

Artaud and Balinese Theatre, or the Influence of the Eastern on the Western Stage

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बोदों-महाभागा फ्रेज्च-नाट्यनिदेशकस्य आतों इत्यस्य बहुमुख-
प्रज्ञाशालित्वं निरूप्य, विंशशताब्द्याः सर्वोत्कृष्टनाटककाररूपेण
नाट्यशास्त्रविशेषज्ञरूपेण च तं प्रतिष्ठाप्य परिणतावस्थायां बालिदेशीय-
दृश्यकाव्यसन्दर्शनेन तदीयनाट्यशास्त्रसिद्धान्ते सञ्जातं विपरिणामं
विशदीकृत्य भारतीय-बालीय-नाट्यशास्त्रसिद्धान्तानां महत्त्वं, प्रभावं
सार्वकालिकत्वज्य निर्गमयति।

Many are those who view the French poet Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) as the twentieth century's most radical influence on the Western stage. In *Le théâtre et son double* (*The Theatre and its Double*), the most famous of his writings, he attempts to redefine the nature and the purpose of drama, what the theatrical reaction of audiences should be — an experience to shake their certainty of everyday existence — and how actors should approach their work. Peter Brook (whose adaptation of the *Mahābhārata* was staged in the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, located in the heart of the Indian quarter of Paris), Grotowski, the Polish director,¹ the Royal Shakespeare Company, and many others have used Artaud's theories in their work, and in colleges of drama, everywhere, Artaud is obligatory reading.

The author of *The Theatre of Cruelty*² has met a cruel destiny. Indeed, Antonin Artaud was an exceptionally gifted man, a poet, a playwright, a drawer of talent, whose self-portraits are strikingly powerful, and most of all a man of the stage. Successively associated with the symbolist Lugné-Poe, director of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, with Charles Dullin, who had just founded the Théâtre de l'Atelier, and with Georges and Ludmilla Pitoëff, at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, Artaud founded and

1. In Artaud's wake, Grotowski staged *Śakuntalā* (1960), aiming at ironically showing to West the stereotyped image of Eastern theater that it generally builds.
2. One of the essays of *The Theatre and its Double*.

directed in 1926-28 the Théâtre Alfred Jarry (after the name of the founder of the Absurd Theatre). To the activities of theatre director and playwright (his adaptation of Shelley's *The Cenci* premiered in 1935), Artaud adds those of theoretician (*The Theatre and its Double*) and of actor in theatre and movies: notably, he appeared, in 1927, as Marat in Abel Gance's 'epic film', *Napoléon*, in 1928, in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, in the role of the monk Massieu, and, in 1935, in Gance's *Lucrèce Borgia*, as Savonarole, the vehement and doomed prophet — all 'ignited' roles. Although Simone Breton describes him as an actor 'beautiful as a wave, moving as a catastrophe',¹ he was also harshly criticised for the excesses of his acting, what was seen as the 'suracuité de son interprétation'.

Yet, in spite of so many talents, or, perhaps, because of them, Artaud suffered from nervous troubles, that is to say, from a bordering on insanity, which varied in degree and form throughout his life, taking him from asylum to asylum, till his death.

Although he associated for some time with the twentieth century's surrealist movement, he was too independent a spirit to remain linked with any school of thought. His only lasting link was with symbolist theatre (which appeared in France at the very end of the nineteenth century). In the light of my familiarity with Indian and Western aesthetics, it appears to me that symbolist theatre shares more than one feature with the aesthetics of Indian drama, although neither the theoreticians of the symbolist movement nor Artaud were aware of it. It may be noted, nevertheless, that, in their search for a genuine, archaic and ideal drama, the Symbolists included an Indian drama in their repertory, the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, the best-known Indian play, to Western minds, after *Śakuntalā*.²

In 1931, Artaud attended a performance of Balinese theatre, given in Paris at the occasion of the Colonial Exhibition. It was, for Artaud, an aesthetic shock, from which proceeded all his

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1. Letter of Simone Breton to Denise Naville, dated 3rd October 1924, in Henri Béhar, *André Breton, le grand indésirable*, Paris: Fayard, 2005.
 2. On symbolist theatre, see Jacques Robichez, *Le symbolisme au théâtre. Lugné-Poe et les débuts de l'Œuvre*. Paris: L'Arche, 1957.

reflexion on theatre. In fact, his article entitled ‘Sur le théâtre balinais’ ('On the Balinese Theatre') is the first of all the essays which Artaud will later publish under the title of *The Theatre and its Double*, his *magnum opus*, in 1938.¹

Thus, it can be said that Balinese theatre has been the catalyst of Artaud's thinking on theatre. Artaud pays a vibrant homage to the performance:

The first Balinese theatre presentation derives from dance, singing, mime and music – but extraordinarily little from psychological theatre such as we understand it in Europe, re-establishing theatre, from a hallucinatory and fearful angle, on a purely independent, creative level.

Even though Artaud's text, which is as much a poem as a manifesto, reiterates his condemnation of contemporary Western theatre as verbal (i.e. verbose) and psychological (what Peter Brook will later call the ‘deadly theatre’), yet, the emphasis is put on what had struck Artaud as corresponding to his own vision of ‘real’ theatre: 1) the idea of a pure theatre in which staging is preeminent; 2) the creation of a new physical language based on ‘signs’: the actors being no longer thought of as verbal articulators but as ‘spiritual signs’ and ‘living hieroglyphs’; 3) a mental alchemy transforming a state of mind into an abstract gesture; 4) the spontaneous improvisation replaced by a mathematical precision extremely controlled and extremely ancient; 5) the requirement of extreme convention; 6) a theatre both popular and spiritual, akin to ritual; 7) the need of total theatre.

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1. It contains: 1) ‘Le Théâtre et la peste’ ('Theatre and the Plague') 1933; 2) ‘La Mise en scène et la métaphysique’ ('Production and Metaphysics') December 1931; 3) ‘Le Théâtre alchimique’ ('The Alchemic Theatre') 1932; 4) ‘Sur le théâtre balinais’ ('On the Balinese Theatre') October 1931; 5) ‘Le Théâtre oriental et le théâtre occidental’ ('Eastern and Western Theatre') between 1932 and 1935; 6) ‘En Finir avec les chefs-d’œuvre’ ('No More Masterpieces') 1933; 7) ‘Théâtre et cruauté’ ('Theatre and Cruelty') May 1933; 8) ‘Le Théâtre de la cruauté’ [premier manifeste] ('The Theatre of Cruelty' [First Manifesto]) 1932; 9) ‘Deux Lettres sur la cruauté’ ('Two letters on Cruelty'); 10) ‘Le Théâtre de la cruauté’ [second manifeste] ('The Theatre of Cruelty' [Second Manifesto]) 1933; 11) ‘Un Athlétisme affectif’ ('An Affective Athleticism') 1935; 12) ‘Le Théâtre de Séraphin’ ('Seraphim’s Theatre') 1936.

From now on, I will extensively quote Artaud, in translation — an arduous task, for his words are those of a poet endowed with a sharp vision, words unusually suited to his unprecedented vision. What strikes the reader of Artaud who is aware of Eastern theatre, whether Balinese or Indian, is the soundness of Artaud's intuitions and his deep and immediate understanding of a form that was quite new to him.

I will start with a long description in which Artaud manifests the acute sensitivity of a spectator who is also a poet:

In fact the strange thing about all these gestures, these angular, sudden, jerky postures, these syncopated inflexions formed at the back of the throat, these musical phrases cut short, the shattered flights, rustling branches, hollow drum sounds, robot creaking, dances of animated puppets, is that: through the maze of gestures, postures, airborne cries, through their gyrations and turns, leaving not even the smallest area of stage space unused, the meaning of a new bodily language no longer based on words but on signs emerges. Those actors with their geometrical robes look like *living hieroglyphs*.¹

And, Artaud continues :

These spiritual signs have an exact meaning that only strikes one intuitively, but violently enough to make any translation into logical, discursive language useless.

Here, for the first time, the seminal concept of Cruelty appears, with the adverb 'violently'. Cruelty, the favorite concept of Artaud, is but the 'violence' inherent in true theatre, which permits us to discover the reality under, or above, reality. Thus Artaud observes in the *First Manifesto for a Theatre of Cruelty* (1932):

No theatre is possible without an element of cruelty as its basis. In our present state of degeneration, it is through our skin that metaphysics will enter our minds.

As already alluded to in his text on the Balinese Theatre ('... re-establishing theatre, from a hallucinatory and fearful angle

1. From now on I am emphasising Artaud's key-words or key-sentences by means of italics. The English translation with postface by Calder Publications (*The Theatre and its Double: Essays by Antonin Artaud: Translated by Victor Corti*, London: Calder Publications, 1970) has been a useful reading wherefrom I have borrowed several translations of Artaud's texts, sometimes with emendations.

...'), Artaud wishes to awake in the spectator a state of hallucination and fear, to 'bring him face to face with an action, but without practical consequences'.

Thus Artaud contrasts reality and realism: realism being condemned as the essence of Western theatre; reality, specially, a higher reality, or the highest, being celebrated as the essence of Eastern theatre. In other words, Western theatre is physical, Eastern theatre metaphysical, inasmuch as it 'impos[es] on our minds something like the idea of a metaphysics coined from a new usage of gestures and speech'.

I will limit myself to quoting passages in which Artaud's analysis corresponds strikingly to Indian dramatic aesthetics, which is even more remarkable inasmuch as he knew little or nothing about Indian dramatic theory — unless it was through the intermediary of his friend René Daumal. The surrealist poet, who had taught himself Sanskrit, indeed brought out in 1935 a translation of a passage in the first chapter of the *Nātyasāstra*, which recounts the origin of Indian theater.¹ Was any of this earlier discussed with Artaud? This, of course, is nothing but speculation, and it detracts not a bit from the power of Artaud's insights.

However that may be, one has the feeling, while reading *The Theatre and its double*, that the Indian universe inhabits a part of Artaud's imagination, as might indicate, for example, his notion of the actor as an 'affective athlete'² the basis of whose performance is breath control — a notion that perhaps reflects the influence of another of Artaud's contemporaries, René Guénon.

Thus I will attempt to show how the dramatic principles that Artaud has derived from Balinese theatre correspond to the strictures of Indian dramatic theory. For instance, a statement such as: 'The play does not develop through the sentiments but through states of mind, themselves ossified and reduced into gestures that are outlines' seems to echo Indian aesthetics, as applied to drama, namely the notion that *rasas*, which are the

1. *L'origine du théâtre de Bharata*, written in 1935, published in *Bharata: L'origine du Théâtre. La Poésie et la Musique en Inde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

2. See 'An Affective Athletism' in *The Theatre and its double*.

sublimated *bhāvas* of ordinary life, are to be translated into *abhinaya*.¹

Not only has he recognised the formal perfection of the Balinese performance, that is, the perfection of its bodily gestures and facial renderings, but he has intuitively discovered the spiritual fountain from which emerges such a notion of gesture; in Indian terms, he has discovered the *sāttvikābhinaya* underlying the *āngikābhinaya*.² Likewise, he has understood that such a refined and conventional art is the product of a tradition:

One of the reasons for our delight in this *faultless* show lies precisely in the use these actors make of an exact amount of assured gesture, tried and tested mime coming in at the appointed place, and even more [and here comes the notion of *sāttvikābhinaya*] in the *spiritual clothing* [in French: ‘enrobement spirituel’], that is, in the deep shaded study which governs the elaboration of those mimics, of those effective signs, giving us the impression that their effectiveness has not become weakened *over the centuries*.

And, about convention, Artaud rightly observes :

The Balinese theatre, with gestures and a variety of mime to suit all occasions in life reinstate the superior value of theatre conventions, demonstrate the effectiveness and greater active value of a certain number of well-learnt and above all masterfully applied conventions.

I should add that the description applies as well to the very elaborate system of Indian dramatic conventions (*dharma*), as expounded in the *Nātyasāstra* (thirteenth chapter). There are two orders of convention, the *nātyadharmī* presenting a higher degree of stylisation than the *lokadharmī*.³

One can marvel at such lucidity. A few hours performance is enough to understand that such a codified art, from which improvisation appears to be excluded, far from being dry and hollow repetition, becomes all the more vivid, deriving its

1. On this process and the four registers of the *abhinaya*, see Lyne Bansat-Boudon, *Poétique du théâtre indien: Lectures du Nātyasāstra*. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (Publ. EFEO 169), 1992: 109-117, 145-155.
2. On the *sāttvikābhinaya*, see Lyne Bansat-Boudon, *op. cit.*: 148.
3. On the two *dharma*s, see Lyne Bansat-Boudon, *op. cit.*: 155-169.

wonderful richness and variety from stability itself. Artaud concludes:

We get a marvellous feeling of richness, fantasy, and bounteous lavishness emanating from this show regulated with a maddeningly awareness of the details.

In the same way, Artaud has grasped the main feature of this theatre: it is total theatre, as Indian drama also is¹ — a concept that, from now on, Artaud will make his own, and which he will try to put into practice, as well as will also his ‘post-modern’ followers. How aptly he speaks of the correlations manifested in the Balinese presentation!:

The most imperious correlations burst forth from sight to earing, from intellect to sensitivity, from a character’s gesture to the evocation of a plant’s movements through the aid of the cry of a musical instrument.

And he concludes with an encomium of Eastern theatre, which is, at the same time, a condemnation of the Western:

Our theatre has never grasped this gestured metaphysics nor known how to make use of music for so direct, so concrete, dramatic purposes. *Our purely verbal theatre, unaware of the sum total of theatre*, that is, of everything that exists spatially, that is measured and circumscribed in space, having spatial density — I mean: movements, forms, colours, vibrations, postures, shouts —, *that theatre of ours could learn a lesson in spirituality from the Balinese theatre* with regard to what is indeterminable and depends on the mind’s suggestive power.

I will stop my quotations here. As I have attempted to show, the triumph of the Balinese theatre celebrated by Artaud is to from extent that of Indian theatre as well. Whatever may be the historical relation of Balinese to Indian theatre, it is indubitable that they share the same principles, conventions, and the same idea of what makes for good theatre. Conceived as total art, theatre participates in and derives from a tradition which privileges a relaxed sense of time, an extreme artificiality of

1. On Indian drama as total theatre — text and acting, associated with song, music and dance — and the corresponding myth of origin, see Lyne Bansat-Boudon (ed.), *Théâtre de l’Inde ancienne*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de La Pléiade), 2006: xxxiv-xxxv.

convention, and reserves a crucial place for the techniques of acting.

This Balinese presentation was not the first appearance of Eastern theatre in France. Already, on the occasion of the Universal Exhibition of 1889, a troupe of Javanese dancers gave performances in Paris. In 1906, Auguste Rodin, the famous sculptor, painted a Cambodian danseuse, a painting which anticipates Artaud's apt description twenty-five years later of the Balinese practice. Yet, the true meeting of Eastern and Western theatre awaited Artaud, his poetical vision and theoretical insight.

Let us recapitulate what Artaud retained from witnessing the Balinese theatre as he attempted to build his theory for renewing the Western stage. Theatre should be a theatre of exaggerated theatricality, making use of extreme convention, of stylised gestures, of masks, of shouts rather than words, a '*théâtre de la démesure*' (as it is formulated in French), that is, a theatre of exaggeration, which paradoxically would be regulated excess, a theatre which is nothing but the actor, which can do without everything but the actor (that is, which can do without settings, props, etc.), a theatre in which the actor signifies — 'makes sign', or, in other words, makes sense.

Such was the impulsion given to Artaud's thought by the Balinese theatre. Yet, the introduction of cruelty makes Artaud's conception of theatre altogether original and distinct from the Eastern. A cruelty which is also that of his own destiny — his 'insanity' — as well as that of his time and place — Europe between the wars, source of the atrocities that will follow.

Could such a high idea of theatre be put into practice in the West? Wasn't it doomed to fail, just as failed, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the symbolist ideal of 'pure theatre'?

Contrary to expectation, Artaud's demanding idea of theatre not only survived, but has a long and vivid posterity, mainly due to three concepts: the concept of total theatre, that of a theatre of cruelty, and that of a curative, that is, cathartic, theatre, able to disturb all routine, to reveal the true reality, to lance abscesses, as the metaphor of the plague does for Artaud

(see ‘Theatre and the Plague’). It is in this way that Artaud renews Aristotle’s concept of *catharsis*.

In the twentieth century, a body of critical and evaluative writing has developed which examines drama in all its aspects, especially its role as a factor in human evolution and as enriching life. Shaw, Stanislavsky, Piscator, Brecht, Grotowski, Kantor, Brook, are only a few of those who have written about the theatre, but no one has been more wide-ranging and powerful as Artaud — whose work and ideas have, incidentally, much influenced the last three named. According to Artaud, the fascination of the theatre, condemned by Saint-Augustine because of its power to drive men mad, lies in its ability to change the course of events: mankind prefers to live in an illusory world of security, believing that the fabric of social living and an ordered society protect it from the terrors of the unknown. The role of theatre must be to shake us out of our complacency and delusions of security.

The phrase most often associated with Artaud is the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’, title of a central chapter of *The Theatre and its Double*. Artaud’s followers have tried to put this concept into practice. For instance, Peter Brook’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ season, in 1964, gave London a taste of Artaudian theatre in its most didactic form. Theatre is pure poetry, disorientating the public from the certainties of everyday existence and taking them away. Artaud’s notion is that the theatre must above all concern itself with subject matter that is relevant to its time, and not only not ignore the horrors of the moment, but, if possible, portray them as even more horrible, with the aid of imagination. This means that acting styles must be extremely physical, as primitive as possible in showing the essential brutishness of man.

On the other hand, Artaud’s theatre is total theatre, a concept also envisaged by Piscator, Brecht and Claudel. In France, Jean-Louis Barrault, as actor and director, brought to the stage that total theatre, although without retaining its dimension of cruelty. Peter Brook, usually working with more limited means and a polyglot multi-ethnic company of actors, has created his own versions of total theatre, mainly by following the basic Artaudian principle of disturbing the audience’s complacent

certainty that it is just sitting in a theatre watching a play. Before he moved to France, there was often vociferous political objection from parts of the British public and the tabloid press, especially to his 'Theatre of Cruelty' season and such plays as *Marat/Sade* and *US*, the latter an attack on the American conduct of the Vietnam war. There have also been other 'Artaudian' companies, such as Julian Beck's Living Theatre.

Artaud's theatrical ideas, when put into practice, have the effect of galvanising the audience, making it more alive and aware, sometimes politicising it, but above all bringing an element of magic into life, with pure poetry as its major component. Beckett, Ionesco and the later 'Absurdist' playwrights such as Fernando Arrabal owe something to Artaud as do the directors associated with total and poetic theatre.

In a century that has known unparalleled savagery, the concept of cruelty as a means of artistic concentration should not be so alien or difficult to understand. It is not (or not just) a matter of bloodshed or sadism, crucified flesh or martyred enemies, but rather, in Artaud's words, of a 'strict control and submission to necessity'.

Artaud's aim was to take the theatre out of the context of mere entertainment and into that of education, or rather initiation into a higher spiritual reality.¹ It is in this sense that Jane Goodall has considered Artaud a modern Gnostic.²

The discovery of Eastern theatre was decisive for Artaud's theories, and Artaud retained as principles of his 'Theatre of Cruelty' features which we know to be characteristic of the Balinese theatre. Yet Artaud's theatre is cruel, in the sense that such cruelty proceeds from a tragic vision of man and the universe, a tragic vision which is altogether unknown in Asian theatre, whether Indonesian or Indian.³ As a theorist on theatre, Artaud remains, in spite of his extreme sensitivity to other forms

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1. For Artaud's followers, that higher reality was mainly political.
 2. Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
 3. On the absence of tragedy in Indian drama, see Lyne Bansat-Boudon (ed.), *Théâtre de l'Inde ancienne*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de La Pléiade), 2006: XLIII-XLVII and 1190-1192 (Notice on Bhāsa).

of thought or art, that is, to all forms of alterity, a man from West, for whom theatre is, in essence, tragedy.

To conclude, I would like to refer to an anecdote: it is said that, in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, the computer generated pictures were animated thanks to preliminary work which consisted in splitting up gestures of the Balinese dancers on video — a story that suggests that such gestures may be considered archetypes of movement. This is another example of the ways Asian theatre goes on having an impact on our 'post-modernity'.