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ANTONIN

# ARTAUD

AND HIS LEGACY

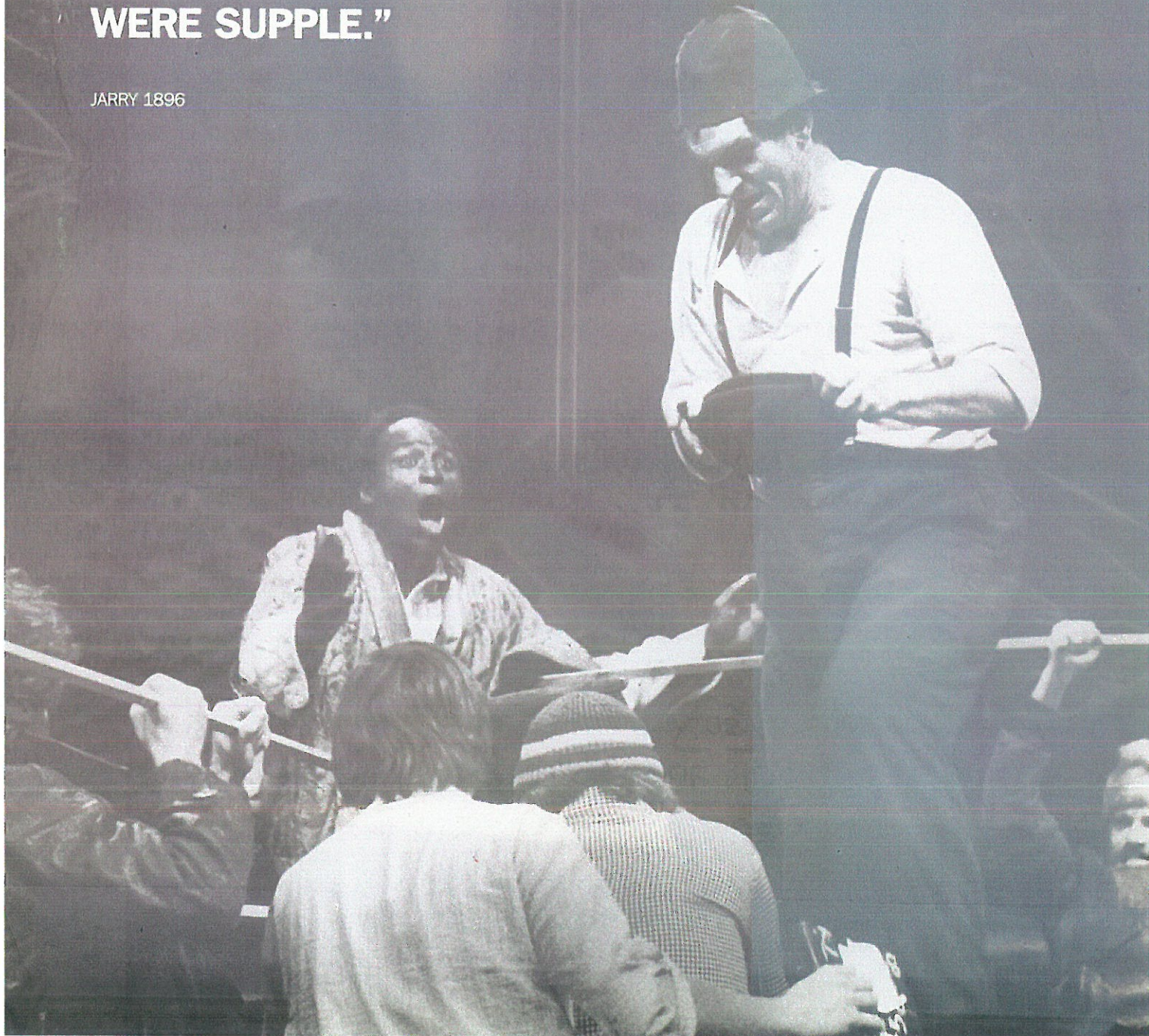
INFLUENCES ON ARTAUD

ALFRED JARRY (1873-1907)

# ALFRED JARRY

**“...THE ACTOR MUST HAVE A SPECIAL VOICE,  
WHICH IS THE VOICE OF THE ROLE, AS IF THE  
MOUTH CAVITY OF THE MASK COULD EMIT ONLY  
WHAT THE MASK WOULD SAY IF ITS LIP MUSCLES  
WERE SUPPLE.”**

JARRY 1896



## INFLUENCES ON ARTAUD

# ALFRED JARRY:

**FRENCH WRITER AND ARTIST**, Alfred Jarry was an important influence on Artaud, who named his theatre after Jarry. Jarry's play *King Ubu* is a recurring point of reference in the development of Artaud's work and that of his followers. It has been suggested that Jarry was a prototype for Artaud and certainly, there are striking similarities between the two men, both within their work, and their lives. Both men lost influential female figures in their life at an early age (Jarry's mother, Artaud's Grandmother), both men lived, for one reason or another, under the influence of drugs. Both men reacted against the society, and the theatre of their time, and, perhaps most importantly, both men found it necessary to blur the distinction between their art and their life.

Many of the recognised elements of Artaudian theatre can be seen in the work of Jarry. Jarry initiated a revival in the use of mask in Western theatre. Indeed, it was one of the key elements of *King Ubu*. Other elements included the focus on an anti-hero, the impersonation and employment of marionettes, and the rejection of the established features of the modern stage.

Like Artaud after him, Jarry was both influenced by, and an advocate of the grotesque in the theatre. He called for a language of gestures that would be universally understood, and recognised the importance of the actor's voice.

'... the actor must have a special voice, which is the voice of the role, as if the mouth cavity of the mask could emit only what the mask would say if its lip muscles were supple.'  
(Jarry 1896)

*Ubu* was written as a puppet play, and has been likened to the more familiar Punch and Judy and Commedia dell'arte with its anarchic comedy and digs at the values of heroism. Again, one can see how this influenced Artaud, who was known to admire those same qualities in the work of the Marx Brothers.

### *King Ubu*: - A Brief Outline

- Mère Ubu persuades Ubu to kill King Venceslas and make himself King of Poland
- Ubu plots with the King's Captain, Bordure, against Venceslas
- Venceslas summons Ubu, who, thinking he has been found out, blames his wife and Bordure. The King had actually summoned him to name him Count of Sandomir and to invite him to a military review.
- Ignoring his wife and son Bougrelas, Venceslas attends the review unarmed with his other two sons.
- Ubu and his men kill both the King and his two sons.
- The Queen and Bougrelas flee to the mountains where she dies. The ghosts of his ancestors tell Bougrelas to avenge his father.
- Mère Ubu and Bordure encourage Ubu to give gold to the people.
- Ubu becomes greedy, executes the nobles, magistrates and bankers and imposes new taxes which he collects personally.
- Bordure, unhappy that he has been mistreated, enlists the

Alfred Jarry

1873-1907)

aid of the Tzar of Russia to help Bourgelas take the throne.

- Ubu goes to war. Mère Ubu remains to look after their wealth and finds more in a hidden crypt.
- Ubu is defeated and flees to a cave where he and his general, Lascy meet a bear. Ubu saves himself, Lascy is eaten.
- Ubu is reunited with Mère Ubu and they set sail for France.

Further influences can be found amongst Jarry's recommendations for the staging of *Ubu*. With regards to the staging, he suggests 'a single stage-set or, better still, a plain backdrop' with placards used to indicate the location of the next scene. Again, his desire to credit the audience with some intelligence influences his style. With costume too, he pre-empts Artaud, suggesting that the costumes should be... 'divorced as far as possible from local colour or chronology (which will thus give the impression of something eternal) ...', although he suggests modern costumes where Artaud preferred the more traditional. Finally, Jarry believed that the theatre should be a spectacle, and was interested in the use of lighting effects to create this atmosphere.

See also - Peter Brook

## EXERCISE

Artaud believed that 'puppets, huge masks and objects of strange proportions appear by the same right as verbal imagery, stressing the physical aspect of all imagery and expression.'

1) Consider a play text with which you are familiar and which you believe is suitable to be staged in an Artaudian fashion, using 'puppets, huge masks and objects of strange proportion'. How would you stage your chosen play using these methods? How would this help to give visual expression to the imagery contained within the dialogue of the text?

OR

2a) Consider the similarities and differences between the plots of *King Ubu* and *Macbeth*.

b) *Macbeth* is categorised as a tragedy, *King Ubu* as an anarchic comedy. If you were to stage *Macbeth* in an Artaudian fashion, using 'puppets, strange masks and objects of strange proportion', would you keep the play as tragedy, or adapt the text to make it into an anarchic comedy? Describe and justify your ideas.

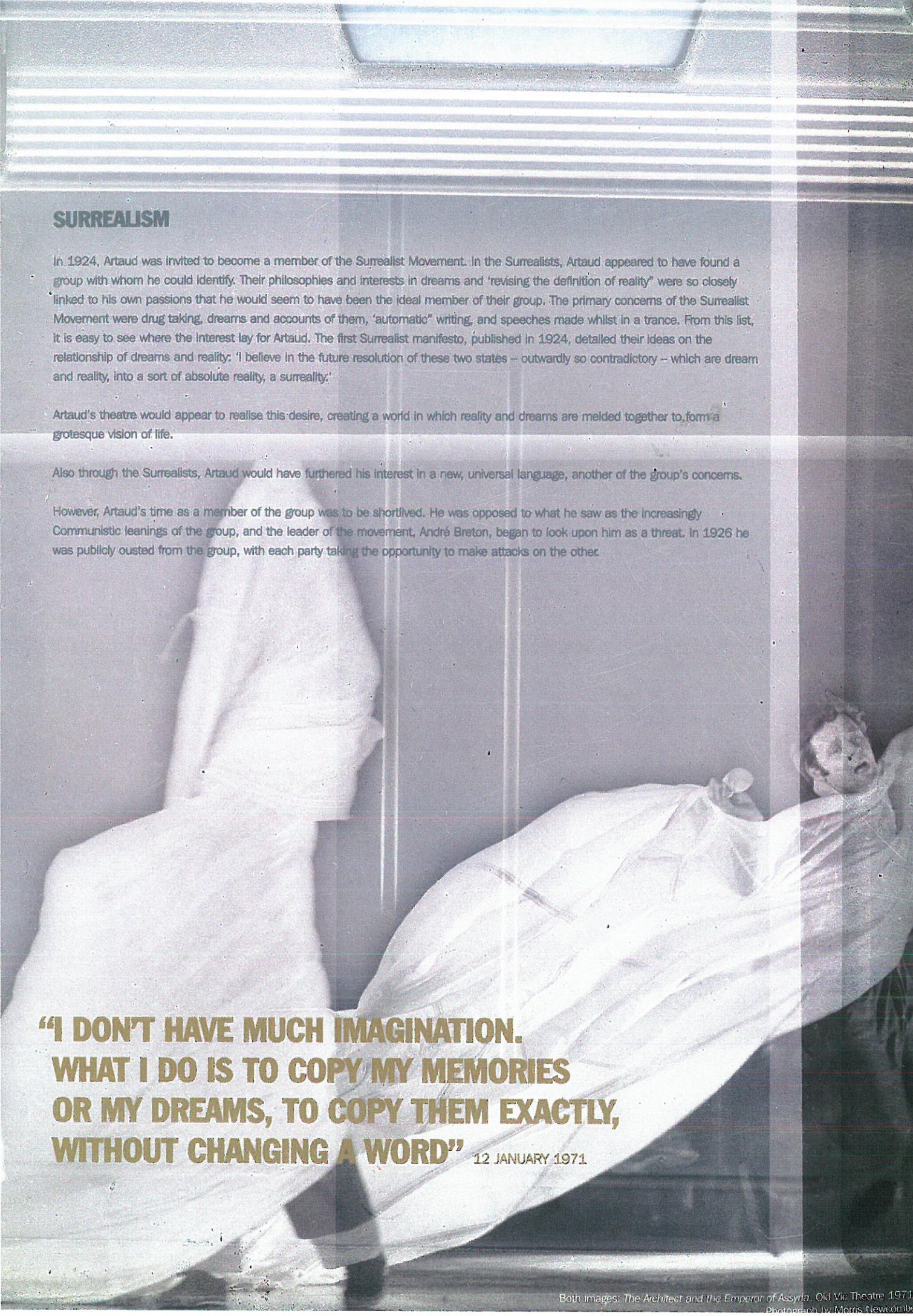
## SURREALISM

In 1924, Artaud was invited to become a member of the Surrealist Movement. In the Surrealists, Artaud appeared to have found a group with whom he could identify. Their philosophies and interests in dreams and 'revising the definition of reality' were so closely linked to his own passions that he would seem to have been the ideal member of their group. The primary concerns of the Surrealist Movement were drug taking, dreams and accounts of them, 'automatic' writing, and speeches made whilst in a trance. From this list, it is easy to see where the interest lay for Artaud. The first Surrealist manifesto, published in 1924, detailed their ideas on the relationship of dreams and reality: 'I believe in the future resolution of these two states - outwardly so contradictory - which are dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality.'

Artaud's theatre would appear to realise this desire, creating a world in which reality and dreams are melded together to form a grotesque vision of life.

Also through the Surrealists, Artaud would have furthered his interest in a new, universal language, another of the group's concerns.

However, Artaud's time as a member of the group was to be shortlived. He was opposed to what he saw as the increasingly Communistic leanings of the group, and the leader of the movement, André Breton, began to look upon him as a threat. In 1926 he was publicly ousted from the group, with each party taking the opportunity to make attacks on the other.

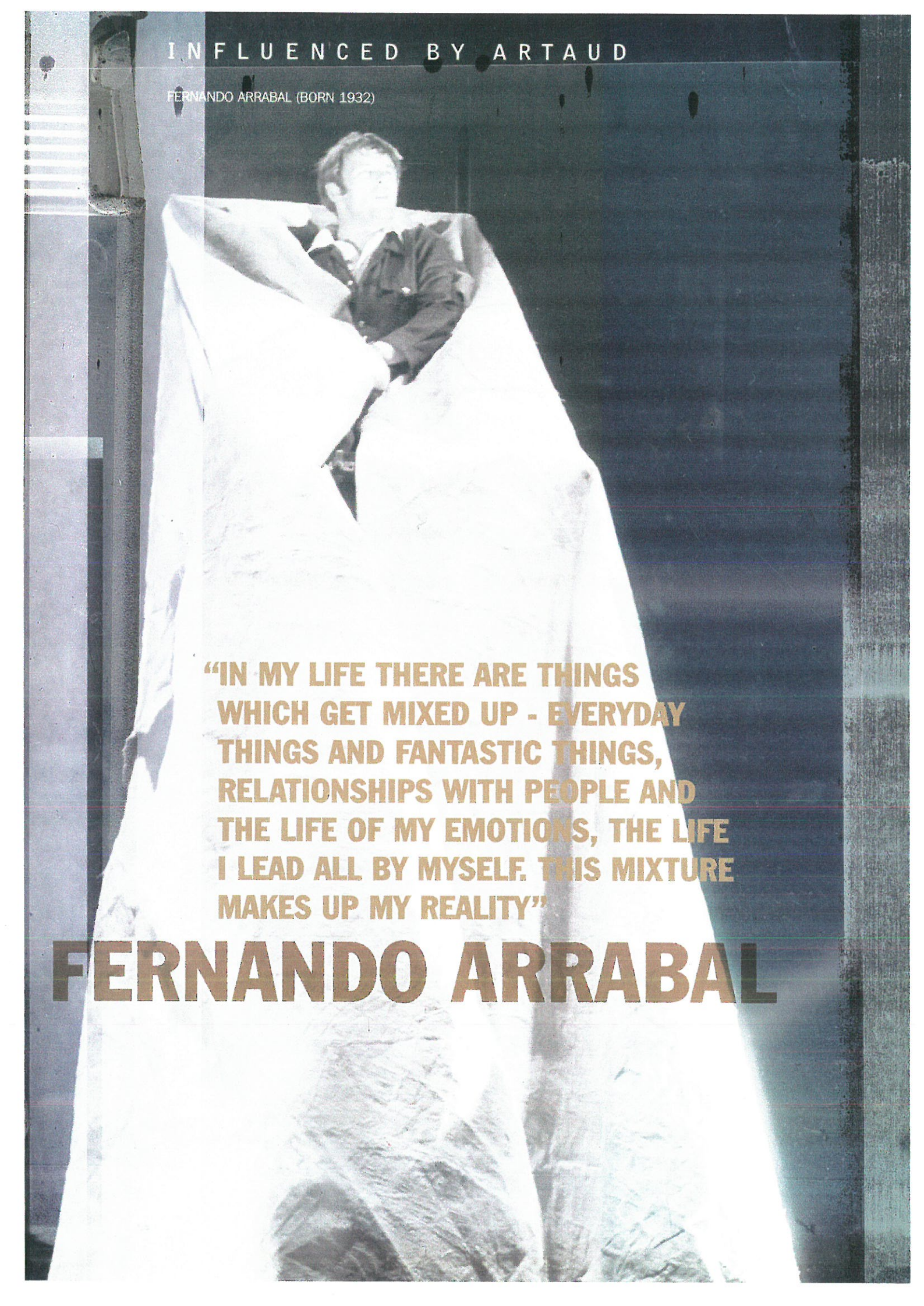


**"I DON'T HAVE MUCH IMAGINATION.  
WHAT I DO IS TO COPY MY MEMORIES  
OR MY DREAMS, TO COPY THEM EXACTLY,  
WITHOUT CHANGING A WORD"**

12 JANUARY 1971

INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

FERNANDO ARRABAL (BORN 1932)



**"IN MY LIFE THERE ARE THINGS  
WHICH GET MIXED UP - EVERYDAY  
THINGS AND FANTASTIC THINGS,  
RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE AND  
THE LIFE OF MY EMOTIONS, THE LIFE  
I LEAD ALL BY MYSELF. THIS MIXTURE  
MAKES UP MY REALITY"**

**FERNANDO ARRABAL**

INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

# FERNANDO ARRABAL

**PLAYWRIGHT FERNANDO ARRABAL** was born in Spain four years before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, a war which devastated the country and caused him to become separated from his father. The influence of a strong Catholic upbringing is evident in much of his work as religion is both discussed and attacked. His early experiences echo the tragic life of Artaud; he also spent a period in a sanatorium at the age of 23, when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. His work contains many elements of torture and suffering and, like Artaud before him, it is easy to see why.

In the early sixties, Arrabal set out to create what he termed the Theatre of Panic. Like the Theatre of Cruelty, the name is ambiguous. For Arrabal, 'panic' is more than merely the state of excited confusion that the word suggests. The word is derived from the god Pan who, like Dionysus, is a god of grotesque fun, abandonment, vulgarity and excess, wild ritual and natural, elemental forces. Pan is also used in the sense of all-encompassing, suggesting a link with total theatre. His theatre is ritualistic and 'ceremonial'. In *Avant Garde Theatre* Arrabal describes what theatre should be:

**'For me the theatre remains a ceremony; it's a feast both sacrilegious and sacred, erotic and mystic, which would encompass all facets of life, including death...'**

(quoted in Innes page 118)

Arrabal cites such influences as Strindberg, Dali, Arthur Adamov (a colleague of Artaud), and surrealism, but insists that the greatest influence on his writing is his own dreams. Interviewed by Ronald Hayman in *The Times*, Arrabal revealed:

**'I don't have much imagination. What I do is to copy my memories or my dreams, to copy them exactly, without changing a word.'** (12 Jan. 1971)

Hayman suggested to Arrabal that the act of writing his dreams down added conscious experience, resulting in a mix of real life and dream. Arrabal's response indicated that his reality was in any case such a mixture of elements:

'In my life there are things which get mixed up - everyday things and fantastic things, relationships with people and the life of my emotions, the life I lead all by myself. This mixture makes up my reality.'

In applying this to his theatre, Arrabal can be seen to be following directly in the surrealist footsteps of Artaud who called for the theatre to be a fusion of dream and reality.

Arrabal's most successful play, *The Architect and The Emperor of Assyria* (1967) reveals a more direct Artaudian influence. In one of his original *Theatre of Cruelty* manifestos Artaud, defining cruelty, wrote:

**'It is not a matter of the cruelty we show to each other by**

**"I DON'T HAVE MUCH IMAGINATION. WHAT I DO IS TO COPY MY MEMORIES OR MY DREAMS, TO COPY THEM EXACTLY, WITHOUT CHANGING A WORD."** 12 JANUARY 1971

*Fernando Arrabal*

# ARRABAL: (BORN 1932)

**mutually cutting up our bodies...or of those Emperors of Assyria who sent each other bags full of human ears through the mails.' (Artaud 1935)**

Arrabal's Emperor appears to be inspired by Artaud. The play itself centres around the Architect, a Prospero-like figure who is the sole inhabitant of a desert island, and the Emperor, who is the sole survivor of an air crash, washed up there. Throughout the play, the two of them act out a series of ritualistic scenes in which they take on a number of dual roles – teacher/pupil, master/slave, mother/son. The play explores issues of confession, morality, religion, theatre and the existence of God.

Ritual and ceremony are central to the piece. The roles adopted by the characters are bound by the rules of the rituals they carry out on a daily basis. Towards the end of the play, the Emperor insists that the Architect must eat him in order to become a synthesis of the two characters. The scene is carried out in a ceremonial fashion with the Emperor's body being laid out as if in sacrifice before the act of cannibalism takes place. The desired transformation to a higher being is, however, unsuccessful. As the life force of the Emperor is absorbed the actors switch roles, leaving only the Emperor left alive. The play ends with another air crash. The whole ritual can now begin again, but now the roles are reversed.

## EXERCISE

1) In what ways do the storyline and the text of *The Architect and the Emperor* resemble the language of dreams?

How would you emphasise these qualities in performance?

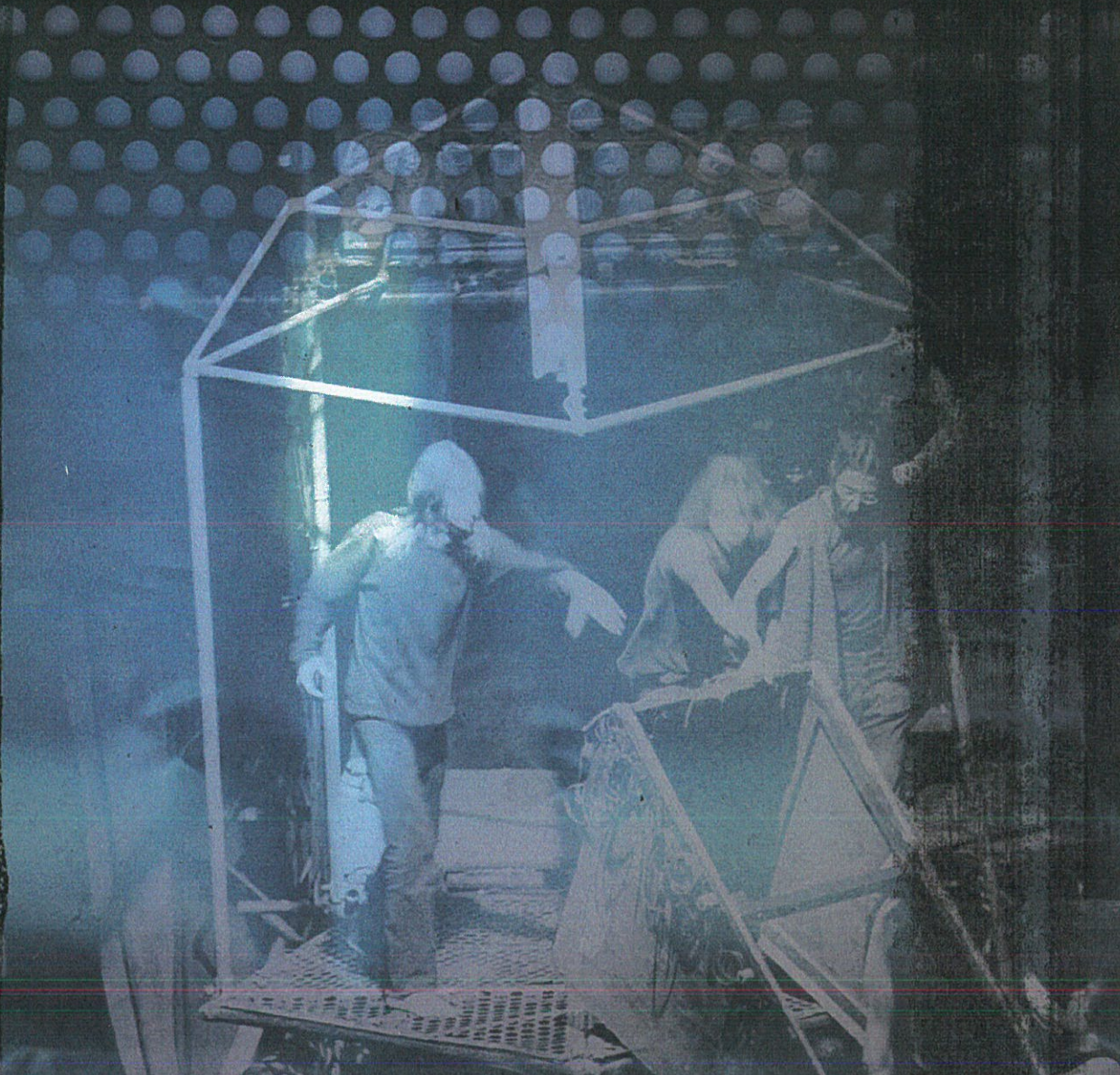
2) In groups, discuss recent dreams that you have had and which you can recollect in some detail. Experiment practically with ways of presenting one of these dreams to an audience.

After you have completed this exercise, discuss which styles of presentation are best suited to this task.



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THE LIVING THEATRE



**“...A PLACE OF INTENSE EXPERIENCE,  
HALF DREAM, HALF RITUAL, IN WHICH THE  
SPECTATOR APPROACHES SOMETHING OF  
A VISION OF SELF UNDERSTANDING, GOING  
PAST THE CONSCIOUS TO THE UNCONSCIOUS”**

**THE LIVING THEATRE**

INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

# THE LIVING THEATRE

**THE TRANSLATION OF *The Theatre and its Double*** into English saw the emergence of a group of companies in America who drew heavily on Artaud's theories. Various elements of the Theatre of Cruelty were explored, resulting in an unprecedented surge in avant garde theatre. The Bread and Puppet Theatre, formed in 1961, used huge puppets alongside actors in street-based performances. They used texts that were based on myths and folk tales. Both elements can be traced back to Artaud, and are still evident in the work of Welfare State International (Britain) and Kneehigh Theatre Company.

Perhaps the best known of these companies is the Living Theatre. Formed in 1948 by Julian Beck and his wife Judith Malina, the Living Theatre embraced much of the Theatre of Cruelty, particularly those aspects concerned with the audience-actor relationship. In Innes' *Avant Garde Theatre* their idea of theatre is described as:

**'...a place of intense experience, half dream, half ritual, in which the spectator approaches something of a vision of self-understanding, going past the conscious to the unconscious'**

(Innes page 181)

Early influences on the work of the Living Theatre came from the Japanese Noh theatre, which, like the Balinese theatre, contains a vocabulary of movement and gesture that was unfamiliar to western audiences. Early productions included a version of *The Orestes* using elements of Noh, Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* which Artaud had also worked on in 1923. They

further explored their links to Artaud through their staging of his description of the Plague, which was the finale of their 1964 production, *Mysteries*, an all-male version of Genet's *The Maids*, and their 1963 production of *The Brig*.

*The Brig* was written by Kenneth Brown and is based on the author's real life experiences as a U.S. Marine in a Japanese penal camp. The themes of the play – physical punishment, humiliation, isolation and a ritual form of regulation – are all closely linked to Artaud's notion of cruelty. The performance was designed to be as much an assault on the senses of the audience as it was on the characters, with shouted orders, sharp truncheon blows and ritual clashing of metal dustbin lids to create violent sounds and imagery.

The invasion of the auditorium by the actors, and the encouragement of the reverse, was an integral part of the Living Theatre's performances. The aim was a sharing not only of the physical space, but of empathy, ideas and emotions. Elements of plot, characterisation and scenery were often replaced by movement sequences and visual images formed by the actors. Such was the case with *Frankenstein* (1965). The Artaudian notion of theatre as a spectacle was emphasised to the full with the staging of this adaptation of Mary Shelley's horror classic. A twenty foot scaffold structure formed the centrepiece of the stage area. From this, the actors hung, forming the body of the monster with Beck playing the Doctor. In act two of the play, the actors on the scaffold were used to represent the senses of the monster. As *Frankenstein* fed ideas to the senses of the creature, stimulating its intelligence, the actors upon the scaffold would move accordingly, forming a series of images designed to appeal to the imagination of the spectator.

“...A PLACE OF INTENSE EXPERIENCE, HALF DREAM, HALF RITUAL, IN WHICH THE SPECTATOR APPROACHES SOMETHING OF A VISION OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING, GOING PAST THE CONSCIOUS TO THE UNCONSCIOUS”

CHRISTOPHER INNES, AVANT GARDE THEATRE, 1991

# ATRE

‘...to find ways of communicating with each other beyond those which involve speech. To find a way of communicating our feelings and our ideas through signs and being.’  
(quoted in Innes, page 182)

In the final act, the sections of the scaffold formed prison cells into which the actors, dragged from the auditorium, were placed.

The work of the company became increasingly political in nature as they developed. *Paradise Now* (1968) was designed to promote non-violent revolution, and is seen by many as a theatrical equivalent of the student uprisings of the late sixties. The performance was controversial in its use of nudity. The actors performed in various degrees of nudity as a challenge to bourgeois conventions, and an anarchic ritual, in which the audience were invited to take part. The performance utilised another element of the Living Theatre style in its confrontational approach to the audience. Members of the company would pick out spectators at random throughout the course of the performance, ridiculing and intimidating them. This approach aimed to create a sense of catharsis for the audience. Any feelings of anger would be brought out during the course of the performance, leaving the spectator devoid of these feelings once they left the auditorium.

In 1970 the company ceased to perform. The work of the company has been sometimes been condemned by critics as pretentious and chaotic, but there are few companies who have taken the ideas of Artaud so seriously in attempting to create a new form of theatre.

## EXERCISES

- 1) Find a newspaper article which you feel strongly about and would like to adapt as a piece of theatre.
- 2) Identify the main themes of the story that you would like to communicate in your stage adaptation.
- 3) Share your ideas in small groups. Decide which member of the group's adaptation you would like to explore practically.

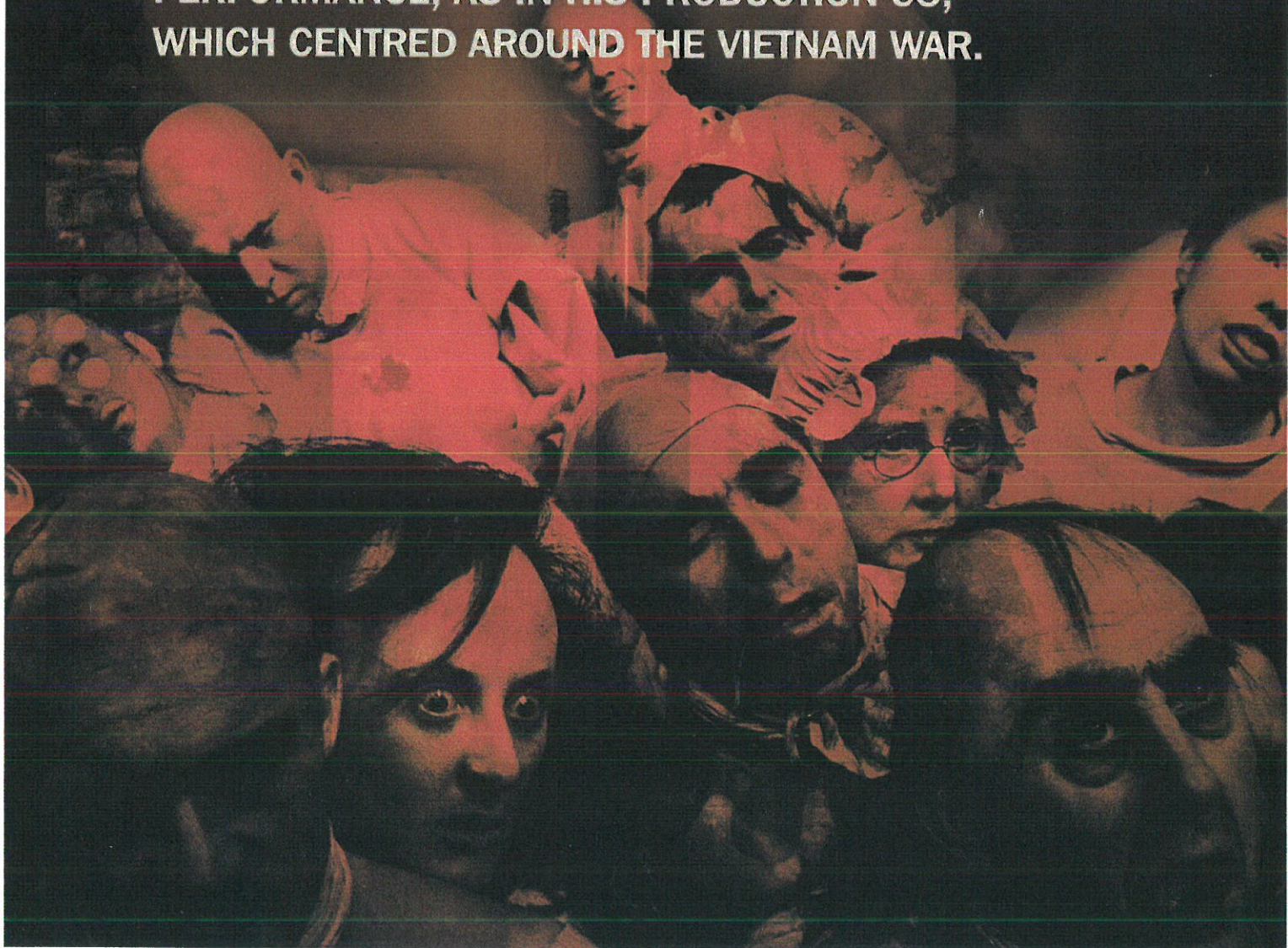
Through improvisation, begin to work on the opening scene. Taking The Living Theatre's production of *The Brig* as your influence, work on creating an effective soundtrack for the scene. Use a combination of sounds, including those which are vocal, simulated using stage props and electronically enhanced.

INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

PETER BROOK (BORN 1925)

# PETER BROOK

ARTAUD'S INFLUENCE IS READILY ACKNOWLEDGED BY BROOK, WHO HAS DESCRIBED HIM AS A VISIONARY. ELEMENTS OF THE ORIGINAL THEATRE OF CRUELTY MANIFESTOS ARE CLEARLY VISIBLE IN BROOK'S WORK: THE BREAKING DOWN OF THE BARRIER BETWEEN AUDIENCE AND PERFORMANCE; THE EXPLORATION OF NEW LANGUAGES; THE EXPLOITATION OF REAL-LIFE, CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS AS A BASIS FOR PERFORMANCE, AS IN HIS PRODUCTION *US*, WHICH CENTRED AROUND THE VIETNAM WAR.



INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

# PETER BROOK:

**BROOK** was one of the first directors to explore Artaud's theatre for a British audience, through his Theatre of Cruelty season at LAMDA in 1963, and his subsequent productions of *Orghast*, *Ubu* and *Marat/Sade*.

Artaud's influence is readily acknowledged by Brook, who has described him as a visionary. Elements of the original Theatre of Cruelty manifestos are clearly visible in Brook's work: the breaking down of the barrier between audience and performance; the exploration of new languages; the exploitation of real-life, controversial subjects as a basis for performance, as in his production *US*, which centred around the Vietnam war.

## Brook and Marowitz : The Theatre of Cruelty and *The Screens*

Brook's interest in Artaud began in 1959 when he first read *The Theatre and its Double*. In the early sixties, he was invited by Peter Hall to become an associate director at the RSC, where he directed Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists*. Following this, Brook asked for, and was granted, funding for research and experimental work. In an unprecedented move, he was given funding for ten weeks' work. This was to be the beginning of his own Theatre of Cruelty, which would be developed alongside a fellow disciple of Artaud, Charles Marowitz.

Brook's initial concern was that, although he had selected a text on which to base his work, Jean Genet's *The Screens*, he felt that there were no actors readily available with the skills to carry out his ideas. Thus, part of the experiment became training for a group of actors who formed his company.

From the very start, the project took on an experimental feel. Marowitz devised an innovative selection process. The actors at audition were asked to give their own, prepared piece as is usual, but then were asked to transfer their chosen speech, unchanged, to an entirely new character and situation. In true Artaudian style, the exercise underlined the need to escape from the confines of the words in question. This was followed by giving the actors a piece of nonsense text, again reflecting Artaud, to which the actor could ascribe any character or situation. What was important was the way in which the actor chose to communicate what was given. With no clues as to the 'meaning' of the text, the actors had to rely on gut instinct. From this, along with other improvisation exercises utilising unrelated objects, Marowitz was able to select a company he felt capable of achieving Brook's desire to create a new theatre language that would communicate not merely through words, but through sounds, gesture and the relationship between actor and objects. Initially, the work of the group was never intended to be given as a public performance, but Brook changed his mind, recognising the need for work to be shown. How was he to assess the success of his experiment, the validity of his new language, without trying it out on an uninitiated audience? So,

after eight weeks of working together, the company put together a programme to display what was termed 'work in progress', under the title 'Theatre of Cruelty'.

The venue for the performance was a new studio space at LAMDA. The space was empty, with a tiered area for seating the audience and a flat bare stage for the performance. Brook subverted this division, placing seats on the stage and presenting the action across the tiers. The programme ran for five weeks, with variations on a number of sections being presented. Along with scenes from *The Screens*, Brook's original choice of text, there were presentations of nonsense text sketches by Paul Ableman; a short story – presented without words; Marowitz's shortened *Hamlet*; improvisation sessions led by Marowitz, and amongst other equally diverse offerings, two versions of Artaud's *Spurt of Blood*. For one of these versions, Artaud's original script was used, whilst the other was presented using sounds and paintings only.

The reception and expectation was not what Brook had envisaged. The problem of misinterpretation of the word 'Cruelty' proved a stumbling block for an audience that had little or no idea of Artaud's theories. Added to this was the fact that the audiences appeared not to know how to take *The Spurt of Blood*. Artaud's original script contains stage directions including a hurricane, stars crashing into each other, live pieces of human bodies falling from above, an army of scorpions, an exploding penis and the hand of God. Brook's first version, highly stylised, lasted around three minutes, followed by his second, wordless interpretation. Whereas on the page, Artaud's script is exciting on an epic, cosmic scale, Brook's attempt was seen as simply amusing by his audience. The difficulty of communicating Artaud's vision was brought home to him, and this was further emphasised with the second version. Brook's attempt to create a new language of sound and gesture was largely seen as a failure, as the audience were unfamiliar with his vocabulary. Tom Milne, a critic of the time writing in *Encore*, compared Brook's 'Spurt' to the Oriental theatre forms of Kabuki and Noh, where elaborate sounds and gestures form an intrinsic part of the performance.

**'But one should not forget, not only the years of training which go into the making of an oriental actor, but also the fact that every stylised sound and gesture has an exact meaning which is known to the audience.'** (Milne in Hunt & Reeves)

Here, he hits upon the problem with Brook's approach. A number of factors, including the lack of trained actors/spectators, meant that the audience were simply left confused and/or alienated by the language. It would seem that Brook, like Artaud before him, was attempting to take an audience who were used to a far more accessible, 'conventional' theatre, too far, too quickly. For Brook however, there was some consolation in the fact that he now had his actors for his

# BORN 1925)

production of *The Screens*. From the beginning, Brook had known that there was little hope of the play being staged at the RSC. The play is described by Albert Hunt as 'a cartoon history of Algeria', and the political ramifications of presenting such a play in Britain, so closely linked with France, prompted the Lord Chamberlain to refuse permission for its performance. Brook did however, present two private performances of part of the play at the Donmar Rehearsal Rooms. The performance used a set of tall white screens that were moved about the stage area on casters by masked stage hands as part of the action. The screens were transformed to convey different settings, objects, actions and emotions. The experimental work that Brook had carried out with his Theatre of Cruelty bore fruit in these performances, and the influence of Artaud was there for all to see in the form of:

**'Frenzy, hoarse shouts, furious gabbling, bursts of complete incomprehensibility, howls and now and then a sort of hoarse barking; hysteria and the grotesque;...fantastic stuffed birds, ritual rhythms, masks.'** (Hunt pg. 83)

By painting on the screens, the company produced vivid images to both enhance and complement the text. In one of the most outstanding sequences, the setting fire to the houses of invading colonialists was presented by actors painting fire in red paint onto the white screens. Tom Milne described the action in *Encore*:

**'...as two Colonialists chat cosily...Arab terrorists creep stealthily in to draw tiny flames on the screens behind them; then more Arabs, more flames, until the action seems to dissolve in a sheet of fire.'**

Brook drew on his Theatre of Cruelty techniques and company as the basis for his 1964 RSC production of Peter Weiss's *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as performed by the inmates of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade*, more commonly known by the briefer title *Marat/Sade*.

The play is set inside the asylum at Charenton, (a fitting location for an exploration of Artaud's theories), and focuses on the performance of a play written by one of the inmates, the Marquis de Sade, about the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, who was stabbed in his bath by Charlotte Corday during the French Revolution in 1793. Whilst the words within the text are essential, there are other elements such as song, mime, sounds and 'physical events' that remove it from purely naturalistic writing. Here lay part of the appeal for Brook, who saw the play as ideal for his exploration of Artaudian principles.

The madness of the inmates was to form a focal point for the play. Each of the actors based their performance on a study of a specific form of madness. Psychiatrists were consulted, as were books on mental illness. Initial rehearsals avoided the script in favour of workshop sessions based on the theme of madness. Brook wanted the actors to look inside themselves and find an 'inner madness', and his

insistence on this approach was to be draining on the actors. Glenda Jackson is quoted as saying 'we were all convinced we were going loony'. Here, Brook can be seen to be taking Artaud's theories to the letter, pushing the actors to the very extreme of their abilities. Once Brook was satisfied that 'the actors now had a language of madness' to apply, they began working on the script.

Brook insisted that the whole stage be available to the actors. His vision for the asylum was realised by designer Sally Jacobs. The inmates were free to roam this asylum, adding to the overall sense of anarchy and danger. The raked stage was covered with hinged duckboards which lifted to reveal baths which were used by the inmates throughout the performance. The stage itself was bare - black, white and grey, surrounded by huge washed out walls, the only other colours being red and blue, to symbolise France. The single piece of set was Marat's bath. Brook did away with the curtain completely, taking away the dividing line between performance and audience. Again, the Artaudian influence is obvious.

The performance explored more of Artaud's ideas. The acting style relied on gestures and physical expression as much as the scripted word. Bells clanged as part of the music, along with 'new instruments' created by the inmates who would utilise the wooden boards as drums to beat out ritual rhythms, accompanied by bizarre sound effects. The King was a life-size puppet with a cabbage for a head.

Brook further employed the use of paint in performance as part of a mass guillotining sequence, with buckets of paint being poured down drains to symbolise the blood of the beheaded. The act of guillotining itself was turned into a physical frenzy, with inmates leaping into a central pit, leaving their decapitated heads visible above stage level.

Brook, in his introduction to the published play commented that the play was designed to:

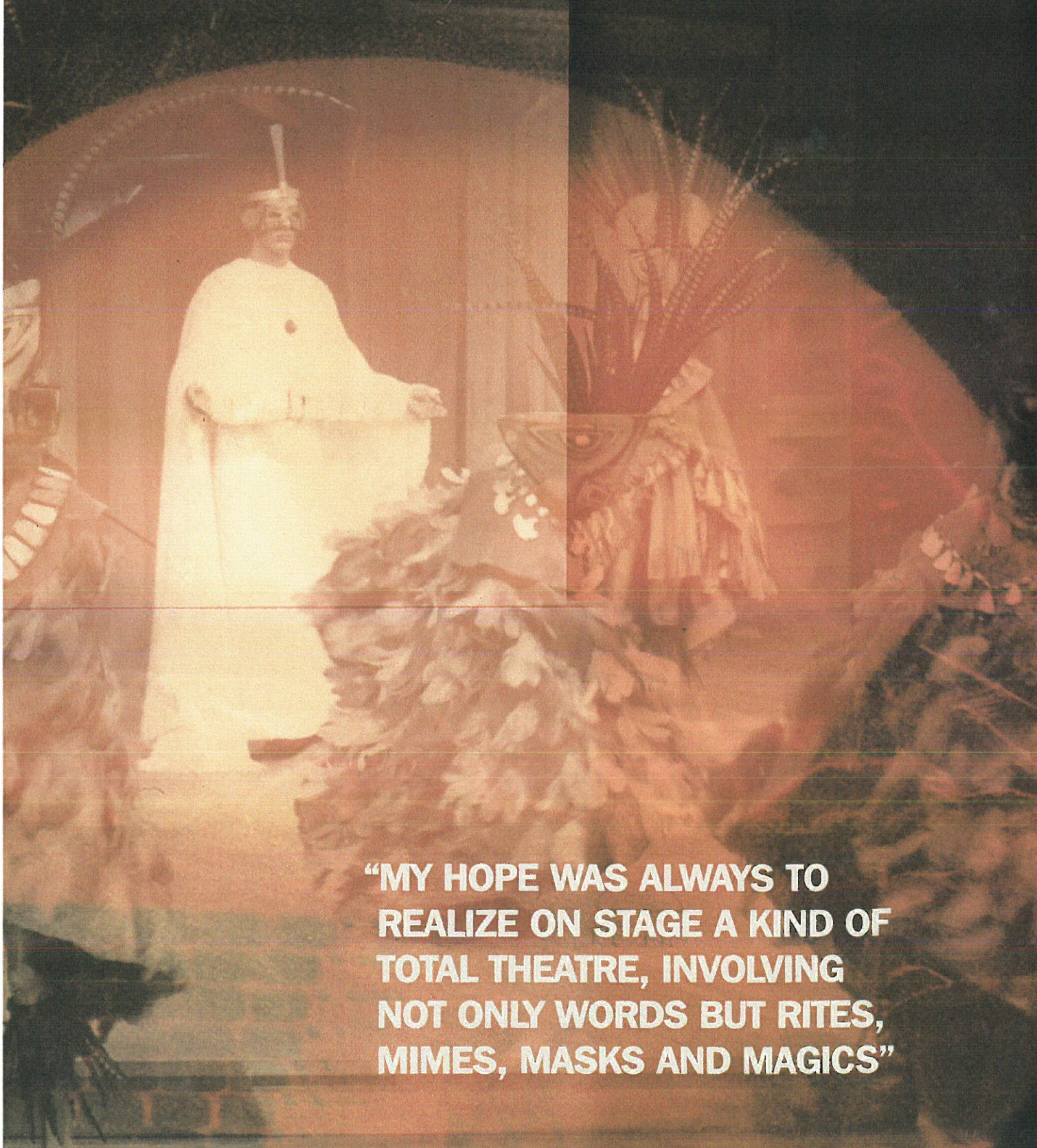
**'...crack the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him to assess intelligently what has happened to him, then give him a kick in the balls, then bring him back to his senses again.'** (Brook)

The play was a critical success, with many praising Brook's adventurous production. *The Times* called it 'the most ambitious example of the Theatre of Cruelty yet to appear'. Brook had now established himself in the eyes of the British theatre-going public as the rightful inheritor of Artaud's legacy.

INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

PETER SHAFFER (BORN 1926)

# PETER SHAFFER



**“MY HOPE WAS ALWAYS TO  
REALIZE ON STAGE A KIND OF  
TOTAL THEATRE, INVOLVING  
NOT ONLY WORDS BUT RITES,  
MIMES, MASKS AND MAGICS”**

INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

# PETER SHAFFER

**IN THE 1960s, PETER SHAFFER** became synonymous with the term 'total theatre', a term used to define theatre in which all of the elements of performance meld together to produce an overwhelming spectacle for the audience, linking him with Barrault, and of course, with Artaud.

His 1964 play *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* is a seminal text in the development of total theatre. The play tells the story of two men, Francisco Pizarro, the commander of a Spanish expedition to Peru, and Atahualpa, the God-King of the Incas, and is set against the backdrop of the Spanish conquest of Peru. The connection with Artaud is immediately recognisable, as one of Artaud's initial suggestions for a suitable scenario for his theatre was *The Conquest of Mexico*.

Shaffer, in his introduction to the play, describes his aim for the production:

**'My hope was always to realize on stage a kind of total theatre, involving not only words but rites, mimes, masks and magics.'**

The elements listed here are contained within Artaud's ideas for his Theatre of Cruelty. The real life themes of the play, religion, war, the loss of faith, are amongst those advocated by Artaud, along with the hugeness of the setting, the invasion and conquering of not only a country, but of a race of people as well. Such an epic text is ideal for transformation into a theatrical spectacle. As Shaffer puts it, 'the text cries for illustration'.

Shaffer, like Artaud, advises the use of a simple stage. For his original production of *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, the stage was bare, save for a huge ring of aluminium which, by the use of hinged petals, could transform from being the Inca emblem of a giant sun, to the Spanish emblem on a giant medallion.

**'This simple but amazing set was for me totally satisfying on all levels; scenically, aesthetically and symbolically.'** (Shaffer 1964)

Music is an integral part of the play. For the original production, Marc Wilkinson produced a score that employed not only conventional music but also:

**'...bird cries; plain chant, a fantasia for organ; freezing sounds for the Mime of the Great Ascent, and frightening ones for the Mime of the Great Massacre.'** (Shaffer 1964)

The music and chanting add to the powerful imagery of the text, enhancing some of the pivotal points of the play. The elements of ritual are invoked in the Chant of Resurrection. At the end of the play Atahualpa lies dead, executed by the Spanish. The soldiers leave his body and the Incas emerge from the shadows to perform their tribal rite, firmly believing that Atahualpa, the embodiment of their Sun-God, will be resurrected as the sunlight engulfs his body.

**'A drum beats. Slowly, in semi-darkness, the stage fills with all the Indians, robed in black and terracotta, wearing the great funeral masks of ancient Peru. Grouped round the prone body, they intone a strange Chant of Resurrection, punctuated by hollow beats on the drums and by long, long silences in which they turn their immense triangular eyes enquiringly up to the sky. Finally, after three great cries appear to summon it, the sun rises. Its rays fall on the body. ATAHUALLPA does not move.'** (Shaffer 1964)

This small section of text incorporates a wealth of features of the Theatre of Cruelty. The tribal music, played on primitive instruments, including bamboo 'bird flutes'; the ritual costume and masks of the Indians; lighting effects to 'create warmth'; symbolic gesture; chant; and, perhaps most significantly, the immense sense of devastation that the Indians experience when Atahualpa does not rise. On a simple level, there is the fact that they have lost their leader, but more significantly, on a much wider level, they have lost both their faith and their religion, and with it their sense of hope and existence. Was this, then, the cruelty that Artaud wrote about? The Incas were not defeated by the physical might of the Spanish army, but by their own belief in their god. From this, the audience could be prompted to question their own beliefs. As Pizarro asks himself, if Atahualpa could not rise again, then who is to say that Christ could?

The physical aspect of the Theatre of Cruelty is also employed in the play. Scenes that would be impossible to stage if taken literally are turned into elaborate, movement-based set pieces, filled with symbolic representations. In a scene that takes its



## EXERCISE

Write down your definition of the term 'total theatre'. Share your definition with other members of the group. How do the definitions vary? What does this tell you about the challenges of interpreting theatrical terms, such as 'total theatre' or 'the Theatre of Cruelty', into practice?

Peter Shaffer

# (BORN 1926)

influence from Jarry via Artaud, the major battle between the Spanish and the Incas is performed as a choreographed Mime of the Great Massacre. Again, music is used to enhance the overall impact as the Incas are first killed then rise again to protect Atahualpa. The Spanish plough through them and in a simple, yet symbolically pivotal moment, Atahualpa's crown is snatched from his head and thrown to Pizarro who crowns himself. To emphasise the defeat of the Sun-God:

**'...dragged from the middle of the sun by howling Indians, a vast bloodstained cloth bellies out over the stage. All rush off; their screams fill the theatre. The lights fade out slowly on the rippling cloth of blood.'** (Shaffer 1964)

The critical response to the production which transferred from the Chichester Festival Theatre to the Old Vic was varied. Whilst there was universal praise for Colin Blakely as Pizarro and Robert Stephens as Atahualpa, and for the spectacular and visual aspects of the production, there was criticism of the text. In their reviews, most critics tended to look to the words for meaning, rather than viewing the performance as a synthesis of theatrical elements. W.A. Darlington, whose review appeared in *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote:

**'...the exotic trappings of the Incas' sun-worship...make an exciting spectacle. Colin Blakely, as Pizarro, and Robert Stephens, as the Inca Atahualpa, give two very fine performances, and make the last part of the play moving in spite of, rather than because of, Mr. Shaffer's flow of language.'** (9 Dec. 1964)

*The Times* commented:

**'...the merits of the show reside largely in its management of physical action and very little in its more reflective scenes of character development and theological disputation with Pizarro and Atahualpa...'** (9 Dec. 1964)

Artaud had recognised that purely physical theatre had less scope than words for exploring psychological concerns ...

**'But whoever said that theatre was made to define a character, to resolve conflicts of a human, emotional order, of a present-day psychological nature such as those which monopolise current theatre?'** (Artaud 1935)

Other critics received the performance more positively. Bernard Levin, writing in *The Daily Mirror* was enthusiastic about the use of the Artaudian elements of mime, ritual, gesture, masks and costume which all played a 'large part in providing a suitable frame for this tremendous, this admirable, this profound, this enduring play'. He was also impressed with the set pieces, singling out the Chant of Resurrection:

**'...the final scene, with the gold-masked Inca priests tragically unable to accept the fact that their god-king is dead forever, is overwhelmingly moving.'**  
(9 December 1964)

Perhaps another of Shaffer's plays to explore aspects of the Theatre of Cruelty is *Equus* (1973). Again, the play is based on real life events, in this case, the story of a stable boy who blinded over twenty horses. The play examines the reasons for the boy's actions and the effect that delving into the boy's subconscious has on his analyst. Elements of Freudian theory – repressive upbringing, sexual frustration, guilt and impotence, and violence as a result – are imbedded in the text. The notion of cruelty, and the capacity within every living thing for cruelty, are central. Could this then be seen as realising Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty?

The staging was reminiscent of a boxing ring, an interesting parallel with Jerzy Grotowski's Artaud-influenced production *The Constant Prince*, where the audience surrounded and looked down on a bare central performance area like an operating theatre or bullring, in which the central character's torture was inflicted.

Other Artaudian elements included actors amongst the audience, ritual chanting and stamping, dream sequences, stylised movement pieces and hugely amplified, piercing sound effects generated from speakers set amongst the seating.

The most noticeable influence was evident in the use of mask. The horses were portrayed by actors clad in black with raised hoof-like platforms on their feet and wire-frame horse head masks. Combined with the movement of the actors, the result was a stable of stylised horses that created an immediate visual and aural impact.

## ARTAUD'S LEGACY

# SARAH KANE: A N

**SINCE** the Royal Court production of her play *Blasted* in 1995, Sarah Kane has emerged as one of Britain's most controversial playwrights. Her work has been likened to modern Revenge Tragedy due to its themes and approach. *Blasted* contains explicit scenes of sex and violence, which were picked up on by the sensationalist elements of the British media, who, in time-honoured fashion, unjustly set out to create Kane as some kind of theatrical monster. *The Daily Mirror* called the play 'a feast of filth', and much was made of the amount of taxpayers money that was involved. Kane has said that she did not read Artaud until after she had written *Cleansed* (1998), the equally violent and controversial follow up to *Blasted*, so it is interesting to find that there are so many elements of the Theatre of Cruelty evident in her work. Both of the plays, according to Kane, are not about violence at all, they are about 'extreme love'. Interviewed for *The Guardian*, Kane explains:

**'If you want to write about extreme love, you can only write about it in an extreme way. Otherwise it doesn't mean anything. So I suppose both *Blasted* and *Cleansed* are about distressing things which we'd like to think we'd survive. If people can still love after that, then love is the most powerful thing.'** (29 April 1998)

Kane expanded on the point in *Time Out*:

**'When you love that obsessively, you do lose yourself. And when you then lose the object of your love, you have none of the normal resources to fall back on. It can completely destroy you. And very obviously concentration camps are about dehumanising people before they are killed. I wanted to raise some questions about these two extreme and apparently different situations.'** (25 March 1998)

The loss of love that she describes brings to mind the loss of faith experienced by the Incas in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. However, for a nineties audience, loss of faith is perhaps less culturally relevant than a loss of love. Interesting parallels can be drawn with Artaud's own ideas about the action of human beings when placed in extreme situations. In Artaud's case, he uses the explanation when referring to the plague, but Kane's interpretation of love is strikingly similar.

Kane has suggested that part of the reason that *Blasted* was so attacked by the critics, was the lack of a linear narrative structure. Again, there is an undeniable link with Artaud's theories here. In *Time Out* she commented:

**'Because *Blasted* didn't have a conventional storyline and there was no obvious precedent in terms of its structure people didn't really have a context within which to locate it. All they could do was list its contents. Most of them hooked on to the explicit things that constitute about 10 per cent of the running time.'** (25 March 1998)

Kane, like Artaud, takes inspiration from real-life events for her plays. For *Blasted* she attempts to imagine the Bosnian war breaking through the television set into your home. Her theatre may be violent and grotesque, but it is a reflection of what she sees around her.

*Cleansed* takes the sex and violence featured in *Blasted* further. Adding drugs to the mix, Kane includes rape, incest and sexual mutilation against a backdrop of a university crossed with a prison camp for 'undesirables'. Director James Macdonald opted for a more symbolic approach to the violence than for *Blasted*. Revealing another Artaudian influence, he commented in *The Independent*:

## EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss newspaper reports of recent atrocities around the world. How would you approach addressing them theatrically? Is it more effective to depict violence on stage *graphically* – or in a more stylised manner?
- 2) Choose a story from the press. Explore both a graphic and a stylised approach to staging it for the rest of the group. Discuss the responses to each presentation.

“WORDS ARE ONLY A THIRD OF THE PLAY. THE BULK OF THE MEANING IS CARRIED THROUGH THE IMAGERY. THAT’S INCREDIBLY RARE FOR A BRITISH PLAYWRIGHT.”

THE INDEPENDENT, 4 MAY 1998

# nineties ‘take’ on Cruelty

**‘Words are only a third of the play. The bulk of the meaning is carried through the imagery. That’s incredibly rare for a British playwright.’ (4 May 1998)**

To gain more insight into the influence of Artaudian theory on *Cleansed*, I spoke to Janette Smith, trainee director at The Royal Court, who worked on the play.

**How would you say that Sarah Kane’s work is influenced by Artaud?**

It’s important to realise that any influence is indirect as Sarah did not read Artaud until after *Cleansed*, but I would say that the most obvious link would be the intention to disturb the tranquillity in the audience. Sarah’s writing shows her interest in man’s inhumanity to man. Her writing highlights horrific events that are shocking, though she doesn’t set out purely to shock. All of the events in *Cleansed* are based on real life events that she has read about. *The Sun* ran a story about a woman who was raped and had her hand chopped off – this story came out whilst rehearsing *Cleansed*, it supports the work’s content. Her work is shocking but it is a reflection of real life. Also, there is the connection with the scream. Artaud was interested in the power of the scream for the actor. At the end of *Cleansed* Carl screams silently. This used to be vocal, but was changed in rehearsal after discussion with people from Amnesty International. They told us about the way in which a victim watched another being tortured. They felt they were screaming, but in fact they became paralysed with fear, and though they wanted to, they could not scream. So, in the penultimate scene, we have Carl physically screaming, but without the sound.

**Are there influences of style or form?**

Not in the aspect of breaking down the barriers between actor and audience. There is a kind of ‘total theatre’ approach through the imagery written into the script, however. The lighting and sound are used in conjunction with the acting to create effect. The rat sounds in particular are used in a metaphoric way rather than purely a literal one. The rats themselves could be another example, i.e. the Plague.

**Why take this approach? Is it possible to ‘shock’ a nineties audience?**

Sarah is aware of world events, and there is a place for theatrical representation of this. The war in former Yugoslavia is an example. Metaphors and images from this war were used in *Blasted* and *Cleansed*. People walked out of *Blasted* and there have been letters to the theatre about *Cleansed*. Sarah does not compromise an image just in case it is offensive. Surely it is more offensive to ignore or soften that image/real event to make it more palatable for an audience than to reflect the full atrocity of it.

**What is the value of Artaud’s legacy for modern directors?**

The fact that he left no set system leaves his theories open to interpretation. There is a lot of freedom here for a director. Lots of possibilities to move toward the unconventional. The Avant Garde theatre of the sixties and seventies has been a big influence on modern theatre. Through people like Brook, Artaud is in there, even though it might not be from a direct application of his theories. Directors and audiences are more open to elements of his work like actors being amongst the audience, or performing alongside puppets and animatronics.

## REVENGE TRAGEDY: A JACOBEAN PERSPECTIVE ON CRUELTY

Artaud looked to this genre in relation to the Theatre of Cruelty. He saw a style of play that would suit his theatre as, unlike the Greek and Roman tragedies, it did not relegate violence to the wings, but allowed battles, duels, murders and other brutal scenes to be performed for the audience.

Artaud particularly admired Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*; Tourneur's *The Revengers Tragedy* and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*. Commenting on theatre in relation to the plague (see the Theatre and Its Double) Artaud wrote that theatre **'...like the plague, contains some sort of strange sun, a light of abnormal intensity in which the difficult and even the impossible itself suddenly become our natural element. And 'Tis Pity She's A Whore by Ford, like all truly valid theatre, is bathed in the dazzling light that is shed by that Sun.'** The play contains scenes of explicit violence, murder, incest, physical destruction and blood shed, including one scene in particular, in which Giovanni emerges with the heart of his sister – his lover – on the point of a dagger.

Perhaps the appeal for Artaud lay in the suggestion that Giovanni and his sister are presented in their own, extreme dimension, which at no time indicates that they could conceivably behave in any other way, and which therefore allows the difficult and impossible to become their 'natural' element. A society under the influence of the plague becomes one which has none of the moral boundaries that inhibit extreme action. Is this the society that Giovanni and his sister exist in?

'If one is looking for an example of absolute liberty in revolt, Ford's *'Tis Pity She's A Whore* provides a poetic example linked to the image of absolute danger' (Artaud)

## ANTONIN ARTAUD: AN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY PERSPECTIVE ON CRUELTY

In christening his theatre the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud unintentionally sowed the seed for the most common misinterpretation of his ideas. For Artaud, 'cruelty' was not limited to the recognised definition, but would encompass far more. Too often, the term is taken literally and the result is a poor attempt at shock tactics for their own sake. For Artaud, cruelty was more than merely physical violence: **'The word cruelty must be taken in its broadest sense, not in the physical, predatory sense usually ascribed to it...From a mental viewpoint, cruelty means strictness, diligence, unrelenting decisiveness, irreversible and absolute determination...It is wrong to make cruelty mean merciless bloodshed, pointless and gratuitous pursuit of physical pain...'** (Artaud, 1932)

For Artaud, there was cruelty in all aspects of life. Indeed, the act of living itself was cruel. The influence of Gnostic philosophy instilled in him a belief that all living things experienced, and were capable of, cruelty (this philosophy could also be seen as the inspiration behind his fascination with 'doubles' and duality).

Perhaps a more accessible attempt to explain Artaud's notion of cruelty is given in Charles Marowitz's play *Artaud at Rodez*. In the play, Artaud is asked the question 'What is the Theatre of Cruelty?', to which he replies: **'Imagine, if you will, the last scene of Hamlet. When the stage is strewn with corpses and the audience is tumultuous with applause. Imagine then, the curtains part and not one actor rises for a curtain call. Imagine a doctor scrambles up to the stage with a stethoscope in his trembling fingers and applies the ear of the instrument to the hearts of the fallen actors. Imagine the audience spellbound and hushed as they might be at an acrobatic act that had suddenly gone wrong. Picture the doctor shaking his head forlornly, and the curtains hurriedly drawing closed. No words. No explanation – only the agonising silence of the living tipping back their seats and rustling their programmes as the unmistakable stench of death wafts itself from the other side of the curtains into the paralysed auditorium.'** (Marowitz 1977)



INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

SHOCKHEADED PETER

# SHOCKHEADED PETER



**"THE DESIGNS...ARE THE SHOW'S MOST BRILLIANT COMPONENT. LIFE-SIZE AND ASTONISHINGLY LIFE-LIKE MARIONETTES; TINY PUNCH AND JUDY-TYPE PUPPETS CONTROLLED BY HIGHLY VISIBLE ACTORS; FABULOUSLY BAROQUE WIGS; AND...THE VAST TOY-THEATRE-TYPE SET, WITH ITS PAINTED FLATS DOORS AND WINDOWS AND CURTAINS IN ITS EVERY LAYER. BUT...IT IS HARD TO SEPARATE ONE ELEMENT FROM ANOTHER..."**

28 APRIL 1998

INFLUENCED BY ARTAUD

# SHOCKHEADED

**SHOCKHEADED PETER** was first performed in April 1998 at the Lyric Hammersmith, produced by Cultural Industry. The play was directed and designed by Phelim McDermott, Julian Crouch and Graeme Gilmour, with music by the Tiger Lillies, and is an adaptation of Heinrich Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter*. Hoffman was a nineteenth-century doctor who created grotesque morality tales to amuse his younger patients who, he believed, had become bored with the traditional tales in which all the children were 'good' and 'clean'. His *Struwwelpeter* stories told the tales of Conrad, who sucked his thumbs, and had them snipped off by the Scissorman; Hammet, who played with matches until she set fire to herself; and Augustus, who refused to eat his soup and subsequently starved.

Hoffman's grimly comic poems reflect a darker, yet perhaps more truthful, vision of the world of children and their fears, making them ideal for a production using Theatre of Cruelty techniques.

The production was based on a set that resembled a run-down Victorian toy theatre with a series of doors that receded in distorted perspective. The performance linked grotesque costume and make-up with life-size and miniature puppets, music and stylised acting to form a disturbing visualisation of the tales. The combination of these elements was praised by critics, particularly in the way that they worked together rather than as separate aspects of the theatre. Alastair Macaulay wrote in *The Financial*

*Times*:

**'The designs...are the show's most brilliant component. Life-size and astonishingly life-like marionettes; tiny Punch and Judy-type puppets controlled by highly visible actors; fabulously baroque wigs; and...the vast toy-theatre-type set, with its painted flats doors and windows and curtains in its every layer. But...it is hard to separate one element from another...'** (28 April 1998)

Various elements of the Theatre of Cruelty are visible here. The combination of actors and puppets, the use of music as an integral part of the show and the overall sense of human cruelty were all central to the piece. Elements of ritual are also contained within the story of *Shockheaded Peter* itself. Born to wealthy parents, the child was so grotesque, with his long talons and straw-like hair, that they buried him beneath the floorboards. In true religious style, he is later resurrected, with a giant head and fingernails, striking a blow for ill-treated children everywhere.

Robert Butler in *The Independent on Sunday* was impressed with the way in which the performance of the actors and puppets in particular affected the audience.

**'The actors attach jump leads to the audience's imagination as they bring marionettes to life or go up in imaginary flames. Finding yourself screaming and squirming with horrified glee as naughty Conrad has his thumbs cut off is**

# PETER

**truly bizarre, particularly when Conrad is a puppet.'**  
(26 April 1998)

Perhaps the strongest link with the Theatre of Cruelty lies in the underlying messages that are sent to the audience. Crouch has said that part of the inspiration behind the text was his own experiences as a parent. Citing Robert Bly's book *The Sibling Society* as an influence, he commented that there is a 'lost art to being parents', which Bly explores through looking at fairy tales. The notion of being a parent is examined in the stories of the play, Peter's story being a prime example. In *The Guardian*, Lyn Gardner revealed how, in her view:

**'...on a darker, far more frightening level, the evening constantly puts our own attitudes to children and parenthood on trial...What parent has not, however fleetingly, thought longingly of stopping their child's crying or unceasing monstrous demands? What parent has not fantasised what life would be like if once again childless? Every family has a body somewhere under the floorboards, emitting the odour of memory which here sprouts in a forest of nails and hair through the cracks in the floor and into the subconscious.'** (25 April 1998)

It is perhaps this level of recognition of subconscious cruelty, that transforms this 'junk opera', from the merely nightmarish to a real example of Artaudian theatre.

## EXERCISE

- 1) Find a version of a short children's story or fairy tale that you believe would be suitable to adapt for the stage. Make sure that you have a clear message that you want to communicate to an audience through the performance of your piece.
- 2) Consider the elements of design that you would employ in order to achieve a grotesque sense of the Theatre of Cruelty in your production.
- 3) Present your ideas to the rest of the group. Support your presentation with  
EITHER a model box or sketches for your set design  
OR Sketches for costume designs for two of the characters, whether actors or marionettes.



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