinchingly human. As Breton wrote in surrealism's second manifesto, "the idea of surrealism aims quite simply at the total recovery at our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves, the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory."

Even though "The Breasts of Tiresias" precedes the movement, it's still probably the most famous surrealist play. Thérèse is tired of

being a woman; when her breasts turn into balloons and float away, she becomes a man. And then she makes her husband dress up as a woman. She sets off to conquer the world and campaigns against childbirth, but her husband finds a way to have children. 40,000 of them. And he and Thérèse reconcile.

For a closer look at these movements, let's explore an influential play that was written even before Apollinaire's. It has elements of symbolism, Dadaism, surrealism, and even naturalism, but somehow manages to be more vulgar than any manifesto would allow. Meet Alfred Jarry's ugly, violent, and sadistically funny "Ubu Roi," which Jarry first drafted as a teenager. Initially staged as a puppet play, it was a merciless satire of Jarry's high school physics teacher, but also a parody of "Macbeth." Jarry convinced Lungé-Poe to stage it at the Théatre de L'oeuvre in 1896.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

The play is Naturalist in its emphasis on degradation, almost like (?~8:06) play, but Symbolist in its concentration on chaos and excess. It's also a forerunner of Dada and Surrealism in its fascination with nonsense and nightmare. The actors are supposed to wear full-body costumes that restrict their movements and acoustic masks that flatten their voices into a monotone. Translation has a hard time capturing just how crude and scatological this play is but know that its first word is "merdre", which is a riff on the French word "merde" meaning poop, and then everyone gets killed with a toilet brush. Come a long way from Neoclassicism and the Unities haven't we. Take us even further thought-bubble.

Pa Ubu is a noble who is obsessed with food, money, and poop he's a creature of pure id, imagine Homer Simpson but way less likable. His wife Ma Ubu convinces him to kill the king of Poland. He then holds a banquet and serves a poop covered toilet brush, poisoning a bunch of people; but the Polish king's son Bougrelas escapes and his dad's ghost tells him to get revenge. Meanwhile, back at the palace, it turns out that a guy who came to the throne by murdering everyone in a really unsanitary way is not a good king. After holding an orgy to celebrate, he taxes the peasants and disembrains a lot of people, including all the nobles. He imprisons his sidekick, Captain Bordure, who escapes and convinces the Russian czar to declare war against Ubu. Ubu places a cardboard cut-out of a horse around his neck and goes to battle, while Ma ransacks a crypt looking for cash. Ubu and the Czar fight. Ubu loses and escapes to a cave in Lithuania, where he's attacked by a bear.

Ma Ubu escapes and meets Pa at the cave. He throws the bear corpse at her, then beats her up. Bougrelas and his army arrive and beat both of them up, but the Ubus escape on a boat bound for Paris where Ubu is pretty sure he can get a job as…Minister of Finance. Thanks, thought-bubble.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

I'm queasy for all sorts of reasons.

On the first night, the audience heard the first word, “Pooooop” and they rioted, closing down the show for 15 minutes. Yeats was there and he later wrote, “What more is possible. After us, the savage God.” The performance eventually continued but the play closed that same night, and it wasn't revived again until after Jarry's early death from tuberculosis and excessive drinking, specifically a cocktail of absinthe, vinegar, and ink. Maybe the tale of the Ubus doesn't seem like a great play, but it's a pivotal work in modernism because of the conventions that it upends and also because it's one of the first works of theatre to take an openly hostile stance toward the audience, actively trying to cause offense. The play's whole argument, if you want to credit Ubu Roi with having an argument, is that greedy, grasping, bourgeois life is dumb and ugly, and that's how it made its bourgeois audience look and feel. Weird as it seems Symbolism, Surrealism, and Dadaism were all profoundly interested in Realism and the ways that Realism fails to convey the truth of human existence. The Symbolists, Surrealists, and Dadaists argued that the truth isn't found in everyday conversation or rigorously researched domestic interiors and costumes, but in dreams, visions, imaginings, the stuff buried deep in the psyche, the innermost recesses of the human brain, and in the immensity of the universe that it perceives and creates, and also sometimes in a hacked up newspaper article thrown into a hat.

Next time we're gonna look at Expressionism, a movement that tries to convey the subjective distorting experience of emotion and mood. [High-pitched scream] Yeah, a lot of those moods are bad, but until then, curtain.

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===== (12:00) to (12:26) =====

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