

# **The Theater and Its Double Study Guide**

## **The Theater and Its Double by Antonin Artaud**

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# Plot Summary

The Theater and Its Double is a collection of essays by French author and actor Antonin Artaud written in the 1920s and 1930s. The book itself was first published in French in 1938. In the book, the author tries to establish a basic theory that is meant to redefine the art of theater using a radical and revolutionary approach, relying mostly on the art of 'mise en scène,' a French expression that refers to everything in theater that should be managed in order to produce a play on a stage including direction, production and staging. The book establishes a relationship between theater and life (reality). In Artaud's mind, theater and reality are two entities that live in separate spheres; as such, they double each other (hence the title of the book). Artaud's radical stance on the art of theater, as expressed in this book, still has a great influence on contemporary art and philosophy. It is a necessary read for anyone involved in creating original art, whether it is theater, video or multimedia.

Antonin Artaud starts by criticizing Occidental theater., which is based on scripts and written language. Artaud shows that language has lost its emotional and logical value because it is frozen in time and too remote from life. In both modern and classic literature, language serves mainly as a support for psychology and the characters are more important than the action happening on stage. The "masterpieces" of theater literature are flawed because they were written for another era, thus forcing both the spectators and the actors to linger in the past.

The author then describes a new, completely remodeled form of theater which he calls the "Theater of Cruelty." He insists that the real theater must touch the senses before it touches the minds. This means that the director (or "metteur en scène") will have to use every mean at his disposal. Artaud's intent is to create a new theatrical language which would allow the director to work as a creator instead of a translator of the author. Artaud then gives an example of a play in which such a new theatrical play could be involved ("The Conquest of Mexico.") His theory is based on the Oriental version of theater, and more specifically the Balinese Theater. Such a theater relies heavily on the usage of hieroglyphs, which use abstract figures to convey concrete meanings.

The Theater of Cruelty is developed by Artaud to allow the staging of great metaphysical conflicts. This staging can only be accomplished through a great deal of intellectual and political violence. However, theater as an art can only rely on physical means (movements, lights, voice, etc.), so it has to reach the spectator's mind by acting in the physical world. Because this violence playing on the stage is faked, there is no real danger for the spectator to translate it into the real world. What Artaud calls "cruelty" is the awakening of the great yet forgotten, dark myths of humanity, because these myths will keep haunting the human mind long after the curtains fell. The problem tackled by The Theater and its Double is not about remaking theater's classic texts, but remaking theater itself.



# Preface: Theater and Culture

## Preface: Theater and Culture Summary and Analysis

The Theater and its Double is a collection of essays by French author and actor Antonin Artaud written in the 1920s and 1930s. The book itself was first published in French in 1938. In *The Theater and its Double*, the author tries to establish a basic theory that is meant to redefine the art of theater using a radical and revolutionary approach, relying mostly on the art of 'mise en scène,' a French expression that refers to everything in theater that should be managed in order to produce a play on a stage including direction, production and staging. The book establishes a relationship between theater and life (reality). In Artaud's mind, theater and reality are two entities that live in separate spheres; as such, they double each other (hence the title of the book). Artaud's radical stance on the art of theater, as expressed in this book, still has a great influence on contemporary art and philosophy. It is a necessary read for anyone involved in creating original art, whether it is theater, video or multimedia.

In the preface to *The Theater and its Double*, Artaud asserts that culture is as essential as feeding when it comes to sustaining human life. He compares culture to civilization, concluding that they are but two words to designate a single action. Culture is essentially mistaken because it confuses words and things, in the same way that civilization has lost its way by confusing acts and ideas. Culture should be a way to both understand and practice life itself, merging instead of separating both functions.

Culture should be a way to extract life out of the cultural objects it provides. The objects should be to the civilized man what totems were to primitive civilizations. As with totems, there are forces that are beyond the simple cultural objects that we enjoy statically. These forces are almost magical and should be a source into which we can tap, much like the Mexicans gather their "Manas" out of totemic objects.

Antonin Artaud asserts that contrary to popular usage, art and culture do not go hand in hand. Theater is the only art form in which shadows take a life of their own. This is because theater uses live objects which generate shadows, literally speaking. Theater uses every kind of language, representation and symbol. However, once one of these languages becomes prevalent, it turns into the theater's very own limitation.

By opening the book with a metaphor that compares two very different concepts (i.e., culture and food), the author mirrors style that he will use in many chapters to follow. Indeed, the book's argument is built by equating essential properties of different concepts—such as the plague, painting and representation, metaphysics, the 'science' of alchemy, cruelty, cinema—with theater.



# I. Theater and the Plague

## I. Theater and the Plague Summary and Analysis

Artaud tells a story about a man named Saint-Rémys, who was Sardinia's Viceroy in 1720. One morning, that man woke up from a dream during which he saw his entire kingdom devastated by an uncontrollable and vicious plague. Fearing that his dream was a premonition about to come true, Saint-Rémys gave orders to turn a ship called the Grand-Saint-Antoine around when the latter tried to dock at Cagliari, the province's port. After turning his ship around, the captain of the Grand-Saint-Antoine sailed to Marseille where the vessel docked a few days later. Almost immediately, a virulent form of plague erupted in Marseille, killing thousands of civilians. There were already cases of plague in Marseille, but the disease was contained. It was later discovered that the boat carried the Oriental form of the virus, which is what triggered the vicious outbreak.

When the plague takes over the city, all civil structures crumble. The author gives ample description of the social consequences of the plague: Piles of dead bodies everywhere, death exasperate instincts, etc. The end result is a mix of panic and incoherent actions occurring all over the city. This is where Artaud compares the plague to theater, as both are at the origin of gratuitous actions which have no immediate use in society. Thus he concludes that theater and plagues have similar effects. Acting is a gratuitous, delirious behavior that communicates like a contagious disease. The essence of fascination is revealed when the spectator believes what he sees, and acts as he believes. The psychological effect of the plague gives life to a latent social and individual disorder which erupts in the shape of images, giving rise to the most extreme of gestures and actions. Like a plague, theater should take gesture to its limit and create images that wake up the sleeping spectator.

Theater, like the plague, is a primordial crisis that ends either in death or in complete healing. Both also perform a good deed in allowing the truth to come out, the crisis to revolve. Like the plague, theater allows people to take an heroic stance in the face of destiny by revealing its own hidden power to the masses, Artaud ends the chapter wondering whether there will ever be some men capable of realizing this true form of theater, thus giving us back the dogmas in which we collectively stopped believing.

In this chapter, Artaud considers a somewhat poetic version of the plague. Modern science knows that the real carriers of the virus are fleas. These minuscule carriers, traveling on the back of rats—or, as in the case of the Grand-Saint-Antoine cargo, rugs—were ignored for centuries. Hence the real origin of the plague remained unknown. The mystery that surrounded the plague allowed a loose interpretation of the disease. Artaud picks the plague simply because it was at the time the most virulent and violent form of social and physical disturbance that society could encounter. The author does not make a serious attempt to solve the mystery of the plague from a medical point of view, taking instead a poetic and highly speculative stance that allows him to interpret the origin of the plague.



## II. Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène

### II. Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène Summary and Analysis

The author describes a painting by medieval painter Lucas van den Leyden called "Daughters of Lot." He describes the main characteristics and elements of the painting: a heavy dark sky, a black tower, lighting bolts that resemble rockets, broken ships wrecked on a beach, etc. Artaud says that there is no clear message or idea to be derived from the painting, yet it affects the spectator's mind directly. At the social level, the painting conveys ideas about sexuality and reproduction. At a deeper, metaphysical level, it conveys ideas of magic, fatality, chaos and the impotency of language. Artaud states that this painting does what theater should do, if only it could speak a language of its own instead of relying strictly on spoken dialogue. Much like painting uses paint and canvas, theater should speak with the things that can be expressed physically on the stage.

Current theater is limited to examining the small, temporary and overwhelmingly material questions that assail the "civilized" man, such as deciding between war and peace, and resolving moral dilemmas and sexual tension. The author admits that in the context of theater, all these questions are not only meaningless but also literally disgusting. Artaud says that theater has lost both its sense of seriousness and humor. He then establishes two causes to this loss. The first of these causes is the loss of immediacy and danger. The second is the loss of a sense of anarchy in the poetry that is inherent to theater. In short, Artaud says that theater is all contained in the mise en scène, which he defines as a language moving in space.



## III. The Alchemical Theater

### III. The Alchemical Theater Summary and Analysis

According to Artaud, the science of alchemy and theater share a common property: They are both 'virtual.' Indeed, alchemy uses symbols to reflect physical operations at a spiritual level. However, the whole science of alchemy has no actual efficiency; it only serves as a double for something that does not exist. The same can be said about theater, which serves as a copy, or double, of a life that does not exist. In its current, Occidental interpretation, theater is limited to mimicking daily life through scripted dialogues; in truth, real theater should reflect a reality where humans must have little influence or effect.

Theater is thus anchored in an essential metaphysical conflict which it cannot escape. The author associates this essential drama or conflict to an original "will," itself without conflict. He asserts that there could be no theater where no conflict or drama exists. In alchemy, the mind must first prove that it can earn the material gold before it can create it at the physical level. A similar "alchemical" operation is necessary for theater to create its own gold. Theater must destroy everything in order to reconstruct itself on a layer of its own virtual reality, where gold is the product of spirituality.

In this chapter, Antonin Artaud uses an aspect of alchemy which is rarely employed as a metaphor. He does so in order to show that real theater should have a different object than the one accepted by western civilization, which is "life" as we know it, with all its psychological and social conflicts. The 'pure' form of theater that Artaud seeks is not simply narrative and descriptive, like the former, but rather the mirror of a universe that lies almost entirely outside of the realm of the physical world; an ideal or dreamed state similar to the world painted by Plato on the walls of the fictional cavern depicted in his famous speech. Antonin Artaud uses a lot of vocabulary linked to the fundamental belief in a higher being (such as "spirituality," "metaphysical," etc.); however, he does so only to link theater to a level of reality that cannot be accessed without belief on the part of the spectators and the actors, at least while the theater play is actually performed.

## IV. On the Balinese Theater

### IV. On the Balinese Theater Summary and Analysis

Balinese theater realizes an extreme and pure version of theater, through which everything exists only because it is performed on stage. In Balinese theater, voice and speech are given an entirely new role, in part because the power of the director, or 'metteur en scène,' of a play is absolute. Gestures, coded by many centuries of traditions, manage to remain effective because they are rooted in centuries of spiritual and metaphysical study.

In Balinese theater, the author of the scenario that drives Occidental theater is replaced by a metteur en scène. The latter becomes the master of a sacred ceremony that happens solely on stage. For this purpose, a Balinese theater play creates a language designed solely to convey a series of pure and almost magical scenic images. The resulting scene appears both obscure and mysterious to the westerner, mainly because its meaning has been repressed by centuries of our own civilization.

"On Balinese Theater" is a chapter that loosely assembles various writings about Balinese theater. Sources vary from an article he wrote for a magazine following a representation of Balinese Theater at the Exposition Coloniale in 1931. Other paragraphs were lifted from letters and other manuscripts written about the same subject during that period. The chapter is not an attempt to give a technical description of this particular type of theater. Rather, the chapter is a series of impressions and points of view written about Balinese Theater and taken more or less out of context.





## V. Oriental and Occidental Theater

### V. Oriental and Occidental Theater Summary and Analysis

Artaud asserts that in the Occidental version of theater, words are everything. The problem is that Occidental culture imposes the supremacy of speech over everything that takes place on a theater stage; consequently this brand of theater relegates the *mise en scène* to an inferior level of the art. If theater is to be restored to its original intention, as an art that is not dependent on any other form of expression, it becomes necessary for these roles to be reversed. Because it speaks directly to the mind instead of the reason, the art of *mise en scène* needs to create a visual, plastic materialization of speech which will then be played on stage as part of the spectacle.

The author says that the problem at the heart of Occidental theater is that western art and culture systematically confuse art with aestheticism. In order to put theater back on its original path, it will be necessary to link it with everything that can exist as an expression on a stage. This would reconcile theater with the rest of the universe and give it back the sort of metaphysical power that it should have retained in the first place.

Because Occidental theater relies solely on speech, it can only be used to express those "things" that are best represented through spoken dialogues such as psychological and social conflicts, as well as daily reality. This is a perversion of theater, simply because the object of theater is not psychological but rather plastic and essentially material. The problem is that reality is untranslatable; translating reality would be betraying and dissimulating it. Thus the role of speech needs to be changed.

Much like its Oriental version, Occidental theater should all at once charm, excite and disturb the mind. Because it relies on the objective consequences of the combination of gesture, sounds, light and words, it is more akin to sorcery than reproduction. In essence, theater is a lot more than it stands for in our Occidental culture, where it is conceived simply as a double of our daily life.

# VI. No More Masterpieces

## VI. No More Masterpieces Summary and Analysis

The biggest obstacle standing in the way of a complete and fundamental renewal of the art of theater is the respect and admiration that we have for the old, classic texts. Artaud maintains that since classic texts—what we generally call masterpieces—were made in the past, they are only good for the past. He says that the reason the public is not interested in "higher" art and in theater in particular, is because people do not react to old language and forms of expression, which are totally disconnected from contemporary reality.

He says that psychology diminishes the value of theater. The separation of life and theater, where the latter is but a mirror image of the former, is inherently false. Written poetry, just like theater scripted in words, must disappear because it loses its value as soon as it is repeated. Poetry should be read then thrown away. In a similar way, theater should be the art of creating a higher meaning that cannot be repeated.

Civilization does not need to change before theater is renewed, but the reverse is true: Theater can influence things. The 'theater of cruelty' proposed by the author is meant to shake up the foundations of civilization and culture as a whole. This type of theater is 'cruel' because it attacks the foundation of culture. A theater of cruelty is meant as a protest against the basis of civilization; it puts the spectator at the center of the spectacle and constantly challenges him physically with forces that trigger actions and reactions.

## VII. The Theater and Cruelty

### VII. The Theater and Cruelty Summary and Analysis

The Theater of Cruelty is a concept aimed at reviving public interest in theater. Antonin Artaud maintains that "everything that acts is a cruelty." If theater is to rebuild itself, it has to do so using the extreme and cruel actions that only acting allows. Theater needs to attack the spectators, challenge them and raise their sensibility at a physical level with an overwhelming assault of sounds and sights. Theater has to bring out the magic that only physical actions can bring forth and make happen, both on stage and in the mind of the spectators who are part of the spectacle.

Artaud's concept of cruelty is aimed at raising the conscience of the public through theater. It does not involve physical or psychological cruelty, but refers to the involvement of the spectator in every spectacle. At the end of the chapter, he argues that such cruelty is necessary to shake up the public in the light of the inevitable catastrophes that life was about to bring them (the text is dated May 1933). He wonders if real blood will be shed before such theater can see the light of day. Indeed, History eventually proved him right, as the world waited for the Second World War to end before it produced instances of radically renewed theater inspired by the Antonin Artaud's theory.

## VIII. The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)

### VIII. The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto) Summary and Analysis

The first thing to notice about theater is that it only expresses itself in space. However, current theater relies on using texts which are considered sacred and translating them into the physical space where theater takes place: the stage. In order to reinvent and modernize theater, it is necessary to get rid of the texts and allow theater to create its own language by considering everything on stage as physical objects that interact at every level with each other. For this purpose, Occidental theater should look at Oriental theater for inspiration.

In his first manifesto, Artaud gives a list of the elements that this "theater of cruelty" needs to maintain. Technically, theater must use every mean available to create a dream in the spectator's mind, thus forcing him to make difficult choices and to find his own place between dream and reality. The spectacle must be present in the form of a recognizable objective element. The people responsible for the "mise en scène" must establish the language which will deal with all the elements of the spectacle as well as with the plot. The language of the stage must be designed to relate every aspect of the play in a tightly organized web of interrelations. The stage and the auditorium must both be renewed in order to accommodate the spectator as an integral part of the play. The whole interpretation should be calculated like a code and the actors denied any personal initiative. Artaud then gives a few examples of possible programs, including reconstructed versions of classics and modern plays without their scripts: Bluebeard, The Fall of Jerusalem, Büchner's Wozzek, etc.



## IX. Letters on Cruelty

### IX. Letters on Cruelty Summary and Analysis

This chapter contains three letters, two of which are addressed to J.P. In the first letter, Artaud tries to justify his usage of the word "cruelty" in association with theater within his first manifesto. He says that his "cruelty" has nothing to do with the kind of physical violence it is commonly associated with and that he is not promoting systematic horror in theater. Rather, cruelty relates to the necessity to submit to a type of action that is meant to provoke a physical reaction. This usage of the term applies to both the "metteur en scène," the actors and the spectators. In the second letter, dated two months later, Artaud insists on the component of "necessity," which makes cruelty a part of every meaningful play.

In the third letter, addressed to "M.R de R", the author says that any criticism of the principles put forward in his manifesto are just display of a fundamental misunderstanding of the metaphysical ideas. Cruelty must be a component of theater because it is a necessary component of life itself.

This chapter essentially repeats the arguments put forth in the first manifesto which precedes it. It uses a more personal tone to explain (and, in a way, defend) the concept of "cruelty" upon which the author based his whole theory. As usual, Artaud compounds his arguments in the hope of clarifying concepts that are difficult to grasp, mainly because they are new, radical and revolutionary.



# X. Letters on Language

## X. Letters on Language Summary and Analysis

The chapter contains four letters, three of which are addressed J.P. In these letters, the author defends his stance on language in general and elaborates on his arguments regarding the destruction of spoken language as the main artifice in theater.

In the first letter, addressed to M.B.C., Artaud insists that the task of "mise en scène" must not be subordinated to spoken or written words as if this task was simply an accessory to theater. While it still qualifies as "theater," a play which depends entirely on a scripted text is nothing but a perversion of theater. The great tragedians (Sophocles, Shakespeare) might have written wonderful plays, but our contemporaries are incapable of physically rendering the play in the way that their "authors" would have wanted them to appear. This physical aspect of theater is possibly even more important to the play than the psychology of the characters, which is developed through the text. There is a culture of gesture which parallels the culture of words in which we live, and only the former allows us to measure ourselves against our destiny.

In the second letter, written a year later, Artaud underlines the fact that actions precede language. Actions give birth to meaning, and from then on to spoken and written language. However, spoken language freezes meaning in shapes and sounds that confines and kills the ideas which it meant to convey. Artaud defends his idea of renewing theater by getting rid of spoken and written language by saying that this idea will extend the possibilities of theater instead of restricting them. For this reason, Artaud finds the duality between "author" and "director" in the context of theater totally absurd, since there should be no difference between them.

In the third letter, Artaud agrees with some of his critics following the publication of "The Theater of Cruelty." He says that his fault lies in the fact that he did not define his use of "cruelty" with enough details. He never meant for cruelty to be used sporadically, but rather as the foundation of his theater. He takes entire responsibility for his first manifesto, which he admits lacks internal organization as it leaps "without transition from one idea to another." He equates "cruelty" with "life" and "necessity;" furthermore, he says that theater is based on a metaphysical principle.

In the fourth letter, written eight months later, Artaud says that he did not intend his renewed theater to become an active tool in society. He says that in fact, the theater he is defining has to assume another civilization in order to function. Speech is a prisoner of the words and their frozen definition, which ignores the poetry of their musicality. Artaud wants his theater to allow the "mise en scène" to let the words join the physical motions that gave them birth in the first place.



# XI. The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)

## XI. The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto) Summary and Analysis

In this second incarnation of Antonin Artaud's manifesto for a "theater of cruelty," the author redefines "cruelty" as the result of an extreme concentration of scenic elements and an absolute rigor of the "mise en scène."

Artaud starts by defining elements of the possible content of such a theater. The themes will be cosmic, metaphysical and based on the sacred texts of ancient civilizations from all over the world. The spectacle itself will be formed along the lines of ancient myths which will be materialized in gestures and movement before decaying into sounds and words. It will use an overwhelming number of images and movement which will all merge to form a language of their own. The latter will be purely theatrical and built like the oldest languages of the world, which are based on hieroglyphs. The spectators will be physically enveloped by the spectacle and the spectator's mind will have no choice but to react to the physical proximity of the theatrical effects like lights, images, movements, sounds and music.

The first instance of such a theater will be called "The Conquest of Mexico." It will present a great conflict and challenge the values of a civilization which used its power to brutally colonize a peaceful country. In the first act, called "Warning Signs," the city of Mexico will be shown in its entire splendor, only to be shaken by a coming storm. Then Cortez and his men will appear like giants alongside their tiny vessels. The second act, called "Confession," will show Montezuma advancing alone to meet Cortez. The third act, called "Convulsions," will show a great battle, with bodies clashing over each other and revolt disrupting everything. The fourth and final chapter, called "Abdication," will show the result of Montezuma's abdication in front of Cortez. The latter will face revolt from every corner of the country during Montezuma's funerals.



## XII. An Affective Athleticism

### XII. An Affective Athleticism Summary and Analysis

Artaud starts by comparing the actor with the physical athlete, concluding that they are each other's double because they function in a similar way. The main difference between these two types of athlete is that physical athletes rely on their bodily functions to support their body, whereas actors use theirs to control their emotions and affections. For instance, the physical athlete uses his body to support his breathing whereas the actor breathes to support and control his body.

Using breathing as an example, Artaud asserts that emotions are essentially physical and that passion, which is at the heart of theater, is material and thus subject to the fluctuations of the latter. In order to accomplish his task, the actor must then control his breathing and become fully aware that its tempo is the key to the emotions that he wishes to convey. Following the classic categorization of breath, Artaud lists three types of breathing: Masculine, feminine and androgynous (or neuter). By understanding, controlling and combining them, even the least talented of actors can convey a wide range of feelings and emotions without uttering a word, simply because the spectator will identify himself with the actor during a play.

Artaud then says that emotive thoughts are necessarily localized in the physical body. He says that the actor must be fully aware of the exact point where emotions are localized. Just like physical athletes are aware of the muscles needed to accomplish the task at hand, the actor should be aware of the points in the body where emotions are emanating. For instance, heroism, guilt and sublimity are located in the breast, anger and attack in the middle of the solar plexus, etc. This science of the organic base of emotions is well known throughout Oriental cultures but has been forgotten since the rise of the Occidental civilization, especially in Europe. In the end, the poetry and magic that theater builds as a spectacle have a scientific foundation that needs to be mastered.





## XIII. Two Notes

### XIII. Two Notes Summary and Analysis

In the first note, entitled "The Marx Brothers," Artaud writes about a movie called "Animal Crackers" and mentions that it is related to surrealism. The movie is magical because it associates words and images in a way that is out of the ordinary. It participates in creating a poetic state of mind unlike any movie before it. The author compares "Animal Crackers" with another movie by the same directors called "Monkey Business." He concludes that while Americans seem to consider these movies as mere humorous products, it is too bad for them that they fail to recognize the inner revolt that is conveyed by these combinations of images and sound.

In the second note, entitled "Autour D'une Mère," Artaud talks about a performance by Jean-Louis Barrault in which the mime plays a centaur-horse. Artaud says that the spectacle is magical in the sense that it uses the space of the stage to express emotions without words. His only criticism is that Barrault's gestures are reduced to symbolic descriptions instead of having a metaphysical content. In the end, he confirms that Barrault managed to create real theater, albeit without the deepest drama that the best theater can provide.



# In Memoriam: Antonin Artaud By Maurice Saillet

## In Memoriam: Antonin Artaud By Maurice Saillet Summary and Analysis

This last chapter, written by a friend of the author after his death in 1948, recounts the literary and artistic path of Antonin Artaud. Artaud's first poetry was published in 1922. At the time, he was the actor who played a murdered angel in "Faits Divers," a movie by Claude Autant-Lara. That same year, he wrote that "[a]ction is the very principle of life," which, according to Saillet, defines Artaud's "vocation." His addiction problems (to morphine) were reflected in his later correspondence with Jacques Rivière, when he complained that his ideas were abandoning him "at every stage" and that he was consequently "in constant pursuit of [his] intellectual being."

Saillet says that Artaud was greatly worried about his state of mind and sought both literary and intellectual advice from Rivière. The latter diagnosed Artaud with an inability to concentrate on a single object Artaud joined the French Surrealists in 1925, but later abandoned them. He condemned their techniques (automatic writing) as "rubbish." The tortured author published his most celebrated poetry, including "L'Ombilic des Limbes," as descriptions of a physical state where his limbs gradually separated from his brain; he said the writing was an "attempt to construct an abominable wisdom."

Artaud then becomes a popular movie actor, playing the role of Marat in Abel Gance's Napoleon and later the role of the tempter monk in "La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc." After abandoning his career in cinema, he starts his experiments in theater with the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, which he founded with Roger Vitrac in 1927. Saillet says that Artaud's dreams had a greater influence on theater than all of his acting and directing accomplishments. After writing the texts which fill *The Theater and its Double*, Artaud visits Mexico in 1936 and writes "Le Voyage au Pays des Tarahumaras," an important and almost magical piece of literature about legends, drugs and blood. Soon afterward, Artaud goes virtually silent as he follows an unsuccessful healing path in a mental institution in Rodez.

He resurfaces in 1946, writing and drawing frenetically until his death two years later. During this "black period," he meets with Van Gogh and writes "Van Gogh le Suicidé de la Société." During that period, he also writes "Ci-Gît" ("Here Lies"), "Artaud-le-Momo" ("Artaud the madman"). Saillet concludes by underlining the influence of Artaud, both as an artist and as a tragic character that walked across the life of his contemporaries like the ghostly figure he interpreted in one of his first movies.



# Characters

## Lucas van Leyden

Lucas van Leyden was a celebrated Dutch painter and engraver who lived from 1494 through 1533 in Leiden, a city of the Netherlands. Lucas van Leyden is known for his exceptional talent as both as an engraver and a painter. Artaud uses the Dutch painter's "Daughters of Lot" masterpiece in the opening example in the chapter called "Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène." The painter's name also appears in the last of the "Letters on Language."

"Daughters of Lot" (circa 1509) depicts Lot and his family in a scene that compounds many elements of one of the stories told by the Bible's Book of Genesis. The painting depicts Lot and his daughters on one side, and a great disaster and its spectators on the other. The canvas, painted by van Leyden when he was around fifteen years old, is fairly accurate with regard to the biblical story; it manages to reproduce its most important characteristics of the storyline in a single scene. In "Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène," Artaud states that this particular painting "makes the four or five centuries of painting that come after [Lucas van den Leyden] inane and useless." He further suggests that "the painter possessed certain secrets of linear harmony, certain means of making that harmony affect the brain directly, like a physical agent." The author's unrestrained enthusiasm for the Dutch painter serves only as a premise for a relatively thorough survey of the graphical elements that are found on the classic canvas.

Artaud uses the master's canvas as an example of the potential for transcendence of the art over language. He insists on the particulars of the story which is linked to theater (and more specifically, to his radical "theater of cruelty," where the spectators are killed simply because they are looking at a spectacle of destruction.)

## Marx Brothers

The Marx Brothers were siblings born in New York the late 19th century to Jewish parents of German origins. The brothers teamed up to become stage comedians before eventually developing a successful career in Hollywood as movie actors. They owe much of their success to their strange sense of humor, which used unpredictable language associations and dissociations in order to shock the public. In *The Theater and its Double*, Antonin Artaud refers to two of the Marx Brothers movies: "Animal Crackers" and "Monkey Business."

"Animal Crackers," released in 1930 by Paramount, was the brothers' second movie. It featured the four brothers and was based on a Broadway show that the actors performed a few years earlier. A dinner party, held in honor of a famed Africa explorer (Groucho Marx), goes wildly mad when a very expensive painting disappears. "Monkey Business," released a year later, was the team's third Hollywood production for



Paramount. The plot revolves around the four brothers as stowaways aboard a transatlantic ship.

In the first of the "Two Notes" chapter, Artaud uses a critique point of view to deliver an ode to the Marx Brothers. He says that "[t]he poetic spirit in action tends to a sort of bubbling anarchy, a total dismantling of the real through poetry." In other words, the Marx Brothers are an example of the potential of humor to be used as a poetic revolt against the social norms. Although the author's enthusiasm for the talent of the Vaudeville actors is understandable, given that the note was written in the 1930s; the movies, which starred the Marx Brothers, really were little more than the production of intelligent slapstick humor. However, Artaud distances himself from the Brothers and the director(s) of the movie, who may (or may not) have had any intent other than delivering humor. He says that it matters little what the critiques and the public think about the movies, as long as they can be felt as liberating by some. Artaud never associates the movies with his "theater of cruelty," but only with the Surrealist movement. In fact, notwithstanding the fact that they are not theater but cinema, the movies of the Marx Brothers are almost excessively talkative and they rely entirely on a type of humor based on standard dialogs - two factors that should immediately disqualify them as valid representatives of the 'pure' theater sought by the author.

## **Saint-Rémys**

Saint-Rémys is the name of the Sardinia's Viceroy. Saint-Rémys is mentioned at the beginning of the chapter called "The Theater and the Plague."

## **Jean-Louis Barrault**

Jean-Louis Barrault is a French mime of the early twentieth century. Jean-Louis Barrault's creation "Autour d'une mère" is the subject of the second of the "Two Notes."

## **St. Augustine**

St. Augustine is the name of the renowned medieval Christian author of The City of God mentioned in The Theater and the Plague.

## **Jacques Rivière**

Jacques Rivière is the name of the French publisher who first printed Artaud's poetry. A lot of influential literary material left from Antonin Artaud's can be found in the letters that the author exchanged with Rivière. Rivière is mentioned in the "In Memoriam" chapter that closes The Theater and its Double.



## **Germaine Dulac**

Germaine Dulac produced the first and only movie based on a scenario written by Antonin Artaud. The movie, "The Seashell and the Clergyman," is the first "surrealist" movie ever made and was first shown in France in 1926. Dulac is mentioned in the "In Memoriam" chapter that closes *The Theater and its Double*.

## **Maurice Saillet**

Maurice Saillet is the name of a friend of Antonin Artaud. Saillet wrote the closing chapter of *The Theater and its Double* to the memory of his friend.

## **Hieronymus Bosch**

Hieronymus Bosch was a Flemish painter known for his awkward scenes representing a multitude of deformed characters. Bosch is mentioned a few times in *The Theater and its Double*.

## **Shakespeare**

Shakespeare was an English author of theater plays. Artaud uses him as an example of those "masterpieces" that theater has to get rid of in order to renew itself.

## **Leon-Paul Fargue**

Leon-Paul Fargue was a French poet, contemporary of Antonin Artaud. He is mentioned in the first manifesto of "*The Theater of Cruelty*" as an example of extreme poetic freedom.

## **Marquis de Sade**

The Marquis de Sade was a French author of the nineteenth century who gave his name to a sexual perversion. The Marquis is mentioned in the first manifesto of "*The Theater of Cruelty*" as an example of extreme use of eroticism in literature.



# Objects/Places

## Balinese theater

Balinese theater is a form of physical theater practiced by the people of Bali, an island of Indonesia.

## Sardinia

Sardinia is a province of France. It is mentioned in the early part of the first chapter, "The Theater and the Plague."

## Marseille

Marseille is a city of France where a plague decimated forty thousands inhabitants in 1720. It is mentioned in "The Theater and the Plague." It is also the birthplace of Antonin Artaud.

## Grand-Saint-Antoine

The Grand-Saint-Antoine is the name of the boat that brought the source virus of the Oriental plague that decimated the city of Marseille (France) in 1720.

## Exposition Coloniale

The Exposition Coloniale (Colonial Exposition) was a exposition of the arts, crafts and industries of the French colonies. Antonin Artaud visited the exposition in Paris in 1931 and was able to see a representation of traditional Balinese Theater. This representation greatly influenced the writer's theory about theater.

## Mexico

Mexico is the location of a fictional play mentioned by Antonin Artaud, which he refers to as the first spectacle of the Theater of Cruelty. A brief synopsis of this play is given in "The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)" as an example.

## Chinese Ideograms

Ideograms are graphic characters that represent concepts and ideas through physical similarities linking objects to ideas.



## **Egyptian Hieroglyphs**

Egyptian Hieroglyphs are a cursive writing system used in religious literature. The graphic characters or symbols represent objects which are linked semantically to words in spoken language.

## **Rodez**

Rodez is the name of the mental institution which treated Antonin Artaud from 1938 to 1946. It is named in the last chapter of "The Theater and its Double."

## **Stage**

The stage is where everything happens during a theater play. The stage can take many shapes and forms. The stage is used extensively to define the physical space around which Artaud's theory of a physical theater is built.



# Themes

## Pure Theater

Pure art can be defined by the following requirements: the absence of elements that do not belong natively to this type of art—such as literature, poetry or painting in theater—and the absence of a practical goal, meaning that pure theater must be an art in and by itself. *The Theater and its Double* was written as a call to revolutionize a stagnant form of theater and to turn it into an art form that is more 'pure.' In the book, the author states that theater should not be considered an imitation of the day-to-day life, but rather as the double of another reality that is more dangerous and, in a way, more real than the one that is experienced daily. Artaud's reasoning reverses the common conception that art imitates life. Instead, he asserts that life imitates a transcendental principle which somehow communicates with theater on a spiritual level. This principle is difficult to grasp and is at the heart of the complexity of Artaud's theory. Indeed, it seems to fall under common sense that theater is merely an imitation of what goes on in real life. But if Artaud is right, then what is it that the spectator is looking at?

Artaud wants to purge theater of all the elements that do not belong specifically to the theatrical art. Dialogs belong to the art of talking and writing, and not specifically to the art of the stage. In other words, dialogs belong to books. Artaud says that the essence of theater is the space that allows physical movement. He thinks that scripting theater is keeping the mind of the spectator from moving among the shapes like a long breath. Since writing crystallizes the spirit and sculpts it into a fixed shape, theater soon turns into the equivalent of idol worship. Real theater, like real culture, is never in the writing, because writing locks the spirit inside the text. Once an idea is written down on paper, it will persist as a dead entity, but this cannot happen on the stage. Yet in his quest for pure theater, Artaud cannot completely abandon language. Instead of restricting the possibilities of theater, he is trying to extend the language of the scene and to induce a new language, independent and autonomous from the spoken language.

In essence, the ideal (and yet fictional) theater as defined by Antonin Artaud can only exist when theater creates a scene on a stage which has its own, irreplaceable meaning; a meaning which never repeats itself. Pure theater requires a closed space in which nothing ever repeats and everything is in harmony and has a meaning of its own.

## The End of the Spoken Language

Artaud's quest for a "pure" form of theater starts with a rejection of spoken and written language as its basis. The author points out that articulated language is the foundation of the Occidental view of theater. He adds that the problem is inherent to spoken language: it is a type of communication that is entirely abstract. Moreover, spoken language has lost all its power with regards to reality itself. Artaud says that there is a definite distortion between the reality as it is experienced on a daily basis and the reality





that is expressed through language. The articulated language is a code which was frozen in time generations ago. For this reason, words lost their original capability to summon meaning as well as their musical power and their ability to recall emotions.

Antonin Artaud rejects the traditional use of language in three steps. First, he rejects theater based on authored text, whether it is written, spoken or otherwise articulated. His rejection encompasses language as it is conceived in the theater in every Western culture. He rejects it in part because written language is related to psychology, which can only be useless. Artaud refuses the traditional approach to theater which was prevalent in the 1930's. He wants theater to convey its message outside of all psychology. The spectator should not have to identify himself with the characters that are analyzed on the stage. In fact, in Artaud's conception of pure theater, the message should instead be purely intellectual - delivered, ironically, through purely physical forms.

Antonin Artaud first joined the French Surrealists but later abandoned them, in part because they insisted on using spoken language and common dialogues while they were rejecting both. He also rejects the classics (or masterpieces), which he sees as frozen in time and irrelevant, and he wants to renew this brand of theater with a more modern form that would completely break away with the past traditions. Finally, the author rejects the type of theater which is elaborated around pre-written text, whether this text is classic or modern. He insists that theater must rely solely on physical media; anything else is seen as a perversion of the original intent of theater.

The new language of theater must speak to the spectator's senses as well as his mind. Everything that appears on the stage must speak to the spectator: lighting, costumes, colors, props, etc. The work of the 'metteur en scène' is thus to combine these elements in order to create a language particular to the current play. This is why Artaud prefers sign language to spoken language. He is greatly inspired by Oriental theater (and more specifically Balinese Theater) because this particular brand of theater is coded like hieroglyphs. Objects are associated with ideas without resorting to spoken or written words: for instance, a bird with one eye closed represents the night. Meaning becomes a product of the work that is performed on stage, and not the result of a scripted text. This work would allow the spectator to discover meaning without words, thus putting him in contact with the act of creation.

Finally, it should be noted that while most of Artaud's work on revolutionizing theater had a great influence on the next generations of theater actors, creators and directors alike, his radical stance toward spoken language (or its elimination thereof) did not catch on as much as he probably hoped.

## **Oriental Theater**

Artaud was looking for a language that allowed a mode of representation that would free theater from the limits of the spoken and written language. He found the basis of such a language in oriental theater, and more specifically in Balinese theater. Balinese theater

is performed by the people of Bali, an island in Indonesia. Balinese theater is almost exclusively made of physical movements and dance, facial expressions, music and sounds. This form of theater does not rely on spoken words in any meaningful way. Seeing this traditional theater allowed Artaud to further explore his critic of the dominance of the written language.

Two articles included in *The Theater and its Double* relates to the eastern culture: "On the Balinese Theater," written in 1931, and "Oriental and Occidental Theater," which was written a few years later. Artaud argues that there is a fundamental difference between the occidental and the oriental cultures. Where the former relies excessively on the spoken language, the latter uses an entirely different mode of scenic expression, namely a physical language. In looking for the purest possible form of theatrical expression, Artaud aims to use a language that only includes "everything that exists in the air of the stage, which is measured and circumscribed by that air and has a density in space - movement, shapes, colors, vibrations, attitudes, screams" (Chapter IV, p. 56) More specifically, he wants to purge theater from the limits of everything from non-theatrical elements such as dialogs, spoken words and speeches. He finds the source of such a theater in the Balinese theater.

Such a physical language, developed specifically for theater, would stand opposite the spoken (articulated) language, as something closer to the types of visual and auditory expression not mediated by words. The visual expression of signs and gestures counters writing on the scene. If we tear off speech from the scene, the actors will have nothing left to use but their body. Artaud seems to suggest that spoken language is like a blind alley; in fact, he wants to transform speech in such a way that it can express more than it does in the world outside of the theater. He looks forward to establishing a grammar in gesture, an entirely new language for which rules do not yet exist. In so doing, he would suppress words and creates an entirely new physical language that does not make sense outside the theater space. He treats signs as another element of this new theatrical language. Signs would have a 'plastic,' almost ideographic meaning. In this, he mimics Balinese Theater. He says that this would allow signs to work in a way similar to the hieroglyphs found on antique Egyptian tablets; like a series of pictures that construct a meaning as they scroll on the scene.

# Style

## Perspective

Antonin Artaud was an incredibly talented artist. He excelled as an actor, writer and poet. He was a renowned cinema actor in the early 1920s, yet he abandoned his acting career in cinema when sound was added to movies. Because his work was mostly theoretical, he also had an enormous influence on the modern trends in philosophy which are related to the domain of arts. Artaud was a complex character who struggled with deep personality and psychological problems. During his lifetime, his successes were enormous, but his failures turned out to be much worse, both in terms of personal and public achievements. Given his personality and situation, he was more at ease with writing poetry than with delivering extended narrative and precise descriptions. Antonin Artaud writes using a very dense prose that relies on the power of association to convey its message. His arguments are not necessarily crystal clear, partly because his theories appear to be in constant development and refinement. For instance, he wrote two versions of a manifesto called Theater of Cruelty, both of which are included in *The Theater and its Double*.

For all his problems, he was also a genius in his own time and one that since had an enormous influence, not only on the delivery of theater, but also on every other type of art as well. His call for a purer, more original form of theater was neither the first nor the last of its kind; many similar cries since came from different corners of the world, calling for the radical renewal of theater, cinema, painting, sculpture, or any other fixed form of artful expression. Still not an easy read, *The Theater and its Double* remains one of the most powerful calls for a revolution within the arts in general, and within theater in particular. Sadly, such a call needs to be heard again and again so that the world keeps on turning and theater keeps renewing itself.

Finally, much like the 'pure' theater that he calls for, Artaud's writing needs to be understood at a deeper, almost spiritual level. As much as the author insists on the fact that theater has to be 'felt' on a physical level by the spectators, *The Theater and its Double* needs to be felt as a cry for a mode of expression that is more real and ultimately freer. Admittedly, theater is no different than every other type of art. It is constantly struggling against its own tendency to turn into a commercial endeavor; an endeavor whose only concern it to manipulate the spectator into accepting as valid an unchallenging repetition of the same. And as long as that will be the case, then Artaud's call for a renewal will be necessary.

## Tone

*The Theater and its Double* is a collection of texts aimed at establishing the basis of a new theory of theater. The tone varies from one chapter to the other, but it is generally as confrontational as it is radical and revolutionary. A few of these texts were originally



published as articles in literary magazines and are written in a somewhat aggressive style. The sections which were lifted out of personal correspondence between the author and his friends are less confrontational and more nuanced. The book is entirely written in the first person. This means that every sentence and idea involves the author directly and personally. The language is purposely non-technical and the text never mentions by name a technique specific to theater. The entire book could be applied to any other type of art without the need to fundamentally alter the content of the book.

Antonin Artaud was an experienced actor and theater director who held on firmly to the belief that theater had to be renewed from the bottom up. In order to drive his point, Artaud will generally begin his texts by associating theater with the most extreme situations in life, such as a viral disease (the plague) or a human trait considered dangerous (cruelty). He takes a stance that is both revolutionary and radical; for instance, his theory calls for the abolishment of every previous form of theater (as conceived in the Occidental culture). Instead of building up his arguments slowly and methodically, Artaud prefers to state his opinions or concepts boldly, in their most radical form, from the very start. He then proceeds to construct his argumentation based on examples. This upside-down approach, combined with the use of a dense poetic vocabulary and frequent references to mythology and History, makes Artaud's theory difficult to grasp at first.

Antonin Artaud was a radical theorist who, for psychological and physical reasons, never managed to come up with a concrete product or play that would be able to illustrate his points. He left it to others to figure out the actual working rules of his intended "new" theater.

## Structure

The Theater and its Double is a collection of articles and essays written by Antonin Artaud in the 1920s. The material was written and published in French in 1938; the English translation, which was published twenty years later, follows the original text very closely. Many of these essays were originally published in magazines as commentaries or reviews related to then-current cultural events. The Theater and its Double spreads over 13 separate essays; it opens with a preface authored by Antonin Artaud, and closes with an overview of the author's career and life written by one of the author's friend, Maurice Saillet.

The book's first five chapters lay the theoretical foundation for a 'new' theater. In these chapters, the author defines theater's limits within the Occidental culture. He then elaborates on the goals and methods of what would be a new, totally revamped form of theater, but keeps from giving concrete examples of what should be interpreted as valid theater. Starting with chapter six, the author lays out the principles of a "theater of cruelty" using examples and concepts which he gathers from many cultural sources.

The translation never strays very far from the original French syntax and style. This choice on the part of the translator keeps the original flavor of the text but makes the



author's arguments quite difficult to follow at times. For instance, the sentences vary greatly in length and structure according to the author's mood and the depth of his arguments. When the argumentation becomes complex or the concepts difficult to convey through a simple form, the sentences become both lengthy and complicated. At times, intricate sentences span the length of a whole paragraph. While laying out his arguments for a renewed form of theater, the author reuses the same concepts many times over during a single chapter, presenting every instance of the concept from a different angle or under a different light. Some of these concepts are also purposely ill-defined, as if the work was left unfinished.

The goal of Artaud's theory of 'real' and 'pure' theater is to create the rules of a language that is specifically tailored to the art of the stage. His aim is to use this composite, concrete language to express the emotions, ideas and concepts that cannot be properly expressed anywhere but on stage and which cannot be conveyed by other, more easily recognizable linguistic form (i.e., in speech or in a written form). In the end, Artaud's radical theory, which leads to the rejection of centuries of written theater, suffers from the same problem of 'inexpressibility' (or fuzziness) that plagues the 'pure' theater when it tries to bring emotions and metaphysical conflicts to the mind of the spectator.



## Quotes

"No one can say why the plague strikes the coward who flees it and spares the degenerate who gratifies himself on the corpses." (Chapter The Theater and the Plague, p. 22)

"If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized." (Chapter The Theater and the Plague, p. 30)

"In any case, and I hasten to say it at once, a theater which subordinates the mise en scène and production, i.e., everything in itself that is specifically theatrical, to the text, is a theater of idiots, madmen, inverters, grammarians, grocers, antipoets and positivists, i.e., Occidentals." (Chapter Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène, p. 41)

"[...] the possibilities for realization in the theater relate entirely to the mise en scène considered as a language in space and in movement." (Chapter Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène, p. 45)

"[...] this does not condemn the Oriental theater, but it condemns us, and along with us the state of things in which we live and which is to be destroyed, destroyed with diligence and malice on every level and at every point where it prevents the free exercise of thought." (Chapter Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène, p. 47)

"There is no transition from a gesture to a cry or a sound: all the senses interpenetrate, as if through strange channels hollowed out in the mind itself!" (Chapter On Balinese Theater, p. 57)

"In a word, to raise the question of the intellectual efficacy of expression by means of objective forms, of the intellectual efficacy of a language which would use only shapes, or noise, or gesture, is to raise the question of the intellectual efficacy of art." (Chapter Oriental and Occidental Theater, p. 69)

"Written poetry is worth reading once, and then should be destroyed." (Chapter No More Masterpieces, p. 78)

"We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all." (Chapter No More Masterpieces, p. 79)

"Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds." (Chapter The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto), p. 99)

"It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death." (Letters on Cruelty, p. 102)



"A play in which there would not be this will, this blind appetite for life capable of overriding everything, visible in each gesture and each act and in the transcendent aspect of the story, would be a useless and unfulfilled play." (Chapter Letters on Cruelty, p. 103)

"I will do what I have dreamed or I will do nothing." (Chapter Letters on Language, p. 117)

"Space is stuffed with whirling gestures, horrible faces, dying eyes, clenched fists, manes, breastplates, and from all levels of the scene fall limbs, breastplates, heads, stomachs like a hailstorm bombarding the earth with supernatural explosions." (Chapter The Theater of Cruelty, Second Manifesto, p. 130)

"And through the hieroglyph of a breath I am able to recover an idea of the sacred theater." (Chapter An Affective Athleticism, p. 141)



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the commercialization of the arts in general. Why do people prefer cinema to theater? What are the advantages of theater compared to cinema, if any? Which media is closer to life?

Besides theater, can you name other types of art that are based on pre-written texts (or scripts)? Do you think it would be possible (or even useful) to take the scripted text away from them and still come up with a valid product?

Antonin Artaud personally suffered from major physical and psychological disorders as well as drug addiction. Obviously, his problems affected the way he perceived theater. Do you think that these personal problems tainted his theory to the point of invalidating it?

Pick a theme randomly and write a script for a short play (30 seconds or less) based on the principles in Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty." Discuss and compare versions between teams or students.

Can theater express concepts and ideas without resorting to spoken dialogues? How much freedom should actors have when delivering a theater play?

How does television, cinema and video relate to theater? Discuss if the kind of criticism delivered by Antonin Artaud to theater is applicable in the context of other, more modern types of communication and arts.

Artaud maintains that a play based on the principles of 'pure' theater would be at least as successful as any other theater play based on pre-written texts. Do you think people would willfully submit to the 'cruelty' of such a play, delivered without spoken words?