Understanding Artaudian Theatre

Cruel, Absurd, Expressionistic, Surreal, Amazing or just Madness?

Surreal – of or pertaining to the dreamlike experiences, etc., dealt with by surrealism.

Surrealism – a movement in literature and art from about 1919, based on the expression of imagination uncontrolled by reason, and seeking to suggest the activities of the subconscious mind.

Absurdism – A theory of art that endeavours to contradict reason and common sense.

Expressionism – A theory of art that originated in Europe about the time of World War I, which emphasizes free expression of the artist's emotional reactions rather than the representation of the natural appearance of objects.

Grotesques - Unnatural characters, usually identified by a feature of physical, mental or speech behaviour, who stand for an exaggerated emotional quality.

Caricature - is an exaggeration of a character that is often ludicrous or grotesque. It can be comic, at times derogatory, and with the intention of ridicule.

Theatre of Cruelty – Antonin Artaud’s Philosophy (Dramatic Conventions)

- Theatre should be more than something acted on a stage and watched from seats.
- The stage should voice the inner turbulence of the human spirit.
- Physicality is more important than spoken words.
- Theatre should be taken from the human spirit, and in dreams words are not important, it is the images that are most powerful.
- Theatre should be a mirror of life, but enhanced and taken to the extreme.
- There should be no limits in achieving an emotional response equally from both performer(s) and audience.
- The theatre should include the audience as part of the experience. Entering the psyche of the audience and playing with inducing/inflicting altered states of mind upon them.
- There should be an equal emphasis on all five human senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.
- Overwhelming lighting and more should create a language of its own that can undermine and corrupt the basic principles of human logic, reason and language. Using spoken text/script and comprehensible language is unimportant and secondary.

Aspects/Elements of the Theatre of Cruelty

- Abstract / unnatural / contorted (twisted) gestures
- Archaic / shocking sounds
- Distorted / macabre (gruesome) images
- Unusual scenery (unsymmetrical, unbalanced…”surreal”)
- Lighting should not create a realistic atmosphere on stage (use of shades and colour)

All these aspects combined should provide an extreme sensory experience that provokes a completely heightened emotive response from performer and audience alike.

Modern Examples of the Theatre of Cruelty

- 3D IMAX Cinema
- Flight/ Driving simulators
- Carnival rides e.g. Ghost Train, Gravitron…etc.

An Actor of the Theatre of Cruelty

An actor does not necessarily represent a human or even a living thing, unlike the natural theatre of Stanislavski. An actor can play a spirit or represent an abstract ideal. Thus, the actor's body should be highly-trained in order to achieve a variety of positions with ease. Strong lungs are required to achieve both loud and quiet sounds in a variety of strenuous positions. Masks and puppets may also need to be mastered, as well as a complete confidence in everything that is undertaken - expressionism has no limits.

Theatre of Artaud is about confronting your dreams and making them a reality. Our dreams may terrorize us or provoke irrational fear that lingers into our everyday activity. They can reveal what we dare not think or speak. Theatre of Artaud demands you expose them! Cruel... or is it good theatre?