



THE THEATRE AND ITS DOUBLE
ANTONIN ARTAUD

TRANSLATED BY VICTOR CORTI

ALMA CLASSICS

ANTONIN ARTAUD was born in Marseille in 1896 and died in Paris in 1948. He was an actor, poet, director and theatre critic. In 1927 he founded the Théâtre Alfred Jarry with Roger Vitrac. His influence is widespread in the theatre today, notably in the plays of Adamov, Audiberti, Camus and Genet, and in the productions of Barrault, Vilar and Peter Brook.

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*The Theatre and
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*Preface: Theatre and Culture**

AT A TIME WHEN LIFE ITSELF is in decline, there has never been so much talk about civilization and culture. And there is a strange correlation between this universal collapse of life at the root of our present-day demoralization and our concern for a culture that has never tallied with life but is made to tyrannize life.

Before saying anything further about culture, I consider the world is hungry and does not care about culture, and people artificially want to turn these thoughts away from hunger and direct them towards culture.

The most pressing thing seems to me not so much to defend a culture whose existence never stopped a man worrying about going hungry or about a better life, but to derive from what we term culture ideas, whose living power is the same as hunger.

Above all, we need to live and believe in what keeps us alive, to believe something keeps us alive, nor should every product of the mysterious recesses of the self be referred back to our grossly creature concerns.

What I mean is this: our immediate need is to eat, but it is even more important not to waste the pure energy of being hungry simply on satisfying that immediate need.

If confusion is a sign of the times, I see a schism between things and words underlying this confusion, between ideas and the signs that represent them.

We are not short of philosophical systems; their number and contradictions are a characteristic of our ancient French and European culture. But where do we see that life, our lives, have been affected by these systems?

I would not go so far as to say philosophical systems ought to be directly or immediately applied, but we ought to choose between the following:

Either these systems are a part of us and we are so steeped in them we live them; therefore, what use are books? Or we are not steeped in

them and they are not worth living. In that case what difference would their disappearance make?

I must insist on this idea of an active culture, a kind of second wind growing within us like a new organ, civilization as applied culture, governing even our subtlest acts, the spirit alive in things. The distinction between civilization and culture is artificial, for these two words apply to one and the same act.

We judge a civilized man by the way he behaves – he thinks as he behaves. But we are already confused about the words “civilized man”. Everyone regards a cultured, civilized man as someone informed about systems, who thinks in systems, forms, signs and representations.

In other words, a monster who has developed to an absurd degree that faculty of ours for deriving thoughts from actions instead of making actions coincide with thoughts.

If our lives lack fire and fervour, that is to say continual magic, this is because we choose to observe our actions, losing ourselves in meditation on their imagined form, instead of being motivated by them.

This faculty is exclusively human. I would even venture to say it was the infection of humanity which marred ideas that ought to have remained sacred. Far from believing man invented the supernatural and the divine, I think it was man’s eternal meddling that ended up in corrupting the divine.

At a time when nothing holds together in life any longer, when we must revise all our ideas about life, this painful separation is the reason why things take revenge on us, and the poetry we no longer have within us and are no longer able to rediscover in things suddenly emerges on the adverse side. Hence the unprecedented number of crimes whose pointless perversity can only be explained by our inability to master life.

Although theatre is made as an outlet for our repressions, a kind of horrible poetry is also expressed in bizarre acts, where changes in the facts of life show its intensity undiminished, needing only to be better directed.

But however we may cry out for magic, at heart we are afraid of pursuing life wholly under the sign of real magic.

Thus our deep-rooted lack of culture is surprised at certain awe-inspiring anomalies; for example, on an island out of contact with present-day civilization, the mere passage of a ship carrying only

healthy passengers can induce the outbreak of diseases unknown on that island but peculiar to our countries: shingles, influenza, grippe, rheumatism, sinusitis and polyneuritis.

Similarly, if we think Negroes smell, we are unaware that everywhere except in Europe, we, the whites, smell. I might even say we smell a white smell, white in the same way as we speak of “the whites”.

Just as iron turns white-hot, so we could say everything extreme is white. For Asians, white has become a mark of final decomposition.

Having said this, we can begin to form an idea of culture, above all a protest.

A protest against the insane constriction imposed on the idea of culture by reducing it to a kind of incredible Pantheon, producing an idolatry of culture and acting in the same way as idolatrous religions, which put their gods in Pantheons.

A protest against our idea of a separate culture, as if there were culture on the one hand and life on the other, as if true culture were not a rarefied way of understanding and exercising life.

Let them burn down the library at Alexandria. There are powers above and beyond papyri. We may be temporarily deprived of the ability to rediscover these powers, but we will never eliminate their energy. It is also a good thing too many facilities should disappear, and forms ought to be forgotten, then timeless, spaceless culture constrained by our nervous capacities will reappear with renewed energy. And it is only right that cataclysms should occur from time to time, prompting us to return to nature, that is to say, to rediscover life. The old totems – animals, rocks, objects charged with lightning, costumes impregnated with bestiality and everything that serves to catch, tap and direct forces – are dead to us, since we only know how to derive artistic or static profit from them, seeking gratification, not action.

Now totemism acts because it moves, it is made to be enacted. All true culture rests on totemism’s primitive, barbarous means, whose wild, that is to say, completely spontaneous life is what I mean to worship.

It was our Western idea of art and the profits we sought to derive from it that made us lose true culture. Art and culture cannot agree, contrary to worldwide usage!

True culture acts through power and exaltation, while the European ideal of art aims to cast us into a frame of mind distinct from the

power present in its exaltation. It is a useless, lazy idea and soon leads to death. The Serpent Quetzalcoatl's multiple coils give us a sense of harmony because they express balance, the twists and turns of sleeping power. The intensity of the form is only there to attract and captivate a power which, in music, produces an agonizing range of sound.

The gods that sleep in the museums: the Fire God with his incense burner resembling an Inquisition tripod, Tlaloc, one of the many Water Gods with his green granite walls, the Mother Goddess of the Waters, the Mother Goddess of the Flowers, the unchanging expression echoing from beneath many layers of water of the Goddess robed in green jade, the blissful, enrapt expression, features crackling with incense, where atoms of sunlight circle around the Mother Goddess of the Flowers. This world of obligatory servitude where stone comes to life because it has been properly carved, a world of organically civilized men – I mean those whose vital organs also awaken – this human world enters into us, we participate in the dance of the gods without turning round or looking back under penalty of becoming, like ourselves, crumbling figures of salt.

In Mexico, so long as we are talking about Mexico, there is no art and things are used. And the people are continually exalted.

Unlike our idea of art, which is inert and disinterested, a genuine culture conceives of art as something magical and violently egoistical, that is, self-interested. For the Mexicans collect the *Manas*, the powers lying dormant in all forms, which cannot be released by meditation on forms for their own sake, but only arise from a magical identity with these forms. And the ancient Totems exist to stimulate the communication.

It is difficult, when everything impels us to fall into a sleep, during which we look about us with fixed, attentive eyes, to wake up and to look about as though in a dream, with eyes that no longer know what use they are and whose gaze is turned inwards.

This is how our strange idea of a disinterested action came into being, tough and active nonetheless, the more violent for having skirted around the temptation to rest.

All true effigies have a double, a shadowed self. And art fails the moment a sculptor believes that as he models he liberates a kind of shadow whose existence will unsettle him.

Like all magic cultures displayed in appropriate hieroglyphics, true theatre has its own shadows. Furthermore, of all languages and all arts,

it is the only one whose shadows have shattered their limitations. From the first, we might say its shadows would not tolerate limitations.

Our fossilized idea of theatre is tied in with our fossilized idea of a shadowless culture where, whatever way we turn, our minds meet nothing but emptiness while space is full.

But true theatre, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, goes on stirring up shadows, while life endlessly stumbles along. An actor does not repeat the same gestures twice, but he gesticulates, moves and, although he brutalizes forms, as he destroys them he is united with what lives on behind and after them, producing their continuation.

Theatre, which is nothing, but uses all languages (gestures, words, sound, fire and screams), is to be found precisely at the point where the mind needs a language to bring about its manifestations.

And confining theatre to one language, speech, written words, music, lighting or sound, heralds its imminent ruin, since choosing one single language proves the inclinations we have for the facilities of that language. But one effect of a single language's limitations is that it dries up.

For theatre, just as for culture, the problem remains to designate and direct shadows. And theatre, not confined to any fixed language or form, destroys false shadows because of this, and prepares the way for another shadowed birth, uniting the true spectacle of life around it.

To shatter language in order to contact life means creating or recreating theatre. The crucial thing is not to believe this action must remain sacred, that is to say, set apart. And the main thing is to believe not that anyone can do it but that one needs to prepare for it.

This leads us to reject man's usual limitations and powers and infinitely extends the frontiers of what we call reality.

We must believe in life's meaning renewed by theatre, where man fearlessly makes himself master of the unborn, gives birth to it. And everything unborn can still be brought to life, provided we are not satisfied with remaining simple recording instruments.

Moreover, when we say the word *life*, we understand this is not life recognized by externals, by facts, but the kind of frail moving source forms never attain. And if there is one truly infernal and damned thing left today, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like those tortured at the stake, signalling through the flames.

*Theatre and the Plague**

IN THE ARCHIVES OF THE SMALL TOWN of Cagliari, Sardinia, lies an account of an astonishing historic occurrence.

One night, about the end of April or the beginning of May 1720, some twenty days before the ship *Grand-Saint-Antoine* reached Marseille, where its landing coincided with the most wondrous outbreak of plague to be recorded in that city's history, Saint-Rémy, the Sardinian Viceroy, perhaps rendered more sensitive to that most baleful virus by his restricted monarchical duties, had a particularly agonizing dream. He saw himself plague-ridden and saw the disease ravage his tiny state.

Society's barriers became fluid with the effects of the scourge. Order disappeared. He witnessed the subversion of all morality, a total psychological breakdown, heard his lacerated, utterly routed bodily fluids murmur within him in a giddy wasting-away of matter, growing heavy and then gradually being transformed into carbon. Was it too late to ward off the scourge? Although organically destroyed, crushed, extirpated, his very bones consumed, he knew one does not die in dreams, that our will-power even operates *ad absurdum*, even denying what is possible, in a kind of metamorphosis of lies reborn as truth.

He awoke. He would show himself able to drive away these plague rumours and the miasmas of the oriental virus.

The *Grand-Saint-Antoine*, a month out of Beirut, requested permission to enter the harbour and dock there. At this point the Viceroy gave an insane order, an order thought raving mad, absurd, stupid and despotic both by his subjects and his suite. He hastily dispatched a pilot's boat and men to the supposedly infected vessel with orders for the *Grand-Saint-Antoine* to tack about that instant and make full sail away from the town or be sunk by cannon shot. War on the plague. The autocrat did not do things by halves.

In passing, we ought to note the unusually influential power the dream exerted on him, since it allowed him to insist on the savage

fierceness of his orders despite the gibes of the populace and the scepticism of his suite, when to do so meant riding roughshod not only over human rights, but even over the most ordinary respect for life, over all kinds of national and international conventions, which in the face of death no longer apply.

Be that as it may, the ship held her course, made land at Leghorn and sailed into Marseille harbour where she was allowed to dock.

The Marseille authorities have kept no record of what happened to her plague-infected cargo. We roughly know what happened to the members of her crew: they did not all die of the plague, but were scattered over various countries.

The *Grand-Saint-Antoine* did not bring the plague to Marseille, it was already there, at a particular stage of renewed activity, but its centres had been successfully localized.

The plague brought by the *Grand-Saint-Antoine* was the original, oriental virus, hence the unusually horrible aspect, the widespread flaring-up of the epidemic, which dates from its arrival and dispersion throughout the town.

This prompts a few thoughts.

This plague, which apparently revived a virus, was able to wreak a great havoc on its own, the Captain being the only member of the ship's crew who did not catch the plague. Furthermore, it did not seem that the newly arrived infected men had ever been in direct contact with those others confined to their quarantine districts. The *Grand-Saint-Antoine* passed within hailing distance of Cagliari, Sardinia, but did not leave the plague there, yet the Viceroy picked up certain of its emanations in his dreams. For one cannot deny that a substantial though subtle communication was established between the plague and himself. It is too easy to lay the blame for communication of such a disease on infection by contact alone.

But this communication between Saint-Rémy and the plague, though of sufficient intensity to release imagery in his dreams, was after all not powerful enough to infect him with the disease.

Nevertheless, the town of Cagliari, learning some time later that the ship driven from its shores by the miraculously enlightened though despotic Prince's will was the cause of the great Marseille epidemic, recorded the fact in its archives, where anyone may find it.