RETHINKING ARTAUD'S THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL WORKS

Rob Connick

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Committee:

Scott Magelssen, Ph.D., Advisor
Amy L. Morgan, Ph.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative
Jonathan Chambers, Ph.D.
Bradford Clark, M.F.A.
This study aims to counter the claims that Artaud was a practical failure and his theoretical writings had little value for theatre practice during his time. I instead argue that Artaud’s body of work shows his dedication to creating a theatre style that would differ drastically from the styles dominating French theatre. I use Artaud’s original texts to determine his Theatre of Cruelty aesthetics and to highlight how much of his work holds practical as well as theoretical value. By doing this, I argue that Artaud’s practical capabilities in theatre should be properly acknowledged and his theoretical contributions be viewed for their applicability to production.

This study continues the work of Artaud scholars such as Kimberly Jannarone who have challenged previous portrayals of Artaud by earlier scholars as a failed theatre artist whose theoretical writings are more emblematic of his mental illness than of any practical sensibilities. This study addresses and challenges many of the widely held notions about Artaud concerning his practical works as well as his essays on the plague, cruelty, and non-Western ritual. I argue that while these writings may seem to be disconnected writings, they may be directly connected to practical theatrical concerns.

To make these claims, I examine Artaud’s work at the Alfred Jarry Theatre to demonstrate the ways in which aspects of his developing theatre aesthetic are foreshadowed in his practical work while there. I then look at the ways that Artaud’s
Theatre of Cruelty manifestos can be seen at work in his production of *Les Cenci*, the only full-length play that he wrote. I connect his writings on “plague” and “cruelty” to established performance tropes and show how Artaud used both of these terms to describe the functionality of his new theatre. Finally, I compare the Balinese dance dramas Artaud witnessed at the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition to his Manifestos on Cruelty to show how Artaud’s arguably unstageable theories had, as a matter of fact, been staged through these performances.
To Jesi, April, and Taylor.
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Monster trucks and pro wrestling. That’s where this all started. While discussing Artaud’s views on theatre, Jim Davis commented that if Artaud were alive today, he’d probably be a fan of pro wrestling and monster truck rallies. Whether one agrees or not, it does attempt to answer the question that drives this study: What would Artaud’s ideal performance look like? The following pages represent my attempt to answer this question.

I would like to thank my advisor and mentor, Dr. Scott Magelssen, for all he has done for me academically and professionally. His excitement over my research, both on this dissertation and in other research interests, has helped keep me energized and engaged when this project began to feel overwhelming. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee for their time and effort. Jonathan Chambers has time and again been a voice of reason as I tried to balance studies with having a family. His impact on my academic career goes far beyond the classroom. While Brad Clark joined my committee relatively late in the process, I have always appreciated the practical focus he brings to theoretical discussions. It has been an honor and privilege to learn from all three of them. While I have never taken a class from Amy Morgan, I have worked with her on service projects for the university and have witnessed her commitment to education. I am very fortunate to have her on my committee.

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In July 1983, literary critic and cultural theorist Sylvère Lotringer conducted an interview with Jacques Latrémolière, the psychiatrist who had administered fifty-one electroshock treatments to Artaud between June 1943 and June 1944. During this interview, the two sparred over the validity of Artaud’s writings and their importance to current and future theoretical discourse:

LOTRINGER: His work has had an enormous effect on our culture. All the great theatre directors of the last twenty years—Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, the Living Theatre—from all over the world: Poland, the UK, the USA, all see Artaud as a seminal figure.

LATRÉMOLIÈRE: Listen, don’t talk about the theatre. He never had any theatrical success. Everything he wrote for the theatre was a flop. And don’t try to tell me that Artaud’s ideas in *The Theater and Its Double* have any importance whatsoever. It’s all about the plague. The proof is that the practical applications were a failure. So I’m sorry… when something weird happens, it always gets taken up.

LOTRINGER: It’s no accident that everything important in modern art since the beginning of the twentieth century turned to primitive societies, just as Artaud did. Our civilization was already losing its substantiality, everything was appearing and disappearing again at incredible speed. There was a strong sense that people needed to reconnect with the force of the traditional, to get back to our
roots in the earth and to rediscover serious rituals. That is what Artaud’s theatre is about and that is what drew him to Mexico and to Ireland. And you find that weird? I see it as a complete refusal to compromise. (Lotringer 24)

This brief excerpt from their discussion models much of the theoretical discourse surrounding Artaud’s works. While very few scholars would agree with Latrémolière’s claim that “[i]n 30 or 50 years . . . no one will talk about him anymore” (25), Artaud’s practical failures in the theatre have often served to position his Theatre of Cruelty aesthetics as futile when they are moved beyond the theoretical realm. This view encapsulates what generally constitutes the first wave of Artaud scholarship. Lotringer, though, echoes the sentiments of a second generation of Artaud scholars who have challenged the notion of Artaud as failure. Jerzy Grotowski and Kimberly Jannarone, as well as many others, have countered the foundational Artaud scholarship of Susan Sontag, Albert Bermel, and Eric Sellin by portraying those “failures” through different lenses in a way that limits the weight of these shortcomings or redefines the idea of shortcomings altogether.

I will use this study to address Artaud’s works through the major theoretical discourses brought up by Lotringer and Latrémolière and carried on by recent Artaud scholars: Artaud’s lack of practical success; his inability to coherently explain his connections between the plague, cruelty, and theatre; and his search for performative elements inherent in rituals from non-Western cultures. By examining these three aspects of Artaud’s career and how they have been interpreted by various scholars, I aim to present Artaud as an artist whose lack of clarity in both his practical projects and theoretical writings should be viewed as a deliberate organizing principle instead of an inherent weakness. By looking at Artaud’s career some sixty years after his death, one can easily see the flaws in Artaud’s choice of rhetorical strategy. These flaws,
however, should not be confused with a lack of intention and deliberation. In each of these three areas, this deliberation and attention to detail on Artaud’s part has been overlooked. I will provide examples from Artaud’s own texts to clarify what I see as the confusion surrounding these areas of Artaud’s career.

This study divides Artaud’s theatrical works into four sections: Artaud’s work at the Alfred Jarry Theatre; Artaud’s production of his lone full-length script, *The Cenci*; his essays concerning theatre and the plague and/or cruelty; and his search for new performance styles in the ritual performances of non-Western cultures, specifically through the Balinese performances at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris. By examining all of these works for the practical aspects they address, I contend that Artaud’s legacy as a practitioner and theorist deserves to be re-evaluated by scholars. I also believe that Artaud’s contributions to contemporary theatre practices are easier to recognize when looking at his larger body of work through this lens.

This study continues the examination of Artaud’s work where previous scholarship has ended. Kimberly Jannarone’s article “The Theatre before Its Double: Artaud Directs at the Alfred Jarry Theatre,” defends Artaud’s work at the Alfred Jarry Theatre. She argues that Artaud’s work there has been misrepresented as failures by scholars who have noted the short performance runs without addressing the possible factors (other than artistic ineptitude) that may have led to these short performances. She presents evidence that argues that not only did Artaud plan for these runs to be incredibly short, but that they also received positive critical reviews. While I agree with her argument, I feel that the short length of the production runs and the structure of the evenings make them difficult to compare to the traditional theatre performances in France at the time to which Artaud is most often compared. Furthermore, Jannarone does not address Artaud’s *The Cenci*, which I feel would more strongly support her claims regarding
Artaud’s practical capabilities. Whereas most other Artaud scholarship has focused on a single aspect of his career (practitioner, director, theorist, cultural ethnographer/appropriator, etc.), this study addresses these aspects in conjunction with each other to show how each of these are interrelated and function to serve a specific purpose: to create a theatrical style that would contradict the established norms of French theatre in an effort to revitalize what Artaud considered a dead art form.

**Artaud’s Texts**

Artaud’s manifestos, letters, poetry, and prose have been collected in both his *Oeuvres Complètes* and the English-translated *Complete Works*. The English translation, however, does not include the Artaud’s entire collection of letters and poetry, which are included in the French collection. Artaud wrote two major texts concerning theatre: *Les Cenci*, his adaptation of the Italian legend, and *Le Théâtre et son Double*, the collection of essays and manifestos that describes Artaud’s views on theatre. Artaud’s letters to friends and benefactors complement these texts and provide further clarification of Artaud’s stated ideals.

Simon Watson Taylor’s translation of *The Cenci* remains the sole English version of this text. Artaud’s other theatrical texts, however, can be found in a number of different anthologies and editions. I prefer Claude Schumacher and Brian Singleton’s *Artaud on Theatre: The Poetic and Inspirational Writings That Called for a Fundamental Regeneration of Western Art* as a reference because the editors have collected many of Artaud’s letters related to theatre, as well as his manifestos, pamphlets, and essays on the subject. The editors divide Artaud’s career into eight parts: his early writings from 1921 to 1925; his time working with the Alfred Jarry Theatre (1926 to 1930); his writings on cinema from 1926 to 1932; his attempts to establish a Theatre
Project for the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1931 to 1933); the essays comprising *The Theater and Its Double* and the lectures given in Mexico while Artaud was touring the country and preparing his collection for publication (1931 to 1937); notes and essays concerning *The Cenci* from 1935; a brief collection of his writings on religion and sexuality from his time at the mental institution in Rodez (1943 to 1946); and his writings, which began to again focus more directly on theatre, from his return to Paris in 1946 until his death in 1948. The editors provide a framing statement for each entry, introducing the reader to the context for each piece. They also cite each piece’s position in both Artaud’s published *Oeuvres Complètes* and, when applicable, his English-translated *Complete Works*.

When appropriate or necessary, I have used my own translations of Artaud’s original works. While the English translations available are a valuable resource, I have found that their interpretations of the material sometimes lead to further confusion over Artaud’s ideas. Many of these translations have been done by literary scholars and, while the translations may be stylistically alive, I feel that some theatrical concepts have been at times misinterpreted. The stage directions in Taylor’s translation of *Les Cenci*, for example, enhance the literary value of the work but do not stringently translate Artaud’s actual stage directions. While some of the translations may be very similar, I believe that the different wording I use more closely adheres to the original texts and sometimes clarifies Artaud’s remarks. When using my own translation has not provided any distinct advantage, I have chosen to use one of the existing translations.

I have broken this study into four chapters and begin by addressing Artaud’s practical works and then discussing his use of the terms Plague and Cruelty as well as his experience with the Balinese performance at the Paris Colonial Exposition in 1931. By doing this, I do not adhere to a chronological timeline. Artaud produced his works at the Alfred Jarry Theatre from
1926 to 1929, saw the Balinese performance at the Colonial Expo in 1931, wrote his Manifestos on Cruelty in 1932 and 1933, and produced *Les Cenci* in 1935. According to this timeline, Artaud’s practical works would serve as bookends to the subjects in this dissertation. I instead focus on Artaud’s practical work and aim to counter the view of Artaud as a failed practitioner before examining his theoretical works for their practical applicability. I chose to do this because I feel that it is important to keep Artaud’s practical talents in mind while reading his theoretical writings.

*Artaud’s Practical Work: The Alfred Jarry Theatre and Les Cenci*

Many early Artaud scholars have admitted that a realized Theatre of Cruelty seems to have been an impossible goal. Jerzy Grotowski states that “[t]he paradox of Artaud lies in the fact that it is impossible to carry out his proposals” (60). In *Artaud and After*, Ronald Hayman chronicles the financial failures of Artaud’s productions with the Alfred Jarry Theatre, and Robert Leach, in *Makers of Modern Theatre: an Introduction*, describes a similar fate for Artaud’s later work: “Financially as well as artistically *The Cenci* was a failure. After seventeen performances it was laid to rest” (162). Susan Sontag criticizes Artaud’s practical skills in her essay “Approaching Artaud,” noting that “[w]hat Artaud did on the stage as a director and as a leading actor in his productions was too idiosyncratic, narrow, and hysterical to persuade [a change in theatre practices]. He has exerted ideas through his ideas about the theatre, a constituent part of the authority of these ideas being precisely his inability to put them into practice” (48). Why then would generations of scholars be concerned with these theoretical ideas, the author of which himself cannot realize?
Recently, scholars have begun to refute the entrenched notion of Artaud as a failed artist. In “The Theatre before Its Double: Artaud Directs at the Alfred Jarry Theatre,” Kimberly Jannarone establishes a shift between generations of Artaud scholars. She contends that Artaud’s writings are the work of a man who had an actual gift for theatre making, legitimizing, in a way, his status for a generation (mine) that does not share the same theatrical and cultural concerns as the first wave of Artaud scholars, but that is willing to believe that he holds an important place in theatre history for both his practical as well as his theatrical strengths. (248, parentheses in original)

This validation of Artaud’s practical works differs drastically from the first wave of Artaud scholars. Jannarone’s study focuses on the projects Artaud directed while working with the Alfred Jarry Theatre. By examining the critical responses to these works, rather than the gate receipts or newspaper reviews, she discloses information normally left out of the conversation surrounding these performances. The Alfred Jarry Theatre productions only ran for a total of four evenings, leading many critics to consider them failures. Artaud, Roger Vitrac, and Robert Aron (the other founders of the Alfred Jarry Theatre), however, never intended for these productions to have long runs, as they were all performed during the hosting theatre’s short off-season. These shows also attracted notable guests, many of whom had no idea of the agitating production awaiting them. The combination of small audience size and their agitation may have contributed to the existing narrative concerning these shows. Jannarone, however, examines these issues in a more positive light.

Audience rosters record notable figures including ‘le Cartel,’ Paul Valéry, André Gide, and myriad royalty, press and artists in the packed houses. Each evening at
the Jarry Theatre also gave rise to a disturbance as well as to a serious theatrical performance, making the project a ‘simultaneous succès de scandale and succès d’estime.’ Many reviewers responded only to the scandals, but others analyzed the manifest theatrical talent and praised Artaud’s directing. Their commentary—often fervent, sometimes detailed—documents Artaud’s success at communicating his directorial ambitions. (249)

This description differs greatly from the previous accounts of these performances. What had previously been painted as performances pushed to close early because of mounting financial difficulties due to poor audience turnout instead appears in Jannarone’s assessment to be an intentionally short run whose controversial scandalous moments overshadowed its artistic merits in the popular press.

Does any of this even matter? Does Artaud’s success or failure really influence how we view his legacy? Whether one sides with the first wave of scholars or the new generation, both factions generally speaking advocate his continued importance in theatre studies. For some scholars, however, neither side addresses the truly important aspects of Artaud’s legacy. Jerzy Grotowski offers another method of approaching the paradox of Artaud’s legacy.

Grotowski, often cited as one of the most successful directors influenced by Artaud, offers several explanations for this seemingly contradictory fascination with a “failed” artist in his essay “He Wasn’t Entirely Himself.” Grotowski begins by offering Brecht as a similar example of a theorist whose ideals may be seen as contradictory to his performances. Brecht’s own productions “were perhaps less true to his theory but, on the other hand, very personal and subversive as they were, they showed a deep professional knowledge and never left us in a state of lassitude” (117). For Grotowski, theorists who also practice their art should not have their
theories validated or refuted by their practical work due to the variables that influence the practical aspects. A truncated rehearsal schedule, venue changes, the available talent pool, and many other factors all force the director to adapt his approach to the performance. These changes, necessary for the production, may seem to contradict the theories that exist in written, and thereby less malleable, form. Therefore, a theory’s applicability should not necessarily be tied to specific performances, since no performance should be expected to explicitly fulfill all of the goals of a particular theory. If a play fails, it may have failed due to outside factors, not the inefficacy of the theories that guided its production.

Grotowski also makes the argument that no theorist will ever be fully replicated through another director’s work. In describing what he labels “The Age of Artaud,” Grotowski warns scholars to challenge the ways in which “[t]he ‘theatre of cruelty’ has been canonized, i.e., made trivial, swapped for trinkets, tortured in various ways” (117). If Artaud himself could not encapsulate the Theatre of Cruelty in a single performance, why should we expect others to succeed at this task? Practitioners should instead look for ways to engage in examinations of these theories. Grotowski uses Peter Brook as an example:

When an eminent creator with an achieved style and personality, like Peter Brook, turns to Artaud, it’s not to hide his own weaknesses, or to ape the man. It just happens that at a given point of his development he finds himself in agreement with Artaud, feels the need of a confrontation, tests Artaud, and retains whatever stands up to this test. (117, emphasis in original)

For Grotowski, the failure (or success) of a theory in practice does not make it useless (or useful). Theatre productions serve the same end as laboratory testing: it serves to test a hypothesis and allows the practitioner to draw conclusions based on “whatever stands up to this
test.” Artaud’s utility to theatre has little to do with a set of rules for a Theatre of Cruelty; instead his suggestions for what theatre should be able to do offer practitioners a series of ideas with which to engage in their own works. Artaud, in his diverse collection of writings, offers many such suggestions to practitioners. Some of these suggestions are in works which have often been overlooked or discarded by theatre scholars.

I divide Artaud’s practical works into two separate chapters. In the first, “Artaud Directs at the Alfred Jarry Theatre,” I closely examine Artaud’s practical works at the Alfred Jarry Theatre between 1926 and 1929. I believe that Artaud’s practical works during his time at the Alfred Jarry Theatre provide glimpses into the foundational elements of his Theatre of Cruelty manifestos. Each of Artaud’s productions at the Alfred Jarry Theatre seems to foreshadow specific elements found in his manifestos. By comparing these practical aspects with Artaud’s later theoretical works, I feel that Artaud experimented with these concepts while at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, and that this experience may have helped Artaud establish the practical viability of his manifestos.

In the other chapter “Artaud’s Les Cenci: An Examination of the Theatre of Cruelty,” I will address the production choices Artaud used for his 1935 production of Les Cenci. Produced after Artaud wrote his manifestos on Cruelty, he felt this production would herald the arrival of a new theatrical style in France. In this chapter, I will look at several distinct aspects of that production to show how Artaud put many of the key aspects of his Theatre of Cruelty manifestos into practice. By doing this, I aim to prove that Artaud’s staging theories should not be quickly dismissed as impossible to accomplish. Both chapters demonstrate that Artaud had specific practical concerns in mind while writing his manifestos. While these staging techniques may not
have been accepted by the French critics, they did exist in the practical realm and not only in the theoretical realm where they have been kept by many scholars.

*Sickness, Plague, and Cruelty*

Latrémière considered *The Theatre and Its Double* useless for theatre scholars because “it’s all about the plague” (24). Indeed, many of the essays Artaud chose to include in that collection spend as much time discussing the plague or cruelty as they do addressing theatre. Scholars too often discard Artaud’s disjointed writings (which often include those essays discussing the plague, mental illness, and non-Western ritual), considering them emblematic of both his drug addiction and his mental illness; that is, they serve for these scholars more as a reminder of the damage done to Artaud’s capacities than as a legacy of his ideals. Throughout this dissertation, I caution against this type of compartmentalization. Artaud’s encounter with a van Gogh exhibition at *l’Orangerie* in Paris on February 2, 1947 provides a counter to the idea that Artaud’s writings, particularly after his return from Rodez and the electroshock therapy he endured there, contain too many perceived flaws to be of any value to scholars and practitioners. As Gene A. Plunka chronicles in the following description, Artaud could still write lucid theoretical works when he so chose:

Artaud was so overwhelmed by the work of what he considered to be a suffering artist who, like himself, was confined to an asylum late in life. Pierre Loeb sent Artaud some newspaper reviews of the exhibition. One such account, written by a psychiatrist, described van Gogh as a ‘degenerate of the Magnan type.’ Furious with this assessment of van Gogh, Artaud spent the next few days writing “*Van Gogh, le suicidé de la société,*” which depicted van Gogh as an artist of
extraordinary vision driven to suicide by society’s indifference. Artaud
maintained that psychiatrists did not understand the unique imagination of
creative geniuses. (19)

Artaud’s essay received the *Prix Sainte-Beuve* for the best essay of 1947. If Artaud can write
lucidly enough to receive his highest critical praise during the last stages of his career, the
contradictions and ambiguities of his other writings deserve consideration as potential rhetorical
strategies employed by Artaud to highlight the problematic nature of language. In my third
chapter, “Theatre, Cruelty, and the Plague,” I contend that Artaud’s writings on the plague say as
much about Artaud’s views on theatre as his Theatre of Cruelty manifestos did. For Artaud, the
plague represented an external factor that could change a body (either a physical body itself or
the “body” of a society) without any early warning signs. He frequently compared the way
theatre operates in a society to these conditions, which I will explore further in this chapter. I
also clarify Artaud’s use of the term “cruelty,” noting the ways that cruelty had been intended by
Artaud in contrast to how it has often been interpreted. This chapter addresses the various ways
scholars have read these texts and provides possible insight into Artaud’s views on theatre. I
argue that Artaud intended cruelty to refer more to the self-imposed rigor of creating a new
theatre style than to any physical violence that would occur on stage. The cruelty that occurs in
Artaud’s theatre is a mental cruelty, both for the audience and the actors. This chapter also
chronicles the use of plague as a literary and political device throughout history as a way of
contextualizing Artaud’s use of the term. As I point out, Artaud’s fascination with the term is
not as strange as many might think, as the plague has had a nearly continuous presence in social
discussion from antiquity to the present.
Several scholars have recently addressed the various uses of plague rhetoric. Jennifer Cooke’s *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film* documents the vast uses of plague rhetoric from various cultures throughout history. She positions Artaud’s texts about the plague as emblematic of cultural concerns and draws parallels to current uses of plague rhetoric. This text argues that Artaud’s supposed preoccupation with the plague was not as obscure as critics had made it seem. Instead, Artaud used an established literary and social construct, adapting it to the realm of performance. The use of plague in performance has continued to develop since Artaud’s time, becoming increasingly ingrained in popular culture through the development of the zombie genre of horror films and literature.

The term “cruelty” has become a point of contention as well, specifically when applied to Artaud’s theatrical practice. Grotowski, as well as many other recent scholars, criticizes those misinformed practitioners who have wrongly appropriated Artaud’s ideals for their own purposes, whose works are “full of a so-called cruelty which would not scare a child,” adding that “perhaps there is cruelty indeed, but only towards Artaud himself” (118). This second chapter, also addresses, then, the following questions: for what did Artaud intend the term “cruelty” to stand, and how does the plague connect to those intentions? Australian theatre scholar Jane Goodall offers several interpretations that not only connect the plague and cruelty but also show Artaud’s care in constructing these arguments. Goodall acknowledges Artaud’s specificity in word choice, highlighting his use of the multidefinitional French term *mal* for what we translate “plague” in his “Third Letter of Cruelty” as representative of Artaud’s mastery of the French language. Goodall argues that “[t]he double meaning of ‘mal’ as both ‘evil’ and ‘disease’ allows the term to be associated with the plague that is also to be the force of ‘guérison’ (‘healing/cure’)” (54). By this account, Artaud’s conflation of cruelty/evil and plague/disease,
which has confounded scholars since he wrote these texts, seems to be a conscious choice. With *mal* being used to describe both plague and cruelty, I agree with Goodall’s argument that Artaud implied that the two concepts are interrelated. This relationship connects Artaud’s works regarding the plague with his manifestos of Cruelty in a way that has often been overlooked and places the plague in his theatrical discussions.

Goodall considers this connection a foundational shift in the interpretation of these works. These works can be seen, she argues, as centering on “a question of ‘theater defining ‘cruelty’ for Artaud, as much as it is of ‘cruelty’ serving as an epithet for a theater” (55). She positions Artaud as someone who felt the call of shamanistic duty to use theatre as a means of psychological and physical healing instead of a theatre practitioner who attempted to create a new type of theatre based on the ritual cleansing of the body and soul. I agree that this is an important shift in our considerations of how his body of work should be approached. When his oeuvre is viewed this way, Artaud’s discussions of the plague and cruelty become the recurrent theme in his writings, and these writings then influence our understandings of his theatrical texts.

*Ritual and/in Performance*

My fourth chapter, “The Search for Theatre in Non-Western Ritual and Performance,” addresses Artaud’s fascination with non-Western civilizations and the ways that his experiences with these cultures influenced his approach to theatre. Because of his attraction to ritual as a form of theatre, Artaud has been considered by many scholars as what Gene A. Plunka describes as a modernist shaman of drama. Plunka considers “Artaud’s view of theatre [to be] therapeutic. To Artaud, the theatre is medicinal, a means of curing an ailing psyche” (20). Artaud’s thoughts on rituals first developed from his attendance at a Balinese dance performance; after his theatre
career had ended, Artaud took a trip to Mexico in an effort to find more evidence of the power of performance in rituals. The Balinese janger and calonarang dances that Artaud most likely attended at the Paris Colonial Exposition in August 1931 inspired his ideals for theatre. After *The Cenci* closed, Artaud’s tour of Mexico would influence his writings until his death. These events, however, have become points of contention by those who have studied indigenous Balinese and Mexican cultures. As cultural ethnography, Artaud’s interpretations of these cultures have proven less than faithful.

It is important to remember, however, that Artaud never intended to serve as cultural ethnographer while viewing these rituals and performances. He attended these events looking for staging techniques that he could use as alternatives to the practices at work on the contemporary French stage. Bettina L. Knapp describes the impact that the Balinese dance performance had on Artaud’s developing views of a Theatre of Cruelty:

> When Artaud first saw Balinese theater at the Colonial Exposition in Paris in 1931, he was drawn to it both spiritually and viscerally. Its mythical power revealed to him a spectral, phantomlike world *beyond* human imagination. Its structured stage language—the importance accorded gesture, facial expressions (including eye rolling), pantomime, chantings, evocative rhythms, and tonalities (sounds from what seemed to him to be newly created instruments)—ushered a whole new dimension into being. (89, emphasis in original)

Knapp’s description highlights those aspects that would inspire Artaud in formulating a theatre that he felt would inspire change in European theatre by “re-establishing theatre as pure and independent creativity whose products are hallucination and terror” (“On the Balinese Theatre” 98). Artaud intended to implement aspects of the ritual performances he had witnessed into his
newly developing theatre in France. Nicola Savarese found one slight problem with this claim: the performances Artaud saw at the Paris Colonial Exposition were popular, not religious, dances.

In “1931: Antonin Artaud Sees Balinese Theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition,” Savarese presents evidence that addresses those critics who claim Artaud appropriated the Balinese performances without understanding the significance of these performances. The janger dance that Artaud described was a popular (as opposed to religious) dance created during the 1920s. Artaud thought that the particular gestures used had been handed down for generations, which Savarese points out was not the case at all. Critics have claimed that Artaud perpetuated misunderstandings of non-Western performance traditions, but Savarese counters these claims, noting that Artaud explicitly intended to use what he saw as inspiration for his own developing theatrical ideals rather than a historical commentary on Balinese performances. In their book Balinese Dance in Transition, I Madé Bandem and Fredrik Eugene deBoer provide clear accounts of the two types of dance dramas that Artaud most likely saw: the popular janger dance and the more ritualistic calonarang. By examining the staging techniques and the dramatic structures of these two performances, I highlight those aspects that Artaud addressed in his own staging theories and detail the practical importance that these performances had on Artaud’s manifestos on Cruelty. By doing this, I focus Artaud’s discussion on non-Western ritual back into practical application rather than hypothetical theorization. By looking at Artaud’s own texts, I draw attention to specific examples that show how these productions helped to refine Artaud’s theatrical ideals and provided him with evidence that these techniques were stageable.
Focus and Limitations

Artaud’s body of work creates a variety of topics that warrant study and consideration. To do so in one dissertation, however, would be an insurmountable task. Because of this, I have focused on Artaud’s practical work in the theatre and the ways in which many of his texts relate directly to this specific aspect of his life. In each of my chapters, I use Artaud’s own texts as the basis for my arguments. I feel that this approach is beneficial for this study. Due to the large breadth of material that Artaud wrote, many scholars have approached Artaud’s practical considerations from political, religious, or rhetorical viewpoints (to name just a few). While these approaches all have considerable merit, I believe that they can take the focus off the fact that Artaud was not a writer who dabbled in theatre, but an accomplished theatre practitioner who used writing as a way to speak about the changes he felt that theatre could make in French society.

With this in mind, I will defer a discussion of much of the historical context surrounding the political rhetoric and ramifications surrounding Artaud’s use of cruelty and the plague, as well as the potentially political undercurrents of Artaud’s writing, to other excellent studies. Several scholars (most notably Kimberly Jannarone, Steven D. Brown, and Naomi Greene) have addressed the political statements implied by Artaud’s rhetoric. In particular, these three authors have considered Artaud’s statements in terms of fascist political ideology. These studies place Artaud’s texts in a historical context that considers the changing political climate both in France and worldwide.

I also choose not to discuss Artaud’s trip to Mexico and his writings surrounding Mexican culture. Artaud’s trip to observe the Tarahumara culture came after he had finished his theatrical career. While these writings may have still dealt with performance, specifically how
ritual connects to performance, they were written after Artaud produced any theatre or film performances and after his final Manifesto of Cruelty. As such, they do not connect well to the discussion of Artaud’s practical work vis-à-vis his concomitant staging theories, which is the focus of my study. Luis O. Arata’s “In Search of Ritual Theater: Artaud in Mexico” notes Artaud’s misunderstandings of the Tarahumara culture and discusses many of the issues surrounding Artaud’s concepts of performance and ritual and would be a strong starting point for a study on Artaud’s views of the performative aspects of ritual.

Conclusion

Artaud’s career has provided scholars with numerous opportunities to wrestle with the contradictions and incongruities in his writings, which have often been considered emblematic of his mental illness. Artaud, however, had the potential to write salient pieces even after being confined to a mental hospital and subjected to electroshock treatments. Because Artaud has demonstrated the ability to write clearly articulated works at various points throughout his career, I believe that the difficulties that occur while navigating through Artaud’s body of work must be examined as potentially intended moments where he sought to force readers to question the power and universality of language.

I will use Artaud’s theatrical career and writings to address the moments of questioning that have taken place in three general criticisms of Artaud’s works: his perceived lack of practical success in theatre; his perceived inability to coherently explain the connections he made between the plague, cruelty, and theatre; and the criticisms surrounding his search for “serious rituals” in non-Western cultures. All three of these categories have placed scholars into debate, with no clear answers in sight. Almost three decades after Sylvère Lotringer’s interview with
psychiatrist Jacques Latrémolière, Artaud and his texts remain popular topics for scholars in a variety of disciplines. All of these years later, we still have come no closer to definitively creating an established set of Artaud theories. Perhaps this is the legacy of the so-called “failed practitioner.” His writings aimed to create discourses that could not be solved through rational linguistic means. The best we can do, to paraphrase Grotowski, is test Artaud and keep whatever stands up to his own scrutiny.

This is what I attempt to do with this dissertation. By testing Artaud’s own words against his practical projects as well as the works of other theorists and practitioners from this time, I aim to show how Artaud’s legacy has affected performance in ways that have often been overlooked. I draw attention to the practicality of many of Artaud’s texts and show how these texts highlight Artaud’s desire to reshape theatre. He may not have always achieved critical success with his own performances, but he nonetheless provided future generations with ideas on how to drag theatre and its audiences out of a dormant passivity and reinvigorate it as an integral aspect of the welfare of society.
Antonin Artaud’s practical work as director, actor, and designer has rarely received as much attention from scholars as his theoretical works. For many scholars, Artaud’s theoretical concepts in production betray themselves as untenable. As Kimberly Jannarone notes, “Each major trend in Artaud scholarship has reinforced the image of Artaud as a brilliant/mad theoretician and inspirational writer but a failed theatre practitioner—worse, one doomed to failure” (247, emphasis hers). Some scholars, however, have recently attempted to problematize this argument. Jannarone validates Artaud’s practical work in a way that differs drastically from the legacy established by the “first wave of Artaud scholars,” which includes Albert Bermel, Jacques Derrida, Ronald Hayman, and Susan Sontag, among many others. Jannarone examines the plays Artaud directed at the Alfred Jarry Theatre as her basis for discussing Artaud’s contributions as a theatre practitioner. This chapter will continue her exploration by looking at theatre critic’s responses and Artaud’s writings during this time to show that Artaud’s work there influenced his later theoretical and practical works, specifically his productions of the third act of Paul Claudel’s *Partage de Midi* and August Strindberg’s *Le Songe*.

Jannarone’s study focuses on the projects Artaud directed while working with the Alfred Jarry Theatre (*Les Mystères de l'amour* by Roger Vitrac, *Ventre brûlé ou la mere folle* by Artaud, and *Gigone* by Max Robur, pseudonym for Robert Aron [1 and 2 June 1927], the third act of *Partage de midi* by Paul Claudel and the film *The Mother* [14 January 1928], *Le Songe* by August Strindberg [2 and 9 June 1928], and *Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir* by Roger Vitrac [24
and 29 December 1928 and 5 January 1929).\(^1\) By examining the critical responses to these works, rather than the gate receipts or newspaper reviews, she discloses information normally left out of the conversation surrounding these performances. The four productions ran for a total of four evenings, leading many critics to consider them failures. Artaud, Roger Vitrac, and Robert Aron (the other founders of the Alfred Jarry Theatre), however, never intended for these productions to have long runs, as they were all performed during the hosting theatre’s short off-season. These shows also attracted notable guests, many of whom had no idea of the agitating production that awaited them in each case. The combination of small audience size and agitation may have contributed to the existing narrative concerning these shows. Jannarone, however, examines these issues in a more positive light.

Audience rosters record notable figures including ‘le Cartel,’ Paul Valéry, André Gide, and myriad royalty, press, and artists in the packed houses. Each evening at the Jarry Theatre also gave rise to a disturbance as well as to a serious theatrical performance, making the project a ‘simultaneous *succès de scandale* and *succès d’estime*.’ Many reviewers responded only to the scandals, but others analyzed the manifest theatrical talent and praised Artaud’s directing. Their commentary—often fervent, sometimes detailed—documents Artaud’s success at communicating his directorial ambitions. (Jannarone 249)

This description differs greatly from the previous accounts of these performances. Previous scholars painted these performances failures; often, these shows would have been pushed to close early because of poor audience turnout. These performances, though, instead appear to have had intentionally short runs and the controversial scandalous moments outweighed the

\(^1\) A history of Artaud’s practical work can be found in Schumacher and Singleton’s *Artaud on Theatre*. 
overall artistic merits of the shows in the popular press. As Jannarone has proven, a reexamination of Artaud’s time with the Alfred Jarry Theatre may provide a different view on Artaud’s status as a failed practitioner. This chapter will examine these productions in order to find similarities to Artaud’s later theoretical writings in ways that I feel show that the productions at the Alfred Jarry Theatre allowed Artaud the opportunity to experiment with his still-developing Theatre of Cruelty aesthetics.

Earlier Practical Experience

In a letter to Jean Paulhan written on September 13, 1932, Artaud attempted to clarify what cruelty in practice would be. “Cruelty is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity. There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness” (“Letters on Cruelty,” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 102).² This letter, written well after his work with the Alfred Jarry Theatre, shows how Artaud imagined every aspect of theatre functioning together. In order for a director to accomplish this, he or she would need to be able to articulate to the designers what the finished product would look like. A director should then, according to Artaud, have experience in all of these aspects. By the time he directed at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, Artaud would prove his talent in all of these.

Artaud had garnered a wealth of theatre experience prior to joining the Alfred Jarry Theatre, working with many of the French Theatre’s more renowned avant-garde directors. When looking at Artaud’s body of work, it becomes difficult to dismiss his talents in various theatrical disciplines. He began receiving walk-on roles at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre in 1920. Until this point, Artaud had pursued a literary career. The theatre, though, offered a sense of

² “La cruauté est avant tout lucide, c’est une sorte de direction rigide, la soumission à la nécessité. Pas de cruauté sans conscience, sans une sorte de conscience appliqué” (OC IV: 121).
experimentation that literature and the other arts arguably did not. Naomi Greene addresses the theatre scene in Paris during around 1920:

Here, a number of important directors were rebelling against naturalistic theatre conventions which favored plays offering a ‘slice of life’—more often than not involving the most sordid aspects of contemporary life. Among these new directors was Lugné-Poe, who founded the Théâtre de l’Œuvre in 1893. Interested in producing works of a symbolist and poetic nature, Lugné-Poe staged plays by Maeterlinck, Ibsen, Wilde, Alfred Jarry, Gide, and Claudel. A great admirer of Lugné-Poe, Artaud had the good fortune to begin his acting career under this avant-garde director. (Greene 18)

Artaud would appear as a minor character in the Théâtre de l’Œuvre’s 1921 production of symbolist poet Henri de Régnier’s *Les scruples de Sganarelle*. Looking at the plays staged by Lugné-Poe shows the influence he had on Artaud’s own directorial dispositions. Not only did Artaud name the Alfred Jarry Theatre after one of Lugné-Poe’s favorite playwrights, he would also direct one of Claudel’s plays while there.

After the theatre season ended for the summer, Artaud auditioned for Firmin Gémier, who declined to use him. Gémier, however, recommended Artaud to Charles Dullin, who would have a profound impact on Artaud’s career. Dullin founded the Théâtre de l’Atelier, which would become one of the more influential avant-garde theatres during this time. While Artaud seemed drawn to Dullin’s disdain for naturalism, he never fully embraced Dullin’s approach to acting that “laid great stress upon the mechanics of acting, such as breath and diction” (Greene 19). Artaud may not have incorporated every aspect of Dullin’s techniques, but he did place tremendous importance on the actor’s mechanics.
In “Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto),” Artaud noted that actors take on a unique blend of importance and subservience in his Theatre of Cruelty. “The actor is both an instrument of first importance,” he wrote, “since it is upon the effectiveness of his work that the success of the spectacle depends, and a kind of passive and neutral element, since he is rigorously denied all personal initiative” (Mary Catherine Richards trans., 98).³ Artaud insinuated here that every aspect of the actor’s presence on stage should be carefully orchestrated. He would more explicitly state the type of mechanical precision he longed for in his productions, stating “[t]he spectacle will be calculated from one end to the other, like a code (une langage). Thus there will be no lost movements, all movements will obey a rhythm” (Mary Catherine Richards trans., 98).⁴ The actors should be used in ways similar to the scenery and lighting, argues Artaud: they would be used in specific movements and gestures to enhance the message of the play. This intense attention to detail encapsulates Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty ideals.

In addition to acting, Artaud gained valuable experience as a designer. In 1922, he designed scenery and costumes for several of Dullin’s productions. He served as scenic designer for Dullin’s productions of Les Olives by Lope de Rueda, L’Hôtellerie by Francesco de Castro, and La Vie est un songe by Jose Calderón. He also designed the costumes for Les Olives and La Vie est un songe. Artaud would later (1931) design the lighting for a recital given by dancer Helba Huara, after he had finished his work with the Alfred Jarry Theatre. While this would not affect his directing at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, it would represent the final aspect Artaud needed

³ “L’acteur est à la fois un element de première importance, puisque c’est l’efficacité de son jeu que dépend la réussite du spectacle, et une sorte d’élément passif et neutre, puisque toute initiative personelle lui est rigoureusement refuse” (OC IV: 117).
⁴ “Le spectacle sera chiffré d’un bout à l’autre, comme une langage. C’est ainsi qu’il n’y aura pas de mouvement perdu, que tous les mouvements obéiront à un rythme” (OC IV: 118).
to put into practice. His most important work, however, would come between these design experiences at the Alfred Jarry Theatre.

_The Beginning of the Alfred Jarry Theatre_

While the Alfred Jarry Theatre would have its first production in 1927, the framework was laid much earlier. Artaud became involved with the Surrealists in 1924, finding them to be “kindred spirits who, like himself, wanted to destroy traditional modes of European thought and culture in order to prepare the way for a rebirth of man’s dormant inner life” (Greene 22). Some of those Surrealists he felt closest to included André Breton, Robert Desnos, and Roger Vitrac. Artaud quickly immersed himself in the movement, forgoing most theatrical possibilities to serve as editor of the third issue of _la Révolution surréaliste_. Perhaps just as quickly, though, Artaud wore out his welcome. In 1926, the Surrealists excommunicated Artaud, Philippe Soupault, and Roger Vitrac.

Several factors contributed to Artaud’s break with the Surrealists. At some point, philosophical shifts about art and life began to occur as Artaud’s more cynical view of the world rankled several notable Surrealists, who saw the world in a more positive light. Artaud noted the philosophical shift in “À la grand nuit ou le Bluff surréaliste” as simply “what separates me from the Surrealists is that they like this life as much as I despise it” (Rob Connick trans.)^5^ The Surrealists could never fully embrace Artaud’s apocalyptic views on the world, and he could never accept an artistic revolution that did not seek to destroy the foundations of the arts. As Elizabeth Sakellaridou points out, Artaud definitely saw no neutral ground on which to meet French theatre practices: “Artaud never forgave the theater its mortality nor language its

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^5^ “Ce qui me sépare des surréalistes c’est qu’ils aiment autant la vie que je la méprise” (_OC_ I: 367).
estrangement from the natural world of things. But, his wish to destroy the theater was as ardent as his desire to breathe new life to it” (Sakellaridou 51). The Surrealists, meanwhile, took a more playful approach to new methods of expression. While this aspect alone would seem to signify an inevitable separation, several other factors also played a significant role in the contentious split.

Artaud’s disgust with the French stage makes the Surrealists’ official reason for excommunicating him utterly ironic. Naomi Greene highlights the problems in their reasoning, that “[t]he Surrealists resented Artaud’s preoccupation with the stage because they considered the theater decadent and bourgeois. They apparently failed to realize that Artaud shared their viewpoint and that all his efforts were directed to changing the conventional drama that they abhorred” (27, emphasis in original). The Surrealists booted Artaud and Roger Vitrac, in essence, for agreeing with them. While they all shared the same views on French theatre, Artaud never ceased looking for ways to reinvent the art. Perhaps because the Surrealists had difficulty accepting Artaud’s destructive rhetoric, they could not comprehend why he valued the decadent art form. When Artaud accepted compensation from the Swedish embassy for the Alfred Jarry Theatre’s production of Le Songe, it only reinforced the notion that Artaud was willingly participating in the decadent and bourgeois theatre the Surrealists despised.

The French theatre, however, had a storied avant-garde performance tradition. Artaud was neither the first nor the most famous artist to challenge the status quo. Artaud drew his inspiration for his theatre from Alfred Jarry, whose own predominantly Symbolist aesthetics challenged French concepts of theatre decades earlier in 1896 with his production of Ubu Roi. Even the Surrealists, through Guillaume Apollinaire and The Breasts of Tiresias in 1917, attempted to change French theatre. Only a few years before the formation of Artaud’s theatre,
Jean Cocteau wrote *The Eiffel Tower Wedding Party*. While none of these changed the course of French culture away from Molière (the playwright most often connected with “traditional” French theatre by Artaud and these other artists), they nonetheless show that Artaud was not operating as a lone voice of change. Other reasons, then, seem to have also contributed to Artaud’s separation from the Surrealists.

Another philosophical shift also contributed to the schism and became the reason for the largest public attacks between Artaud and the Surrealists: Marxism had gained support throughout the group, much to the chagrin of Artaud. Both sides found notable faults with the others’ rationale. For Artaud, Surrealism and Marxism could never coexist. “The acceptance of Marxist doctrines by some of the Surrealists horrified Artaud,” writes Greene:

> No political doctrine, he asserted indignantly, could resolve the spiritual problems destroying man; politics could only distract men from confronting fundamental dilemmas. This immediate and instinctive reaction found warm support, years later, in the writings of Albert Camus. *The Rebel* sets forth Camus’ conviction that an essential dichotomy irreparably separated the Surrealists, believers in the marvelous and in the forces of unreason, from the Marxists, whose basic doctrines were built on rationality and order. At the time, however, Artaud appears to have been the only one aware of all the implications of this fundamental dichotomy.

(23-24)

Artaud’s concerns led to his public excommunication from the group in 1926. In 1927, the Surrealists attacked Artaud for his lack of vision. Louis Aragon, André Breton, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret, and Pierre Ulik all signed the brochure “*Au grand jour*” (“In Broad Daylight”), in which they jointly criticized their former associate and publicly declared their allegiance to
Communism. In this leaflet, they berated Artaud for “being concerned with the isolated pursuit of literature rather than with the welfare of man and society” (Greene 24). Artaud would counter with his own brochure. From the name (“A la grande nuit ou le bluff surréaliste”—“In the Dark of the Night or The Surrealist Bluff”) through the content, Artaud responded to all of the claims against him. In particular, he responded to the claim that he was not concerned with society’s welfare by arguing that “political revolution alone was worthless because it could not effect a transformation of man’s deepest nature” (Greene 24). While Breton and Artaud would begin to collaborate sporadically again after 1928, their friendship would be halted until they reconciled in 1936.

Artaud continued his assault on contemporary French theatre without the support of the Surrealists. Artaud, in collaboration with Vitrac and Aron, began his attempt to create a new theatre that would confront and challenge the audience, rather than allowing them to passively view the action on stage. In 1926, Dr. René Allendy and his wife provided the funding needed to start the process. Artaud soon began promoting the theatre that would appear shortly. They named it after Alfred Jarry as an homage to the furor that Ubu Roi created upon its premiere in 1896. Artaud hoped that his theatre would provoke the same type of reaction. In a pamphlet advertising the Alfred Jarry Theatre, Artaud explicitly stated the goals for this venture:

[W]ith every production we are playing a very serious game and the significance of our efforts lies in the very nature of this seriousness. We are not appealing to the audience’s mind or senses, but to their whole existence. To theirs and ours. We stake our lives on the show that is taking place on stage. If we did not have a very deep, distinct feeling that part of our intimate life was committed to that show, we would not think it necessary to pursue this experiment further.
Audiences coming to our theatre know they are present at a real operation involving not only the mind but also the very senses and flesh. From then on they will go to the theatre as they would to a surgeon or dentist, in the same frame of mind, knowing, of course, that they will not die, but that all the same this is a serious business, and that they will not come out unscathed. If we were not convinced we were going to affect them as deeply as possible, we would think ourselves unworthy of this, our highest task. They must be thoroughly convinced we can make them scream. (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre (1926-7),” Victor Corti trans., 31-32)⁶

This lengthy section provides us with as clear a sense of Artaud’s intentions as we could expect from his writing. Artaud found an intensity and importance in theatre that refutes the Surrealist view of theatre as a decadent luxury. Instead, as this selection points out, Artaud saw theatre as a powerfully charged art form that had the potential to make distinct, lasting changes in ways that political affiliations could not.

One of Artaud’s most recognizable stances dealt with literature. Specifically, it would seem from many of his more popular writings, particularly *The Theater and Its Double*, that it was Artaud’s disdain for the written word that led him to advocate its removal from the stage.

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⁶“qu’à chaque spectacle monté nous jouons une partie grave, que tout l’intérêt de notre effort réside dans ce caractère de gravité. Ce n’est pas à l’esprit ou aux sens des spectateurs que nous nous adressons, mais à toute leur existence. A la leur et à la nôtre. Nous jouons notre vie dans le spectacle qui se déroule sur la scène. Si nous n’avions pas le sentiment très net et très profond qu’une parcelle de notre vie profonde est engagée là dedans, nous n’estimerons pas nécessaire de pousser plus loin l’expérience. Le spectateur qui vient chez nous sait qu’il vient s’offrir à une operation véritable, où non seulement son esprit mais ses sens et sa chair sont en jeu. Il ira désormais au théâtre comme il va chez le chirurgien ou le dentiste. Dans le même état d’esprit, avec la pensée évidemment qu’il n’en mourra pas, mais que c’est grave, et qu’il ne sortira pas de là dedans intact. Si nous n’étions pas persuadés de l’atteindre le plus gravement possible, nous nous estimerions inférieurs à notre tâche la plus absolue. Il doit être bien persuadé que nous sommes capable de le faire crier” (*OC* II: 21-22).
What then should we make of Artaud’s views on the importance of the scripts for the Alfred Jarry Theatre productions? He wrote that

[I]t is quite clear we will work with actual scripts. The plays we intend to perform are part of literature, of whatever type. Yet how can we manage to reconcile our desire for freedom and independence with the need to conform to a certain number of directions as laid down in the script? The way we are trying to define theatre, only one thing seems sure to us, only one thing seems real. The script. But the script as a separate reality, existing as something self-sufficient in its own right, . . . simply for the air breathed in enunciating it. That’s all. (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre (1926-7),” Victor Corti trans., 32-33)⁷

Artaud explicitly stated that he intended to use existing scripts. He claimed that the script was the only thing that was “real” in theatre. The script’s importance, though, laid not in its attention to details, but rather in the way that it sounded when spoken. Artaud found a tremendous amount of value in a text’s ability to do this. Conversely, he took umbrage with those aspects of a text that could run counter to the creative process, namely the detailed descriptions of ornate scenery that made the stage look like a painting or sculpture come to life. He found these unnecessary, because they disallowed the creative process to occur.

At this point in his career, Artaud sought to eliminate the stage directions from the script. Rather than follow these established methods of production, the Alfred Jarry Theatre would

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⁷ “Il est bien évident, toutefois, que nous travaillerons sur des textes déterminés; les œuvres que nous jouerons appartiennent à la littérature, quoi qu’on en ait. Comment arriver à concilier notre désir de liberté et d’indépendance avec la nécessité de nous conformer à un certain nombre de directives imposées par les textes? Pour cette définition que nous essayons de donner au théâtre, une seule chose nous semble invulnérable, une seule chose nous paraît vraie: le texte. Mais le texte en tant que réalité distincte, existant par elle-même, se suffisant à elle-même, . . . mais simplement quant au déplacement d’air que son énonciation provoque. Un point, c’est tout” (OC II: 36).
encourage directors to experiment with alternative approaches. Artaud bluntly and explicitly stated that “as to production theory, we boldly leave it to chance. In the theatre we want to create, chance is our idol. We are not afraid of any failures or disasters” (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre (1926-7),” Victor Corti trans., 32). A director could not take the proper chances if he or she maintained the integrity of the stage directions. Artaud referred to these as “the thing which seems to us most basically embarrassing in theatre, and most basically destructible” (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre (1926-7),” Victor Corti trans., 33). He concluded the first leaflet on the Alfred Jarry Theatre by noting that “[t]hese trappings, this visual display are what we want to cut down to the bare minimum and immerse in a solemnity and a spirit of disturbing action” (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre (1926-7),” Victor Corti trans., 33). These passages show how Artaud intended to use the script in a way that still maintained his goal of reimagining the productions that would be staged at the Alfred Jarry Theatre.

With the theatre nearing its inaugural production, Artaud wrote another manifesto. In “Manifesto for an Abortive Theatre,” Artaud described what the Alfred Jarry Theatre hoped to accomplish in terms that seem to foreshadow his manifestos on Cruelty. One particular passage highlights the Alfred Jarry Theatre’s confrontation with the contemporary French theatre of the time as well as begins Artaud’s discussion of gesture as a key component of his theatre language:

> We are not creating a theatre so as to present plays, but to succeed in uncovering the mind’s obscure, hidden and unrevealed aspects, by a sort of real, physical

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8 “C’est assez dire qu’en fait de mise en scène et des principes nous nous en remettons bravement au hasard. Dans le théâtre que nous voulons faire, le hasard sera notre dieu. Nous n’avons peur d’aucun échec, d’aucun cataclysme” (OC II: 25).
9 “Car ce qui nous paraît essentiellement gênant dans le théâtre, et surtout essentiellement destructible” (OC II: 26).
10 “C’est cela, cet attirail, ce déploiement visuel que nous voulons réduire à son minimum impossible et recouvrir sous l’aspect de gravité et le caractère d’inquiétude de l’action” (OC II: 26).
projection. We are not aiming to create an illusion of things which do not exist, as was done heretofore, as has been done up to now in the theatre. On the contrary, we aim to make a certain number of scenes—indestructible, irrefutable images appealing directly to the mind—appear on the stage. The very objects, props, and scenery on stage must be understood in an immediate sense, without being transposed. They must not be taken for what they represent, but for what they really are. Production as such, the actors’ movements, must be considered only as the visible signs of an invisible or secret language. Not one theatrical gesture must be devoid of the fatality of life and the mysterious happenings that occur in dreams. (Victor Corti trans., 35)\(^{11}\)

Before the Alfred Jarry Theatre had produced its first performance, Artaud had laid out a framework for the types of scripts that would be used, the acting styles that would be incorporated into the performances and the influence that the director would exert over the entirety of the production.

\(^{11}\)“Si nous faisons un théâtre ce n’est pas pour jouer des pièces, mais pour arriver à ce que tout ce qu’il y a d’obscur dans l’esprit, d’enfoui, d’irrévélu se manifeste en une sorte de projection matérielle, réelle. Nous ne cherchons pas à donner comme cela s’est produit jusqu’ici, comme cela a toujours été le fait du théâtre, l’illusion de ce qui n’est pas, mais au contraire à faire apparaître aux regards un certain nombre de tableaux, d’images indestructibles, indéniables qui parleront à l’esprit directement. Les objets, les accessoires, les décors même qui figureront sur la scène devront être entendus dans un sens immédiat, sans transposition; ils devront être pris non pas pour ce qu’ils représentent mais pour ce qu’ils sont en réalité. La mise en scène, proprement dite, les évolutions des acteurs ne devront être considérées que comme les signes visible d’un langage invisible ou secret. Pas un geste de théâtre qui ne portera derrière lui toute la fatalité de la vie et les mystérieuses rencontres des rêves” (OC II: 29-30).
By creating a spectacle that deviated from the norm to this extent, Artaud anticipated a backlash from the audience. He constantly referred to the performances as processes rather than finished products. The audiences, however, seemed to ignore this method of approaching the productions. The first Alfred Jarry Theatre productions occurred on June 2 and 3, 1927 at the Théâtre de Grenelle. The evening consisted of three short plays: Artaud’s *Ventre brûlé ou la mere folle*, Vitrac’s *Les Mystères de l’amour*, and Max Robur’s (a pseudonym for Robert Aron) *Gigone*. Commercially, the event could not be described as anything less than an abject disaster. While the auditorium held capacity crowds, the two-night run resulted in a loss of over seven thousand francs. On the surface, Artaud seemed undeterred by this. He acknowledged the problems facing the Alfred Jarry Theatre, but also maintained an optimism for its future. In a letter to Jean Paulhan written a month after the productions, he conceded that the Alfred Jarry Theatre is not above the tribulations facing many of the theatres at the time:

Even the Jarry Theatre is ill, from lack of funds, and we do not know if we shall be able to keep it going. I am the first person to acknowledge the faults of our first experiment. We have excuses: time, money, but there is still *Les Mystères de l’amour* and whatever [theatre critic] Monsieur Benjamin Crémieux thinks of it, it remains a play made for the stage. (“To Jean Paulhan,” Victor Corti trans., 37)\(^{12}\)

The financial failure of the first production did not dampen Artaud’s belief in the importance of his work at the Alfred Jarry Theatre. He defended *Les Mystères de l’amour* as a worthy

\(^{12}\) "Le Théâtre Jarry lui-même est bien malade, faute de fonds, et nous ne savons pas du tout si nous pourrons le continuer. Je suis le premier à me rendre compte des lacunes de notre première tentative. Nous avons certes des excuses: le temps, l’argent, mais il reste *les Mystères de l’amour* qui, quoi qu’en pense M. Benjamin Crémieux, est une pièce faite pour le théâtre" (*OC* III: 130-131).
endeavor because “this play and its scenic conception contain a resistance, a density given to things of a moral order which were worth pointing out” (“To Jean Paulhan,” Victor Corti trans., 37).\textsuperscript{13} Artaud’s outward faith in his work seemed unmoved.

At this point, however, Artaud began to attack the friends that had supported him, a habit that would continue until his death. In questioning Crémieux’s taste in theatre, Artaud disparaged the very directors who taught him: “I am surprised that Monsieur Benjamin Crémieux should be charting the theatrical movement in those blessed years of 1926-7 and should still cling to those doddering old corpses, those anti-representative phantoms of Jouvet, Pitoëff, Dullin, even Gémier, etc.” (“To Jean Paulhan,” Victor Corti trans., 37).\textsuperscript{14} While this letter was undoubtedly intended to be part of a private conversation, Artaud’s attack points to a rhetorical strategy that he would employ in many of his later writings.

Artaud used attacking language as a way of generating a response to his letters and essays. This caustic approach to both friendship and writing leads Steven Brown to compare Artaud to a “spider who is weaving out subtle threads in all directions, alert to the slightest disturbance – a possible insult, the hint of money, a rumor” (236). Artaud positioned Crémieux as an enemy, but Jannarone mentions that his “response to this evening is representative of all Jarry Theatre reviews – brief and favorable to Artaud’s direction” and that Crémieux “would continue to admire Artaud’s stagings over the next two years” (252). As would be the case with the other Alfred Jarry Theatre productions, Artaud’s reaction to criticism was to attack those closest to him, including one of the few critics fully on his side. This often forced Artaud to

\textsuperscript{13} “Bref il y a dans cette pièce et dans sa conception scénique une certaine résistance, une densité données à des choses d’ordre moral qui valaient d’être signalées” (OC III: 131).

\textsuperscript{14} “Je m’étonne que M. Benjamin Crémieux dressant un tableau du mouvement théâtral dans ces ans bénis du théâtre 1926-1927 s’attache encore à ces pourritures branlantes, à ces fantômes anti-représentatifs qui sont Jouvet, Pitoëff, Dullin, voire Gémier, etc” (OC III: 130).
search for new venues for his talents rather than developing a long-lasting career with any one
director or theatre. Claude Schumacher lists many of the former collaborators that Artaud railed
against: “Both verbally and in writing, he viciously attacked Dullin, Pitoëff, and Jouvet who had
given him support and whose work he had previously admired. He quarreled with his friends of
the Nouvelle Revue Française and with Roger Vitrac” (xxiv). Schumacher also includes a
section of a letter from Jean Paulhan, another of Artaud’s frequent advocates/targets, to Artaud
that highlights the difficulties that arose from dealing with him: “You should be surprised that
you have friends, not that you have enemies” (xxiv). This combativeness would seem to
dissuade critics from attempting to forge any bonds with the combustible head of the Alfred
Jarry Theatre; why should they risk their reputations defending an upstart theatre that did not
seem to appreciate the aid? This would also cause the numerous notable theatre practitioners
that knew (and previously worked with) Artaud to keep their distance from his upcoming
performances, knowing that the any attempt at reconciliation would seemed doomed to failure at
the slightest hint of dissatisfaction.

The Second Production: Controversy through Cinema and the Use of Paul Claudel’s Partage de
Midi

Almost six months passed between productions by the Alfred Jarry Theatre. With the
debut losing the amount of money it did, finding funding proved more challenging the second
time around. The Alfred Jarry Theatre switched its base of operations to the Comédie des
Champs-Élysées during one of the down times for that theatre, for a performance on January 14,
1928. For the Alfred Jarry Theatre’s second performance, Artaud intensified the agitation he
aimed to cause. He chose to include a screening of Pudovkin’s film The Mother, which had been
Connick 36

banned by French censors, at least in part as a protest against censorship of any kind by the government. While Artaud’s choice to show a film in the evening is important because of his connection to the artistic development of French Surrealist cinema, the second half of the evening seems more surprising for theatre scholars. Artaud presented the third act of Paul Claudel’s *Partage du midi* without the author’s consent. In fact, none of the actors involved knew the actual play they were producing. Artaud let everyone know at the end of the performance, when he entered the stage and announced “The play we have just performed is by M. Paul Claudel, French ambassador to the United States and a traitor” (Hayman 73). The evening generated the expected furor and led to Jean Paulhan’s friendship with Artaud becoming further strained, since the former considered Claudel a close friend.

Upon closer inspection, however, it seems that Artaud’s mockery of Claudel at the end of the evening was more for show than originally thought. Artaud’s well-known reconciliation with the Surrealists occurred at this event when André Breton silenced the crowd who began laughing at the performance. Breton did this not only out of loyalty to Artaud, but also because the Surrealists “shared none of Claudel’s religious, patriotic, or moral convictions, but they recognized in him a great and powerful wordsmith of the French language” (Schumacher 41). If Artaud indeed had intended to attack someone the Surrealists held in high regard, it would seem unlikely that their armistice would have occurred.

Artaud’s own letters seem to contradict his spiteful benediction. In a letter to actress Génica Athanasiou (who played Yzé in Artaud’s production and had been Artaud’s only long-term romantic interest) written on January 19, 1928, Artaud used almost reverential language when talking about this play. He began by telling her that, with this character, she “had the

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15 Artaud considered Claudel a traitor for becoming a government representative and for censoring his own works.
opportunity to be a marvelous success with a role to rank alongside the most beautiful [she] had ever played” (“To Génica Athanasiou,” Victor Corti trans., 40). The letter simultaneously attacked Athanasiou for following the direction of another actor rather than taking Artaud’s notes. Artaud accused Athanasiou of joining André Berley (who most likely played Mesa in his only performance with the Alfred Jarry Theatre) in sabotaging the performance through their misunderstanding of the text, with Athanasiou garnering critical praise while undermining Artaud’s directing. Artaud’s most damning criticism preceded a discussion of the play’s merits:

[In] the eyes of certain ill-intentioned people infected with the spirit of the so-called arts theatre, I appear an idiot and a bloody fool. How could you not have understood that you, much more than I, were responsible for the [lack of] success of this play. If you had respected the timings and the interplay of emotions, you would have made this play the worthy success it should have been. But you had no faith in it, although you were dealing with one of today’s masterpieces. No doubt this play wasn’t theatrical in the usual sense of the word, but it’s a mistake to believe that only plays considered theatrical can be staged. A work such as this, performed in the right conditions, would not just have been acceptable but exhilarating for an audience. Witness the reactions of the Surrealists who supported us throughout the show and with whom I made my peace after the show. They, unlike Gide and company and other denigrators of avant-garde theatre, considered that this interpretation and this translation of a known masterpiece improved on a straightforward reading of this very masterpiece and

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16 “Tu avais une occasion de te tailler un succèes magnifique avec un role parmi les plus beaux que tu aies eu à jouer” (Lettres à Génica Athanasiou 280).
that, for me, is the most rewarding result I could have hoped for. (“To Génica Athanasiou,” Victor Corti trans., 40)\textsuperscript{17}

This letter offers many clues about Artaud’s views on the performance. First, it notably reinforces the notion that Artaud was harshest and most critical to those to whom he was closest, as this letter alternates between complimentary and critical tones. Second, Artaud explicitly supports the value of this production on an aesthetic level, instead of the idea that it was staged merely as a provocation.

What, then, did Artaud find worthwhile in this script, if he shared none of the playwright’s political, social, or religious views? The notion that Artaud chose this script to criticize censorship gained credence from Claudel’s insistence that the play stay off the boards, because he felt it too closely resembled his personal life. The original script, written in 1905, circulated only through Claudel’s friends via typewritten copies.\textsuperscript{18} One of these friends was Jean-Louis Barrault, who had also befriended Artaud (and who could have provided Artaud the opportunity to obtain a copy of the script). When the third act of the play was produced at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, the only people who might have known the identity of the playwright

\textsuperscript{17}“Mais dans cette aventure et aux yeux d’un certain nombre de personnes mal intentionnées et toutes infectées de l’esprit des soi-disant théâtres d’art, je prends figure d’un maladroit et d’un con. Comment n’avez-vous pas compris que vous teniez en main beaucoup plus que moi le succès de cette pièce. Si vous aviez respecté les temps et la répartition des sentiments en action, vous auriez donné à cette pièce la valeur qu’elle devait avoir. Mais vous n’y avez pas cru alors que vous aviez devant vous un des chefs-d’œuvre contemporains. Sans doute cette pièce n’était-elle pas scénique au sens usual du mot, mais c’est une erreur de croire que seules les pièces dites scénique peuvent prendre place sur une scène. Une œuvre comme celle-là jouée dans les conditions requises était non seulement supportable mais exaltante pour un public. Je n’en veux pour prévue que l’attitude des Surréalistes qui nous ont soutenus tout le long de la représentation et avec qui à la suite de cette représentation je me suis réconcilié. Eux, à l’encontre de l’opinion de Gide et consorts et autres contemtateurs des théâtres d’avant-garde, ont trouvé que cette interpretation, cette traduction d’un chef-d’œuvre connu, ajoutait à la simple lecture de ce chef-d’œuvre, ce qui est pour moi le plus beau résultat que je pouvais espérer” (\textit{Lettres à Génica Athanasiou} 280-281).

\textsuperscript{18}Claudel would revise the script, although not until the latter part of 1942.
would have been those people who had read the play. Claudel, however, had achieved fame for his other plays by this point. By producing the play against Claudel’s wishes, Artaud claimed to be critiquing censorship, in this case the self-censorship by the playwright. But, I would argue, Artaud would have needed more of a reason to choose this play in particular than merely to represent the fight against self-censorship. He would have gained nothing by producing a play that had no business being in front of an audience simply for this reason. I feel that this production had more to offer than this. By looking at the play, I believe that aspects of the play prove to be similar to Artaud’s aesthetic ideals.

The play revolves around the romantic intersections between Yzé and three men in her life: De Ciz, her husband; Amalric, her ex-lover; and Mesa, the rejected priest who now serves as a Customs Officer. The first two acts are notable for their inaction. The first act takes place on a boat carrying the four passengers to their destination in the Orient. The act does little more than introduce the four characters, indicate that they know each other on familial terms, and situate Yzé as the aware and willing object of the three men’s affections. Claudel makes no attempt to flesh out the back-story of how all four characters know each other, but character development plays a limited role in this script. The second act places the characters in a cemetery for European expatriates near Hong Kong. Little action actually occurs on stage. Mesa convinces Yzé’s husband, de Ciz, to take a job that will take him away from his family, and most likely lead to his death (a fact that only Mesa knows). Mesa’s actions place him at odds with his religious past, but he and Yzé renounce any ties to the morals of this world. In both of these acts, I found very little that would seem to match either Artaud’s or the Surrealists’ aesthetic sensibilities.
The third act, however, shifts drastically from the first two. A few years have passed between the second and third acts. Yzé has moved in with Amalric after the death of de Ciz, although she had a child with Mesa. A political revolution has just begun, and Yzé and her family are trapped in their house. With death almost certain, Amalric rigs explosives around the house in order to make sure that the family dies without being tortured or dishonored. While he goes to double check the explosives, Mesa enters and confronts a silent Yzé for abandoning him while she was pregnant with his child, yet also offers to save her and the child by taking them with him to safety with tickets on the last boat leaving the country. Amalric returns and knocks out Mesa by attacking him from behind. They take the tickets and Yzé exits to get her child, only to discover that the child has died without explanation. Amalric and Yzé head for the rescue boat and Mesa regains consciousness. As he begins to make peace with his fruitless quest for love, Yzé reappears. They reconcile as the heavens open above them and they await either the explosion that will kill them or their transcendence into heaven.

With the time lapse as well as the aesthetic shift, the third act feels very different from the first two acts, which may help explain why Artaud chose to produce only the final act. While the first two acts are grounded in the words of the characters, the third act creates a sense of wonder and surreality throughout. This act also has much more action motivating the characters. From the fight between Amalric and Mesa to the revolution occurring onstage around the characters, there seems to be more going on in this act. As I will explain in a few moments, it would seem to be more easily staged according to Artaud’s goal of addressing those metaphysical ideals that hide behind the logic of words.

The spirituality of *Partage de midi* seems to approach Artaud’s sensibilities. Claudel’s plays have been closely associated with the playwright’s own Catholic ideals, and this script
holds true to this description. Joseph Chiari discusses the Catholic subtext inherent in Claudel’s works in his book *The Poetic Drama of Paul Claudel*. He sees the third act of this play as reminiscent of a miracle play.

We can understand the reasons that broke the union of Ysé and Mesa. Mesa, who had been unable to give himself entirely to God, had also been unable to give himself entirely and definitely to Ysé. Ysé, who had broken her life, and tried to fill that terrible vacuum that only God could fill, had been unable to live for long in the extraordinary atmosphere which surrounded Mesa; therefore she had to return to Amalric, who is on a lower level, who is more human, and who has certain complementary assets which she needs . . . [A]ll their sufferings endured, the deaths and disasters which have strewn the paths of their lives, were part of God’s ways to bring back to Him souls which have strayed from the flock. (68-69)

This view of the play as a lesson in morality may not seem like the type of spirituality Artaud identified himself with in his work. Unlike most of Claudel’s other work, however, *Partage de Midi* brings a sense of upheaval into its portrayal of God.

The God shown here seems to act in a chaotic, almost random manner. The characters themselves seem to portray a more agnostic worldview as well; because of this, the play tends to occupy a space outside of Claudel’s other works in his canon, according to those who have studied his career (such as Chiari and Vera Lee). Chiari contends that *Partage de Midi* “though touched by the light of God’s Grace, still retains some of the violence and pride of the Pagan” (70). Chiari denounces the play because of the dramatic flaws that he finds in the third act:

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19 The name can be found spelled both with an s and with a z in various texts. I chose to use Yzé unless quoting another source because I have found it more commonly used.
[T]he Third Act, which is beautiful poetry, is dramatically weak, for the solution that it offers is that of a morality play, and not that of a true drama. The ‘cantique’ of Mésa is beautiful, but no longer quite in character, and above all Yssé, the vital character of the play, emerges, perhaps too clearly, as the chosen instrument of God; she has been the ‘jack’ employed in order to lift God’s elect—Mésa—to Him. Such a view of the relationship between man and God fits Pagan deities perfectly, but it does not fit the God of the Christians. (71-72)

While Claudel’s portrayal of a God that would deliberately sacrifice His followers may be the antithesis of Chiari’s view of the Christian God, it seems like a logical extension of Artaud’s vision of the deity.

Artaud’s attitudes toward God can be seen in his Le Jet de sang. I would suggest that examining Artaud’s depiction of God in Le Jet de sang provides a valuable look into Artaud’s choice of producing Partage de Midi at the Alfred Jarry Theatre. Artaud had pushed for Le Jet de sang to be produced at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, to no avail.20 Artaud considered his piece as having the qualities that met the Alfred Jarry Theatre’s ideals, and, as I argued earlier, he felt Claudel’s play did the same. Claudel’s God acts in a chaotic manner and the setting becomes a very surreal moment in time and space; both of these aspects are addressed both later in Artaud’s career, in The Cenci, and at much earlier, when he wrote Le Jet de sang. By looking at the way Artaud portrayed God in both this play and his adaptation of The Cenci, Artaud’s view of God as

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20 Naomi Greene provides the following list of plays that Artaud proposed for production, several of which were eventually produced at the Alfred Jarry Theatre: Artaud’s Le Jet de sang, Jarry’s La peur chez l’amour and Le vieux de la montagne, Vitrac’s Les mystères de l’amour, Aron’s Gigogne, Strindberg’s Le songe, and Cyril Tourneur’s The Revenger’s Tragedy (Greene 26-27).
a chaotic force that uses evil methods to reach His ends matches the portrayal Claudel created in *Partage de midi*.

Artaud’s God in *Le Jet de sang* unleashed a series of trials on the Young Man and Girl that rivaled those faced by Mesa and Yzé. In one of the opening moments, the nightmarish wonder of the Heavens is revealed to the Young Man and Girl:

Silence. Noise like a huge wheel spinning, blowing out wind. A hurricane comes between them. At that moment, two stars collide, and a succession of limbs of flesh fall. Then feet, hands, scalps, masks, colonnades, porticoes, temples, and alembics, falling slower and slower as if through space, then three scorpions one after the other and finally a frog, and a scarab which lands with heart-breaking, nauseating slowness. (“The Spurt of Blood,” Victor Corti trans., 19)²¹

While the final scene in *Partage de midi* (where the Heavens also opens up) does not participate in as vivid a corporeal display, it nonetheless maintains the same sense of dread and danger. In *Le Jet de sang*, the body parts fall from the sky, while in *Partage de midi* the carnage from the revolution occurs just offstage. But in both plays, the characters are surrounded by the chaos produced under God’s watchful eye.

God, however, takes a much more direct hand in the action in Artaud’s play. Claudel’s God may be manipulating the course of action, but He never becomes a character on stage in the

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²¹ “Un silence. On entend comme le bruit d’une immense roué qui tourne et dégage du vent. Un ouragan les sépare en deux. A ce moment, on voit deux asters qui s’entrechoquent et une série de jambes de chair vivante qui tombent avec des pieds, des mains, des chevelures, des masques, des colonnades, des portiques, des temples, des alembics, qui tombent, mais de plus en plus lentement, comme s’ils tombaient dans du vide, puis trois scorpions l’un après l’autre, et enfin une grenouille, et une scarabée qui se dépose avec une lenteur désespérante, une lenteur à vomir” (*OC* I:89).
way He does in Artaud’s play. After the Young Man talks with the Priest, night falls, a storm occurs, and God intervenes:

At a given moment a huge hand seizes the WHORE’s hair which catches fire and sprouts up visibly.

A GIANTIC VOICE: Bitch! Look at your body!

The WHORE’s body appears completely naked and hideous under her blouse and skirt which turn transparent.

WHORE: God, let go of me.

She bites God’s wrist. A great spurt of blood slashes across the stage, while in the midst of the brightest lightning flash we see the PRIEST make the sign of the cross. (“The Spurt of Blood,” Victor Corti trans., 21)

Artaud’s God created a violent world that crumbled around his characters. Claudel’s God, while more subdued, did precisely the same thing in the third act of Partage de midi. The only hope that Yzé and Mesa had rested in the afterlife; the revolution had occupied the house and the dynamite in the house would soon kill them both. The two characters came back to God because they had no other options. They will either be dead or raptured. Either way, life in the physical world could no longer occur.

For Artaud, this chaotic worldview would fit with the Theatre of Cruelty ideals he was developing during his time at the Alfred Jarry Theatre. Both of these plays share Artaud’s

22 “A un moment donné une main énorme saisit la chevelure de la maquerelle qui s’enflamme et grossit à vue d’œil.
UNE VOIX GIGANTESQUE. Chienne, regarde ton corps!
Le corps de la maquerelle apparait absolement nu et hideux sous le corsage et la jupe qui deviennent comme du verre.
LA MAQUERELLE. Laisse-moi, Dieu.
Elle mord Dieu au poignet. Un immense jet de sang lacère la scène, et on voit au milieu d’un éclair plus grand que les autres le prêtre qui fait le signe de la croix” (OC I: 94).
sentiment that “[w]e are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all” (“No More Masterpieces,” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 79). While Claudel’s piece may at first glance seem an odd fit with Artaud’s aesthetics, the play contains several qualities that made it a worthy pairing with the Alfred Jarry Theatre. The play’s surreal qualities, particularly in the third act, appealed to both Artaud and the Surrealists, and led to their brief reconciliation. The fact that Claudel refused to allow the play to be publicly produced also allowed Artaud to critique censorship, in this case self-censorship, with the production. The play moved beyond the real world yet maintained a sense of physical danger for the characters. Claudel’s version of God departed from the traditional Catholic representation in his other works to a less benevolent force who uses His power in nearly evil, if not sinister means in order to get His children to return to Him. All of these aspects combined made Artaud consider the play one of his generation’s best pieces and one worthy of inclusion in the Alfred Jarry Theatre season.

The Third Production: Strindberg and Surrealism

The next production for the Alfred Jarry Theatre had the greatest financial support of any of the Alfred Jarry Theatre’s events. August Strindberg had translated his *A Dream Play* into French, and the Swedish embassy in Paris sought a theatre for its premiere, willing to fund the performance. Artaud proved a willing recipient of these funds, and the Alfred Jarry Theatre produced two performances of the play: June 2 and 9th, 1928 at the Théâtre de l’Avenue. However great the importance of the Swedish embassy’s funding may have been, Artaud praised

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23 “Nous ne sommes pas libres. Et le ciel peut encore nous tomber sur la tête. Et le théâtre est fait pour nous apprendre d’abord cela” (*OC* IV: 95).
the play’s artistic merits as the reason for including the production in the Alfred Jarry Theatre season. The program notes for the production commended the play as exemplary:

*A Dream Play* by Strindberg has a place in the repertoire of an ideal theatre, it constitutes one of the model plays whose production for a director is the pinnacle of his career. The range of feelings translated and assembled in this play is infinite. One rediscovers both the inside and the outside of a manifold and vibrant thought. The most eminent problems are presented, evoked in a concrete and, at the same time, mysterious form. It is truly the universality of the mind and life whose magnetic thrill is offered to us and grabs us at the point of our most precise and most fruitful humanity. The success of such a performance is inevitably the crowning of a director, a producer. (‘‘A Dream Play’ by Strindberg,’’ Victor Corti trans., 41-42)\(^{24}\)

From these comments, it is clear that Artaud placed Strindberg’s play at the head of the list of plays that captured the dreamlike wonder of the world that Artaud attempted to create on stage. He continued to describe this process later in the program notes.

Present-day theatre represents life, seeks by way of more or less realistic setting and lighting to give back to us the ordinary reality life, or else it cultivates *illusion*—and then it’s worst of all. Nothing is less capable of deluding us than

\(^{24}\) *"Le Songe*, de Strindberg fait partie de ce répertoire d’un théâtre idéal, constitue un de ces pièces types dont la réalisation est pour un metteur en scène comme le couronnement d’une carrière. Le registre des sentiments qui s’y trouvent traduits, rassemblés, est infini. On y retrouve à la fois le dedans et le dehors d’une pensée multiple et frémissante. Les plus hauts problèmes y sont représentés, évoqués en une forme concrete en même temps et mystérieuse. C’est vraiment l’universalité de l’esprit et de la vie dont le frissonnement magnétique nous est offert et nous empoigne dans le sens de notre humanité la plus précise et la plus féconde. La réussite d’une représentation semblable sacré nécessairement un metteur en scène, un directeur” (*OC* II: 40).
the illusion of the fake prop, of cardboard and painted cloths which the modern stage offers us. We must accept things as they are, and not seek to compete with life. In the simple exhibition of the objects of reality, in their associations, in their sequence, in the relationships between the human voice and lighting, there is a whole reality which is self-sufficient and doesn’t need any other to come alive. It is this false reality which is theatre and which must be cultivated. The *mise en scène* of *A Dream Play* thus complies with the necessity of offering the audience only what can be of immediate use, and which is used as such by the actors.

Three-dimensional characters will move in the midst of properties, of objects, in the midst of a total reality equally three-dimensional. The fake in the midst of the real, that’s the ideal definition of such a *mise en scène*. A meaning, a utilization of a new spiritual order given to the ordinary objects and substance of life. ("‘A Dream Play’ by Strindberg,” Victor Corti trans., 42)²⁵

In this section of his program note, Artaud provided the aesthetic reasons that *A Dream Play* would fit with the Alfred Jarry Theatre. As previously noted, Artaud strove to create theatre that did not attempt to recreate the real world; he instead wanted theatre to embrace the qualities that

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²⁵ “Le théâtre actuel représente la vie, cherche par des décors et des éclairages plus ou moins réalistes à nous restituer la vérité ordinaire de la vie, ou bien il cultive l’*illusion*—et alors c’est pire que tout. Rien de moins capable de nous illusionner que l’illusion d’accessoire faux, de carton et de toiles peintes que la scène modern nous présente. Il faut en prendre son parti et ne pas chercher à lutter avec la vie. Il y a dans la simple exposition des objets du réel, dans leur combinaisons, dans leur ordre, dans les rapports de la voix humaine avec la lumière toute une réalité qui se suffit à elle-même et n’a pas besoin de l’autre pour vivre. C’est cette réalité fausse qui est la théâtre, c’est celle-là qu’il faut cultiver. La mise en scène du *Songe* obéit donc à cette nécessité de ne rien proposer aux regards du public qui ne puisse être utilisé immédiatement et tel quel par les acteurs. Personnages à trois dimensions que l’on verra se mouvoir au milieu d’accessoires, d’objets, au milieu de toute une réalité également à trois dimensions. Le faux au milieu du vrai, voilà la définition idéale de cette mise en scène. Un sens, une utilisation d’un ordre spirituel neuf donné aux objets et aux choses ordinaires de la vie” (*OC* II: 41-42).
differentiated it from reality. With this production, Artaud had a play that would allow him to address these qualities.

Strindberg wrote *A Dream Play* in 1901. The play follows Indra’s daughter, Agnes, as she visits the Earth to see how difficult life here could be. After meeting people from many different cultures and times, she considers almost every aspect of human life (hunger, war, even the mundane aspects of domestic life) to be evidence of the horror that humans face every moment of their lives, sometimes without their knowledge. She returns to the heavens pitying the hopelessness of life on earth, happy to return from the nightmarish world she had just visited. In his author’s note for the play, he described the picture he attempted to paint with this play:

> Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble. But one consciousness rules over them all, that of the dreamer; for him there are no secrets, no illogicalities, no scruples, no laws. He neither acquits nor condemns, but merely relates; and, just as a dream is more often painful than happy, so an undertone of melancholy and of pity for all mortal beings accompanies this flickering tale. Sleep, the liberator, often seems a tormentor, but when the agony is harshest comes the awakening and reconciles the sufferer with reality – which, however painful, is yet a mercy, compared with the agony of the dream. (Strindberg 553)

The idea that the agony of the dream amplifies the comparatively minor trials faced in real life mirrors Artaud’s view of theatre as an exaggeration of the cruelty found active in the world.
“Everything that acts is a cruelty,” he wrote. “It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theatre must be rebuilt” (“The Theater and Cruelty,” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 85). Even though Artaud would write his manifestos on cruelty after his work at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, one can still see the ideas and concepts at work in his choices while there. In this case, the nightmare of *A Dream Play* matches Artaud’s seeming attraction to “extreme action, pushed beyond all limits” (“The Theater and Cruelty,” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 85). This play allowed Artaud the opportunity to experiment with this type of production before incorporating it into his later aesthetics.

Strindberg also shared Artaud’s fascination with non-Western performance and culture. Michael Meyer recorded moments from Strindberg’s personal journal during the time he wrote *A Dream Play*. On November 18 1901, the day he finished the play, he wrote about the influence that Indian religions had on the play:

> Am reading about Indian religions.

> The whole world is but a semblance (= Humbug or relative emptiness). The primary Divine Power (Maham-Atma, Tad, Aum, Brama), allowed itself to be seduced by Maya, or the impulse of procreation.

> Thus the Divine Primary Element sinned against itself. (Love is sin, therefore the pangs of love are the greatest of all hells).

> The world has come into existence only through Sin—if in fact it exists at all—for it is really only a dream picture (consequently my DREAM PLAY is a picture of life), a phantom, and the ascetic’s allotted task is to destroy it. But this task

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26 “Tout ce qui agit est une cruauté. C’est sur cette idée d’action poussée à bout, et extrême que le théâtre doit se renouveler” (*OC* IV: 102).
conflicts with the love impulse, and the sum total of it all is a ceaseless wavering between sensual orgies and the anguish of repentance.

This would seem to be the riddle of the world. (Strindberg 547-548)

In *A Dream Play*, Artaud found a play that reached throughout time, and may have had more in common with medieval thought than it did with other modern theatre productions.

Göran Stockenström investigates a historical binary at work in *A Dream Play*, looking at it as characteristic of both modern and medieval theatre. In arguing in favor of its medieval themes, Stockenström points out that the four elements play vital roles in the various settings throughout the play. The belief in the Great Chain of Being (to which all religions and their deities belong), which proves to Indra’s daughter that this world is only a copy and thus can never be perfect, also reflects medieval leanings, although the medieval theology and symbolism Strindberg used also fits equally well with the symbolist movement.

Strindberg’s fascination with “the idea of a conscious will in history that guides the seemingly chaotic revolutions and actions of individuals, peoples, and states” (Stockenström 88) creates many ripples throughout the structure of this play. *A Dream Play* follows no linear progression through time. Agnes’s sufferings occur at specific moments throughout time in many different cultures. It could be argued that these “recurring cycles of synchronism,” as Stockenström calls them (88), can be seen throughout world history, countering a progressive view of history by showing that the intervention of the (or a) Savior has occurred at several distinct periods in different cultures. No matter what mankind has tried to do to protect itself from impending destruction and guarantee a continuation of each culture’s views, only divine intervention has been able to end periods of chaos and suffering and restore order and peace for the coming generations. Strindberg found evidence of Indra’s Daughter coming to help mankind
in many different forms throughout history. The play then seems to represent an attempt at making sense of the futility of life, if nothing we can do will really make a difference in the end. No matter what mankind attempts to do, suffering will continue to exist. Therefore, it might be better to think of this life as a trial run, a dream that prepares us to appreciate what comes after our time here is finished. Or, perhaps for Artaud, the play proved that no matter what control we may think we have over our lives, the sky could fall at any moment and we would be powerless to stop it.

While the play may have fit well with Artaud’s concept, it caused the final break to occur between him and the Surrealists. Where Artaud saw the epitome of his theatrical ideals, André Breton saw an artist selling out for a government paycheck. As I mentioned earlier, the Surrealists felt that theatre was too decadent an art to have any lasting value. While they had reconnected with Artaud after his production of *Partage de midi*, the knowledge that the Swedish Embassy funded *Le Songe* became too big a theoretical obstacle to overcome. When the play opened, the stage had been set for a battle of political ideologies.

When *Le Songe* opened on June 2, 1928, at the Théâtre de l’Avenue, the crowd contained enough disparate political forces that a disruption was imminent both by the surrealists, who were suspicious of Artaud’s motives, but also by representatives of the Swedish establishment, who took issue with the perceived lack of respect shown to them and Strindberg. The Surrealists attacked Artaud for selling out and the Swedish establishment as the embodiment of capitalism. The Swedish Embassy left the show assuming that Artaud planned the show to make a joke at their expense. Ronald Hayman paints the scene that evening:

> [T]he audience included the Swedish ambassador, Prince George of Greece, and several Swedish aristocrats. Just before the curtain went up, thirty uninvited
Surrealists sat down in the stalls. As soon as the performance was under way the heckling started. [The Surrealists claimed] The organizers were lackeys of Swedish capitalism. Artaud, who had been waiting in the wings, made a premature entrance not to silence the Surrealists but to side with them. He had agreed to produce a play by Strindberg, he said, only because Strindberg had been a victim of Swedish society. (75)

The Surrealists showed up to attack national Swedish funding of the production, claiming that Artaud and the Alfred Jarry Theatre were only serving the needs of the Swedish embassy. In much the same way he did with the *Partage de midi* performance, Artaud hastily improvised an attack on his own work. He also seemed to have done this with little evidence that he believed the attack he was orchestrating. Instead, as he had done (and continued to do) throughout his career, Artaud criticized those who were contributing most directly to his success. This only compounded the problem, as now no one seemed content with the events of the night, and few people would even comment on the performance. The memorable events are instead that “Breton was not impressed, the Swedes stormed out and Madame Allendy, who had wooed the generous sponsors, was placed in an impossible position” (Schumacher 31). The memory of this attack on his own work, though, would fade from view much more quickly than his first.

The Surrealists issued an ultimatum to the Alfred Jarry Theatre after the first performance: cancel the performance the following weekend or there would be a much larger disturbance in the audience. Perhaps they felt that Artaud’s condemnation of the play gave them the support they needed to get the performance canceled. If so, they underestimated Artaud’s connection to Strindberg’s play and/or his resistance to being told what to do. In either case, the situation escalated much farther than the previous evening: “Artaud and Robert Aron decided to
ignore the ultimatum, announcing that the Théâtre Alfred Jarry would take the necessary steps, however repugnant, to defend its liberty. They then asked for police protection, with the result that Breton was arrested together with several other Surrealists when they tried to interrupt the performance” (Hayman 73). The battle with the Surrealists began with renewed fervor after this incident. Breton took the police involvement as proof that Artaud had become one of the bourgeois artists they despised. Artaud later noted the hypocrisy in the stance that the Surrealists took on the police involvement. In the final manifesto produced for the Alfred Jarry Theatre, Artaud (with Roger Vitrac) addressed the disruptions and police involvement. Regarding the police being at the theatre, he claimed that the Alfred Jarry Theatre situation was not unique:

As for the police, they always automatically step in with productions of this sort [regardless of whether their presence is requested]. Everyone knows this, even the right-wing Surrealists. For example, when S.M. Eisenstein delivered his lecture at the Sorbonne, there were a hundred or so policemen scattered about the building, not counting the Chief of Police. You can’t do anything about that. (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre and Public Hostility,” Victor Corti trans., 46)27

The Surrealists who had condemned Artaud for using police protection had themselves used it in the past at their own events, and Artaud argued that they must have known that the police would be at this performance even if Artaud had not asked for them. This knowledge of the perceived hypocrisy by the Surrealists created the largest source of vehemence from Artaud towards the Surrealists.

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27 “Quant à la police, elle intervient toujours automatiquement dans ce genre de manifestations. Tout le monde le sait, même les surréalistes de droite. Le jour de la conférence de S. M. Eisenstein à la Sorbonne, par exemple, il y avait, outré le préfet de police, une centaine d’agents distribués un peu partout. Il n’y a rien à faire à cela” (OC II: 56).
Since the Surrealists knew that the police would arrest them and they still interrupted the performance, Artaud considered this a form of organized sabotage. In the same manifesto, he detailed the way that the Surrealists used the police presence for their advantage more than the Alfred Jarry Theatre could have:

This is generally the handiwork of malicious people or pranksters who methodically provoke the police to act against them, and in consequence against the audience and the show as well. Without them the police would quietly remain at the door. Having carried out their coup, these agents provocateurs have only to accuse the Alfred Jarry Theatre of being in league with the police and they’ve done the trick. They kill two birds with one stone. They stop the show and throw discredit on their promoters. ("The Alfred Jarry Theatre and Public Hostility," Victor Corti trans., 46) 28

The Surrealists placed themselves in a situation that the Alfred Jarry had no way to win. If there had been no police protection at the performance, the Surrealists would have tried to incite the crowd into leaving the performance. Since there were police forces waiting for them, they could argue that this proved the Alfred Jarry Theatre had sold out and became part of cultural elite they were attempting to challenge.

The performances constituted an attempt on Artaud’s part to place many of his ideals into practice, although the fight with the Surrealists has generated the most notoriety. However, I feel that it is important to view Le Songe as a springboard for Artaud’s ideas for a Theatre of Cruelty.

28 "Il est généralement l’œuvre de personnages malveillants ou de plaisantins qui systématiquement par leurs provocations attirent sur eux, et par contre-coup sur le public et sur le spectacle, les forces policières qui sans eux resteraient tranquillement à la porte. Leur coup fait, il ne reste plus à ces agents provocateurs que d’accuser le Théâtre Alfred Jarry d’avoir partie liée avec la police et le tour est joué. Ils font d’une pierre deux coups. Ils empêchent le spectacle et discréditent ses organisateurs" (OC II: 56).
He acknowledged that the play contained many elements of what he considered the ideal way to challenge the modern theatrical conventions. The dreamlike qualities in the script made it easy to work against the trend of representing reality on stage. The theoretical underpinnings that humanity has little control over its destiny would also be manifest in Artaud’s later writings. All of these aspects would become key components to Artaud’s career as he attempted to create the Theatre of Cruelty.

The Final Production: Comparisons to Jarry - Vitrac’s “Victor, or Power to the Children”

After the public relations disaster that occurred with Le Songe, the founders of the Alfred Jarry Theatre needed to eliminate as much potential negative reaction as possible. For their fourth production, they chose to produce founder Roger Vitrac’s Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir (“Victor, or Power to the Children”). For this production, they returned to the Comédie des Champs-Élysées during that theatre’s off-season. The play opened on the afternoon of December 24, 1928 and had two more matinee performances on December 29 and January 5 before it closed. The play follows Victor, a boy whose enormous physical stature and heightened mental capacities belie his age (it is his ninth birthday) and whose condition ensures that he will die before the end of the day. He represents what Jannarone considers “the discord between flesh and spirit: he dislikes the world as he incarnates it” (263). Ida Mortemart, the female lead, occupies a similar role as creation of conflicting ideals. “She is a beautiful, ethereal being afflicted with a most embarrassing condition – flatulence – that erupts whenever she experiences a deep emotion” (Jannarone 264). These two characters, and the physical characteristics that make them abject, serve to critique the notions of power and beauty at play in the society.
This production had its own issues, most notably the replacement of the actress who played Ida Mortemart after the original actress became nervous about all of the publicity concerning her crude behavior onstage. This character served as one of Artaud’s tools for incorporating previously recorded sound effects, through her flatulence, as a vital dimension of his mise en scène. Jannarone addresses the discrepancy between Artaud’s intentions for the character and the public’s response. “While, for Artaud, Ida Mortemart represented everything that was tragic and beautiful in the world, the critics believed her metaphysical flatulence was Artaud’s own Ubu-esque ‘merdre,’ shocking and childish” (264). Mortemart’s similarities to Jarry’s characters became the focal point of most of the critical discussion of the play.

As with the other Alfred Jarry Theatre productions, the spectacle surrounding the performance surpassed discussion about the production itself. The financial situation had not become as dire as it has been made to sound, though. Even with the financial losses and scandal that had plagued the four previous productions, Artaud secured an offer of 20,000 francs from the Vicomte and Vicomtesse de Noailles for the next production (Hayman 74). Instead of putting the funding towards the next production, though, Artaud put the money into publishing a manifesto in 1930 that he hoped would generate even more income for the theatre.

The End of the Alfred Jarry Theatre

The previous shows had generated critical success, but none of them fully captured Artaud’s ideals.29 In “The Alfred Jarry Theatre and Public Hostility,” Artaud attempted to address all of the reasons he felt the shows had not generated more artistic praise. He specifically mentioned the following as directly contributing to the difficulties faced by the

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29 Kimberly Jannerone’s article “The Theater before Its Double: Artaud Directs in the Alfred Jarry Theatre” examines the critical response to these productions.
Alfred Jarry Theatre: the search for funding, the choice of place, the difficulties of collaboration, censorship, the police, systematic sabotage, the competition, the public, and the critics. While Artaud may have separated these into their own issues, common threads run through many of the discussions.

I have already introduced the sections on the police and systematic sabotage in my discussion about *Le Songe*. The police involvement, however unintentional, served to push government control, or at least surveillance, into the productions. Even when the police did not need to be there, their presence at least intimated a connection between the theatre and the government that fought against Artaud’s own anti-establishment ideals. This only simplified the ability of other groups to sabotage the Alfred Jarry Theatre performances by provoking the police into action. When the Surrealists were escorted from the theatre, it “proved” that Artaud had indeed sold out to the Swedish and French governments. Artaud could do little to disprove this, since the police were indeed there and acted on his behalf, although the police force often had a presence at any large event, even those created by the Surrealists who denigrated Artaud. Artaud knew that the Surrealists could spin the events to show Artaud in a negative light, and this systematic sabotage was a factor that could influence every performance and was almost entirely out of his hands.

The search for funding remained a problem throughout that Alfred Jarry Theatre’s run. Artaud lamented the issues that arose from the constant search for funding:

> Money is hard to find. Although enough may be found for one production, this is insufficient, since spasmodic undertakings are not properly speaking a going

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30 “Ce sont: la recherché des capitaux, le choix du lieu, les difficultés de la collaboration, la censure, la police, le sabotage systématique, la concurrence, le public, la critique” (*OC* II: 53, italics in original).
concern and do not benefit from the advantages of regular business exploitation.
On the contrary they are bled by all sorts of suppliers who, not content with
charging high prices, put them up as high as they can, reckoning it is fair to levy a
surcharge on such *snob entertainment*. ("The Alfred Jarry Theatre and Public
Hostility," Victor Corti trans., 45, italics in original). 31

Throughout its performance history, the Alfred Jarry constantly had to change performance and
rehearsal spaces. Artaud insinuated here that because they did not have their own theatre, more
money than usual was spent on procuring spaces at increased prices. Because of this, the Alfred
Jarry Theatre could only afford to rent the space for two or three performances per show. While
this may have been beneficial for the intentionally abrasive performance of *Partage de midi*, for
the later performances of *Le Songe* and *Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir* it would prove
counterproductive as the show would close “at the very moment when it could prove how
effective it is” ("The Alfred Jarry Theatre and Public Hostility," Victor Corti trans., 45). 32 As
the goals of the Alfred Jarry Theatre changed from staging provocative performances to full-
length works, their reputation precluded them from finding the necessary income to make the
switch.

The next area, the choice of place, may have been directly influenced by monetary issues,
but, according to Artaud, the venues played their own roles in determining the success of the

31 “L’argent se cache. Il arrive toutefois qu’on en trouve pour un spectacle, ce qui est insuffisant,
car les entreprises périodiques ne constituant pas à proprement parler une affaire, ne bénéficient
pas des avantages dont jouissent les exploitations régulières. Au contraire, elles sont saignées à
blanc par les fournisseurs de toutes sortes qui, non contents de faire payer le prix fort, majorent
tant qu’ils le peuvent, estimant qu’il est justice de percevoir une taxe sur ces *divertissements de
snobs*” (*OC* II: 53-54).
32 “c’est à-dire au moment où il pourrait prouver son efficacité” (*OC* II: 54).
Alfred Jarry Theatre. Because of the financial limits under which the theatre operated, they had to choose between ideal dates or venues:

> It is just about impossible to perform in the evening with very little money. Either you have to be satisfied with a rudimentary, unequipped stage (lecture rooms, banqueting halls, etc.) or resign yourself to playing matinées and only on slack days, or else during the off-season. In any case, the conditions are deplorable and are made worse by the fact that theatre managers categorically refuse, for reasons given below, to rent their theatres, or only at exorbitant rates. (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre and Public Hostility,” Victor Corti trans., 45) 33

Artaud chose to use better venues at the cost of off-season and poor dates for the performances. The issues that would arise from this can be seen by examining the dates of the final performances. December 24, 1928, fell on a Monday in addition to being Christmas Eve – hardly the ideal time for a matinee. December 29 and January 5 would have been Saturday afternoons, but for a show to open in the middle of the day at the beginning of the week would have made it difficult to generate any momentum from the opening performance through the remaining performances, which also had a lengthy break between them. The performance dates seem too scattered to maintain the word of mouth that would have helped the performances.

Choosing to perform in spaces during their off-time also led to another liability: the lack of rehearsal time in the space. Artaud described how little time they had actually spent in the theatres for each production:

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33 “Il est autant dire impossible de jouer en soirée avec de faibles moyens. Ou bien il faut se contenter d’une scène rudimentaire (salles de conferences, de banquets, etc.) dépourvue de machinerie, ou se résigner à jouer en matinée et seulement les jours creux, ou encore en fin de saison. De toute façon les conditions sont lamentables et s’aggravent de ce fait que les directeurs de théâtre refusent, pour les raisons qui vont suivre, et catégoriquement, de louer, ou n’y consentent qu’à des prix exorbitant” (OC II: 54).
The Secrets of Love had only one rehearsal on stage, the night before the performance. A Dream Play had but one rehearsal with the scenery and costumes. Break of Noon was seen only one time on the boards, the same morning as the show.

For Power to the Children, it was worse still. It was impossible to see even a single run-through of the play on stage before the show opened.

All these difficulties came because the Jarry Theatre never had at its disposal either a troupe or a place. (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre (1929),” Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud recognized, albeit too late, the need for the Alfred Jarry Theatre to focus on finding a theatre space in which they could establish a permanent residence. The manifestos unsuccessfully attempted to raise capital to achieve this goal.

Without a permanent theatre in place, the development of a theatre troupe also proved difficult. Artaud often had to rely on amateur or rookie actors. Professional actors were in short supply for a variety of reasons.

Actors cannot be found, since most of them have regular engagements that obviously prevent them working elsewhere in the evening. Moreover, theatre managers, for a variety of reasons, abuse their authority and prohibit actors from collaborating with the Alfred Jarry Theatre. Worse, they often grant permission

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34 “Les Mystères de l’Amour furent répétés une seule fois sur scène la nuit qui précéda la représentation. Le Songe n’eut qu’une répétition en décors et costumes. Le Partage de Midi fut vu une seule fois sur le plateau, le matin même du spectacle. Pour les Enfants au pouvoir, ce fut pire encore. Il fut impossible de voir la pièce même une seul fois d’un bout à l’autre sur scène avant la générale. Toutes ces difficultés proviennent de ce que le Théâtre Jarry n’eut jamais à sa disposition ni une troupe, ni un local” (OC II: 46-47).
that they withdraw later, thus interrupting rehearsals and forcing us to recast the roles. (“The Alfred Jarry Theatre and public Hostility,” Rob Connick trans.)

The best actors were already being used in other theatres. If the Alfred Jarry Theatre did manage to find an experienced actor to use, they ran the risk of having them leave during the rehearsal process if another, higher paying, role became available. As such, the Alfred Jarry Theatre used actors who did not carry the critical clout that would have generated buzz. Artaud found this aspect to be both a curse and a blessing. While they may not have been able to use actors of the highest level, those that worked with Artaud became a close-knit group. Artaud mentioned that the actors who stayed “have all proved themselves, in spite of the traps and provocations, of greatest and most perfectly satisfying devotion” (“The Theatre and Public Hostility,” Rob Connick trans.).

The common trials and tribulations served, at least in Artaud’s opinion, to strengthen the resolve of the troupe members.

Artaud listed censorship as an issue that plagued the Alfred Jarry Theatre, but he admitted in that section of the manifesto that “we never ran long enough to provoke a similar action” (Rob Connick trans.). Artaud again returned to the short run as being the chief problem the Alfred Jarry Theatre faced. Censorship may have been a problem that could have faced theatre productions, but it never became an issue for the Alfred Jarry Theatre. Even when they produced *Partage de midi* as a response against censorship, the theatre would not have faced any

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35 “Les acteurs sont introuvable parce que la plupart sont engagés régulièrement, ce qui de toute évidence les empêche de jouer ailleurs en soirée. De plus les directeurs de théâtre, pour des raisons diverses, usent abusivement de leur autorité pour leur interdire de collaborer avec le Théâtre Alfred Jarry. Mieux, ils accordant souvent des autorisations qu’ils reprennant par la suite, interrompant ainsi les répétitions et nous obligeant à recherché une nouvelle distribution” (*OC* II: 54-55).

36 “Ils ont tous fait preuve, malgré les traquenards et les provocations, du plus grand dévouement et du désintéressement le plus parfait” (*OC* II: 55).

37 “Nous n’avons malheureusement jamais tenu assez longtemps l’affiche pour provoquer pareille intervention” (*OC* II: 55-56).
legal sanctions over the stage performance because it had been promoted as a private reading, which circumvented France’s copyright laws. They curtailed any potential legal issues with Claudel’s work and their showing of Gorki’s banned *The Mother* by loosely making the evening a private show by invitation only. Buying a ticket to see the first part of the evening, *Partage de midi*, extended the customer the invitation to stay for the film. This operating practice might have caused problems for the Jarry Theatre if, as Artaud pointed out, the production ran for more than one night.

Artaud finished the manifesto by showing his distaste for the current French audiences and theatre critics. He railed against the audience members that attended performances more to be seen than to see the performance. These crowds seemed to compete with the production for attention:

> Here, it is only a crowd filled with show-offs and flippant types. Those who either find it [the performance] disgraceful or who make very funny jokes throughout, for example the sound of a dripping faucet, a rooster’s crow, or a thundering voice affirming that Mr. Alfred Jarry invited him and that he is in the house. In short, what one would consider the typical French public. (Rob Connick trans., italics in original)

Artaud wanted to create a new type of theatre; unfortunately, the audiences came expecting either traditional theatre or a mockery of the theatrical process. Those who expected a normal theatre performance found the Alfred Jarry Theatre “disgraceful” while those who assumed

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38 “Il n’est question ici que du public de parti pris ou du public du genre *m’as-tu-vu* et *titi*. Celui qui trouve que c’est une honte ou celui des plaisanteries très drôle qui imite par exemple le bruit du robinet qui coule, le chant du coq, ou celui qui d’une voix tonitruante affirme que M. Alfred Jarry l’a invité et qu’il est chez lui. Bref, ce qu’on est convenu d’appeler le public *bien français*” (*OC* II: 57).
Artaud intended to mock theatrical conventions (or who came to mock these conventions regardless of the Theatre’s intent) distracted from the detail and precision of the productions. In either case, the audience seemed ill-prepared to welcome the start of the new theatrical era Artaud planned to usher into place.

It would seem from Artaud’s brief yet biting comments on theatre critics that they also fell into this dichotomy. The only comment that Artaud had for the critics was “[l]et us thank them initially and then let us not speak of them” (Rob Connick trans.).

Artaud seemed to imply that theatre critics proved to be a waste for the Alfred Jarry Theatre, not significant enough to warrant mention in the manifesto. Jannarone, however, presents evidence that shows the Alfred Jarry Theatre actually received comparatively favorable reviews from theatre critics, especially those outside the mainstream news outlets. Why then would Artaud be so dismissive of the one aspect that seemed to be working favorably for the Alfred Jarry Theatre?

The answer seems to point to a very complicated balance Artaud struggled to maintain between acceptance and defiance. If Artaud complimented the critics or even acknowledged the positive press he received, rivals (such as the Surrealists) could use that as further proof that Artaud had sold out and became a mainstream artist. If, however, he attacked the critics, he risked their wrath during future performances. In this case, the safest bet seems to be exactly what Artaud did: thank them and leave it at that, providing a seemingly biting attack through his silence. This would allow Artaud to seem distrustful of the critics without actually saying anything that may come back to haunt him. In at least one case in his career, Artaud left a fight for someone else to start.

39 “remercions-la d’abord et n’en parlons pas” (OC II: 57).
Conclusion

The Alfred Jarry Theatre had a very brief run: four productions with a total of eight performances from June 1927 to January 1929. By many scholars’ accounts, the Alfred Jarry was a colossal failure that proved Artaud’s inefficiency as a theatre practitioner. But Kimberly Jannarone has challenged these claims, presenting critical response that refutes the idea of Artaud’s incompetence and instead shows Artaud as an artist who worked in many different areas of theatre practice: acting, directing, and design. Artaud’s previous experience in the theatre also proves that he had received a great deal of practical experience and praise before his run with the Alfred Jarry Theatre. What, then, should be the Alfred Jarry Theatre’s legacy? I have argued that each production provides a clear glimpse at aspects that Artaud would later attempt to incorporate into his Theatre of Cruelty manifestos.

The first production, with plays written by each of the founders (Artaud, Robert Aron, and Roger Vitrac), effectively served as a distinct and direct break from the Surrealist period of Artaud’s career. By not only continuing to pursue theatre (which the Surrealists considered bourgeois and worthless) but forming his own theatre with other ex-Surrealists, Artaud cemented theatre as an important part of his legacy. Where the Surrealists saw hollow performance, Artaud saw the potential for life-changing events. By producing the first show at the Jarry Theatre, Artaud took his ideals and concretized them. It would have been one thing to advocate theatre’s beneficial qualities in writing. It was much stronger for Artaud to attempt to prove them in practice. This first production would bring Artaud’s career back toward theatre and prove the importance of performance to his theoretical ideals.

The second production, the third act of Partage de midi and a screening of Gorki’s banned film The Mother, showed the influence film had on Artaud. By placing the film in the
Alfred Jarry Theatre production, he implied that film had a place as a performing art. The performance of *Partage de midi*, though, offered a clearer look at Artaud’s developing Theatre of Cruelty aesthetics. The God that Claudel portrays in this play acts in ways that place people in harm’s way due to no fault of their own. This vengeful, chaotic God would become a staple in Artaud’s view of cosmic forces. The play also created a surreal landscape that appealed to Artaud’s distaste for theatrical realism and allowed Artaud to briefly reconcile with the Surrealists. Artaud’s views on religion, spirituality, and the possibilities of surreal staging techniques were tested on stage with this performance before they made their way into the Theatre of Cruelty manifestos.

The third production, Strindberg’s *Le Songe*, foreshadowed a great deal of Artaud’s future writings. The refiguring of life as a nightmarish world pushed Artaud to explore far beyond the realm of realism with this performance. The sense of impending doom hanging over the blissfully ignorant human race would also become a dominant theme in Artaud’s writings about the plague and cruelty. Of the four productions at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, this one seems to most closely resemble Artaud’s developing views of a Theatre of Cruelty.

The fourth and final production, Vitrac’s *Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir*, began to explicitly incorporate sound design as a vital component at the forefront of the production. Artaud’s focus on sound would become apparent with his later work on *Les Cenci* and the radio drama *Pour en enfir avec le jugement de Dieu* (“To Have Done with the Judgment of God”). The sounds of Ida Martemort’s flatulence, however crude, operated in ways foreign to the theatre at that time. Artaud’s view of non-realistic theatre had now moved beyond the visual and into the aural qualities of the play. As he began his search for a theatre unbound from language, this play would have been an ideal place for that experimentation to start.
In all of these productions, Artaud put into practice aspects of his later theories. As Jannarone has pointed out, their short runs should not instantly render the productions failures. Instead, they offered Artaud the practical experience he would draw on while writing the Theatre of Cruelty manifestos, and eventually for his production of *The Cenci*. With that production, Artaud’s practical experience at the Alfred Jarry Theatre would combine with the theories he had developed after its closing.
Chapter Two

Artaud’s *Les Cenci*: An Examination of the Theatre of Cruelty

While the quality of Artaud’s work at the Théâtre Alfred Jarry has been championed by Kimberly Jannarone, his production of *Les Cenci* remains the signpost for both Artaud’s ideals and his practical failure. This production serves as the most concrete example of how Artaud intended his Theatre of Cruelty to look; this would be the only production Artaud directed after writing his manifestos. Unlike the Alfred Jarry Theatre performances, which only ran for one or two nights each, Artaud intended for *Les Cenci* to have a traditional performance run. *Les Cenci* also used a script that more closely resembled the standard French theatre model. Because of these similarities with the established theatrical practices of the time, I believe that Artaud’s *Les Cenci* became more important to his legacy as a theatre practitioner in the minds scholars and historians.

With *Les Cenci*, Artaud recognized the importance of producing an adequate representation of his aesthetics. The Alfred Jarry Theatre had failed, and Artaud could not afford to plant any doubts about his theatre’s viability in the minds of potential investors. As with many other moments of artistic tension in Artaud’s life, he seemed to have taken the pressure to heart. Albert Bermel notices that “his directing approach had hardened [from his earlier productions]. He was desperate for *The Cenci* to succeed according to his lights, sensing that he would not have another opportunity to prove himself” (84). James Roose-Evans offers a suggestion for why it would have been so important for Artaud to “prove himself”:

> It is important to remember that Artaud, writing a quarter of a century later [than Appia and Craig, to whom he is often compared], was rebelling against a
particular kind of rhetorical acting then fashionable at the Comédie Française. He was attacking a French theatre particularly dominated by words, by reverence for the author. In place of the poetry of language, he was proposing a poetry of space, employing such means as music, dance, painting, kinetic art, mime, pantomime, gesture, chanting, incantations, architectural shapes, lighting. (89)

Artaud, it would seem, intended for this production to critique the contemporary French theatre as well as introduce a new type of performance.

The initial audience reaction seemed to be positive, as a review of the original production noted that seats to the performance were “sought after so eagerly that the mob beat down the doors and quarreled with the ticket collectors” (“Les Cenci: A Theatrical Evening” 129). Although the initial response (notably before the audience had seen the performance) was impressive, Artaud’s production quickly received ambivalent reactions from its audiences. This presented Artaud with the worst possible scenario: Albert Bermel discusses how Artaud did not receive any glowing commendations about this work, nor did her stir up enough protest to allow himself to be viewed as a scandalous figure, “to depict himself as a reborn Victor Hugo trying to introduce another Hernani” (82). He instead earned reviews that considered the production “[c]ruel and amusing. More passionate, unquestionably, than our capricious love affairs . . . and deserving, if not respect, at least goodwill” (“Les Cenci” 129). By now, Artaud’s opponents seemed to have learned that the best way to dissuade him was simply to ignore him. After a run of only seventeen performances, Les Cenci closed.

Many scholars have sought to determine the extent of this production’s commercial and critical success and the results have been overwhelmingly negative. In Theatre and Anti-Theatre, Ronald Hayman compares Artaud to Peter Brook (as many other scholars also do), but
notes that “unlike Brook, [Artaud] was less successful in directing actors than in manipulating words” (181). Robert Leach more explicitly damns Artaud’s work. “Financially as well as artistically, “The Cenci” was a failure. After seventeen performances it was laid to rest” (162). Susan Sontag criticizes Artaud’s practical skills, noting that “[w]hat Artaud did on the stage as a director and as a leading actor in his productions was too idiosyncratic, narrow, and hysterical to persuade [a change in theatrical practices]. He has exerted influence through his ideas about the theatre, a constituent part of the authority of these ideas being precisely his inability to put them into practice” (48). These works, and many others, find very little worthwhile in this production.

Even those scholars who address the psychological aspects of the production still address the physical shortcomings of the production.

‘Les Cenci,’ intended to dispense with the psychological problems of individuals, was to reveal the forces of destiny at work and, at the same time, to embody many of Artaud’s theories on staging and dramatic effects. But even Artaud’s admirers found it difficult to praise the play which, at several points, disintegrates into pure melodrama. (Greene 38)

Greene’s comparison of Les Cenci to melodrama highlights the shortcoming of this play, since Artaud was explicitly seeking to distance theatre from these types of productions. It seems that many Artaudian scholars have admitted that a realized Theatre of Cruelty seems to have been an impossible goal. Jerzy Grotowski states that “[t]he paradox of Artaud lies in the fact that it is impossible to carry out his proposals” (60). Why then would generations of scholars be concerned with ideas that their own author could not realize?

Several of Artaud’s tenets for a Theatre of Cruelty can be seen in his production of Les Cenci. But does that mean that we should consider this production a realization of Artaud’s
ideals, as many (Sontag, Hayman, and Leach among them) have done? Other Artaud scholars have argued that this production only hinted at Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, serving as what Bermel describes as “a forerunner of the Theatre of Cruelty that should have materialized but never did” (85). Bermel outlines Artaud’s future plans for the Theatre of Cruelty:

Artaud had hoped to follow his production of *The Cenci* with his treatments of *The Conquest of Mexico, Macbeth*, and *The Torments of Tantalus*, the latter being a projected reinterpretation of the myths of Tantalus and his two sons, Thyestes and Atreus, who vied for his crown. *The Cenci*, which was not itself the true Theatre of Cruelty, would pave the way for these other spectacles . . . (81)

The evidence for this claim, and those like it, stems from Artaud’s own contention that *Les Cenci* “is not yet the Theatre of Cruelty, but preparing for it” (Rob Connick trans.) If Artaud himself claims that the production falls short of Theatre of Cruelty ideals, what could possibly provide evidence to the contrary? Why would one attempt to make this connection between his theory and practice? Can any theories, even those by notable theorist/practitioners such as Brecht or Appia, ever be completely connected to practice?

If Artaud’s writings have proven anything, it is that prescribing a definitive quality to anything he wrote can be problematic. A further examination of his notes on *Les Cenci* serves to counter his, and many scholars’, claims. Artaud compared this production to the Theatre of Cruelty three more times in this note, and all three instances enhance, rather than hinder, my claim that *Les Cenci* provides an example of Theatre of Cruelty ideals in practice. Artaud compares the difference between the Theatre of Cruelty and *Les Cenci* to “the difference which exists between the thunder of a waterfall or the unleashing by nature of a hurricane on the one

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1 “ne sont pas encore le Théâtre de la Cruauté, mais ils le préparent” (*OC* V: 45).
hand and, on the other hand, whatever degree of their violence may remain in their image once it has become established” (“The Cenci.” Simon Watson-Taylor trans., 163). Thus, according to Artaud, Les Cenci is not the true Theatre of Cruelty because it has become an established, and thus constrained, image rather than a raw force of nature. By this logic, then, all attempts to stage the Theatre of Cruelty would fall short since all theatre, including those texts Artaud laid out for future Theatre of Cruelty performances, utilizes and creates established images. If one chooses to accept Artaud’s reasons for excluding Les Cenci, then he or she must also acknowledge that the Theatre of Cruelty would be unattainable for these very reasons. Even though Artaud did not produce another theatre piece after Les Cenci, he continued to write about producing the Theatre of Cruelty. He seemed to feel that the inability to create a pure Theatre of Cruelty on stage did not mean that the Theatre of Cruelty could not be at least represented in some form, which I believe he accomplished with Les Cenci.

Artaud did offer two ways in which the Theatre of Cruelty could be seen at work in this production. The first example I have found highlights the importance Artaud placed on sound. “Just as they would in the Theatre of Cruelty,” he wrote, “the audience at The Cenci will find themselves in the centre of a network of sound vibrations” (“The Cenci,” Simon Watson-Taylor trans., 163). During his later years, Artaud would shift his focus to creating the Theatre of Cruelty through only aural components by creating a radio broadcast of “Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu” (“To Put an End to the Judgment of God”). Artaud seems to connect to

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2 “la différence qui existe entre le fracas d’une chute d’eau ou le déclenchement d’une tempête naturelle, et ce qui peut demeurer de leur image une fois enregistrée” (OC V: 46).
3 “Tout comme dans le Théâtre de la Cruauté, spectateur se trouvera, dans les Cenci, au centre d’un réseau de vibrations sonores” (OC V: 46).
Wassily Kandinsky’s ideas concerning the importance of sound. While Artaud does not make a claim as bold as Kandinsky’s that “[t]he Sound is therefore the soul of form. Coming from within, it alone activates form” (Kandinsky 271), he nonetheless gives it an importance it rarely receives from other theorists.

Secondly, Artaud noted that “The Cenci will include the presence of human dummies,” and that by doing this, it would be able to “achieve the Theatre of Cruelty by devious and symbolic paths” (“The Cenci,” Simon Watson-Taylor trans., 163). Instead of continuing his previous claim that Les Cenci is “not yet the Theatre of Cruelty,” Artaud explicitly declared that he had created the Theatre of Cruelty in these specific moments. In these moments, Artaud seems to have refuted his own claim of failure.

What should we make, then, of the aspects of the Theatre of Cruelty manifestos that cannot be readily seen in this production? One of the most well-known aspects of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty is his desire for a new theatre space. Ronald Hayman notes that, when discussing Artaud’s legacy

One of the most influential passages in his Manifesto deals with the architectural relationship between acting area and auditorium . . . It was not until after the war that this began to have its effect on theatre design and production. The effort to break down the dividing line between stage and auditorium has been central to the development of theatre. (187-188)

When discussing the alternative theatre spaces used by others like the Performance Group and Jerzy Grotowski, Artaud’s manifestos receive credit for informing these choices. It is important

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4 Artaud’s concept of doubling in theatre also seems to echo Kandinsky’s theories of The Great Abstraction and The Great Realism discussed in “The Problem of Form.”

5 “Des mannequins interviendront dans les Cenci. Et c’est ainsi que je rejoins le Théâtre de la Cruauté par des voies détournées et symboliques” (OC V: 46).
to remember, though, that while Artaud offered specific ways to recreate the theatre space, the need for a new type of space had already been mentioned by Adolphe Appia, “who had already foreseen that the dramatic art could not be reformed without first reforming the place where the art takes place” (Roose-Evans 90). Artaud, though, did offer concrete ways that the Theatre of Cruelty would be presented differently, and in different spaces than the traditional theatre spaces whose utility he questioned.

In his first Manifesto on Cruelty, Artaud announced his desire to “abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of action” (“The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto),” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 96). In order to create this “theater of action,” Artaud advocated “abandoning the architecture of present-day theaters.” Instead, he wrote, “we shall take some hangar or barn, which we shall have reconstructed according to processes which have culminated in the architecture of certain churches or holy places” (96). This space would lack any resemblance to the former theater spaces.

The hall will be enclosed by four walls, without any kind of ornament, and the public will be seated in the middle of the room, on the ground floor, on mobile chairs which will allow them to follow the spectacle which will take place all

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6 “Nous supprimons la scène et la salle qui sont remplacées par une sorte de lieu unique, sans cloissonnement, ni barrière d’aucune sorte, et qui deviendra le théâtre même de l’action” (OC IV: 114-115).
7 “C’est ainsi qu’abandonnant les salles de théâtre existant actuellement, nous prendrons un hangar ou une grange quelconque, que nous ferons reconstruire selon les procédés qui ont abouti à l’architecture de certaines églises ou de certains lieux sacrés” (OC IV: 115).
around them. In effect, the absence of a stage in the usual sense of the word will provide for the deployment of the action in the four corners of the room. (96)\textsuperscript{8}

With such a detailed critique of traditional theatre spaces inherent in his manifesto, Artaud’s choice to stage Les Cenci at the Folies-Wagram Theater would indeed seem to disqualify the production from being considered a manifestation of his Theater of Cruelty. In addition to the choice of theatre space, the stage language, lighting, and décor all more closely resembled the current theatrical conventions than Theatre of Cruelty ideals. Even without Artaud’s statements about Les Cenci and the Theatre of Cruelty, there are enough aspects missing that one could argue that the production did not uphold the Theatre of Cruelty ideals.

But is that a fair criticism? I would argue that such a rigid standard would eliminate any staging theories from being successfully put into practice. As one can imagine, it would be unrealistic to apply a steadfast, draconian standard of theory to any artist’s practice, and one would be hard put to establish a one-to-one correspondence between theory and practice with any practitioner either before or after Artaud. For example, Appia, whose views on acting and the importance of sound can possibly be seen as influencing Artaud’s own ideals, considered actors particularly dangerous to the director’s intentions. For Appia, actors trained in the contemporary French style can ruin the new form of theatre since, as Marvin Carlson puts it, “the tendency to bring his own emotional life and spiritual values to the interpretation is so persistent, so difficult to overcome, that a single wish to go back to them can be enough to make him unequal to the struggle” (Carlson, 295, citing Appia, Die Musik und die Inszenierung). In practice, both Artaud and Appia would use actors who had little to no professional training and

\textsuperscript{8} “La salle sera close de quatre murs, sans aucune espèce d’ornement, et le public assis au milieu de la salle, en bas, sur des chaises mobiles qui lui permettront de suivre le spectacle qui se passera tour autour de lui. En effet, l’absence de scène, dans le sens ordinaire du mot, invitera l’action à se déployer aux quatre coins de la salle” (\textit{OC} IV: 115).
whose subsequent performances showed their inexperience. In Artaud’s case, he arguably had the most acting experience in his troupe, and perhaps because of this, took the role of Count Cenci for himself.

Grotowski, often cited as one of the most successful directors influenced by Artaud, offers several arguments against considering Artaud’s work a failure. In his essay on Artaud, “He Wasn’t Entirely Himself,” Grotowski begins by offering Brecht as a similar example of a theorist whose performances, it may be argued, contradict his theoretical works. Brecht’s productions “were perhaps less true to his theory, but on the other hand, very personal and subversive as they were, they showed a deep professional knowledge and never left us in a sense of lassitude” (Grotowski 59). For Grotowski, theorists who also practice their art should not have their theories validated or discredited by their practical works due to the variables influencing those pursuits. A truncated rehearsal schedule, venue changes, and the available talent pool all force the director to adapt his or her approach to the performance. These changes, necessary for the production, may seem to contradict the theories that exist in written, and thereby less malleable, form. Therefore, a theory’s applicability should not necessarily be tied to specific performances, since no performance should be expected to explicitly fulfill all of the goals of a particular theory or set of theories. If a play fails, it may have failed due to outside factors, not the inefficacy of the theories that guided its production. For Grotowski, the failure (or success) of a theory in practice does not make it useless (or useful).

Artaud’s production met with many of the problems Grotowski mentioned. Claude Schumacher lists many of the difficulties Artaud had to face before the show could be produced. The available actors could only loosely be considered professional:
The production went into rehearsal at the end of March 1935, but at that time Artaud had neither a full cast nor a theatre. Some of his actors were wealthy amateurs who agreed to put up money in exchange for a good part. So it was that the role of Beatrice was played by Iya Abdy, the Russian-born wife of an English baronet, and her mother, Lucrezia, by Cécile Bressant, the wife of the publisher Robert Denoël. In sharp contrast, many male actors were out of work when they joined the company and badly needed to earn some money. And since money was in short supply some members of the cast had to leave during the rehearsal period in order to accept jobs where they had a better chance of getting paid. (159-160)

Artaud explicitly mentions the impact of Abdy’s financial contributions to the production in a letter to Pierre Souvtchinksy. Artaud contracted Roger Désormière to design the sound for the production and Artaud noted in this letter that “I think Lady Abdy is disposed to give Désormière the means to commence his work immediately” (Rob Connick trans.). On the opposite end of the spectrum, the lack of available funds meant that not only did Artaud find it difficult to keep a full cast, the constant changeover would have required him to spend valuable rehearsal time (and money) reworking scenes he had already staged.

Artaud also found it difficult to find an appropriate place to stage the play, eventually settling on the Folies-Wagram Theater. A series of letters written by Artaud sheds some light on the problems Artaud encountered in contracting a performance space. Around March 1, 1935, Artaud wrote to Louis Jouvet, the director of the Athenée Theatre in Paris. At this point, Artaud was attempting to find a performance space, telling Jouvet that he was “presently in negotiations

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9 “Je pense aussi que Madame Abdy est disposée à donner à Désormière les moyens de commencer immédiatement son travail” (OC V:254-255).
with many theatres . . . Nothing is decided with anyone. And I can undertake to show it in three weeks, if I have a theatre at my disposal” (“Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’” 94). Less than a week later, Artaud pressed Jouvet for an answer about using the Athenée Theatre. On March 5, Artaud wrote “I ask you not to keep me waiting. I want to try to perform the play at the end of the month, and it is still possible if we begin to rehearse immediately: it needs at least three weeks to get the sound machinery ready” (94). At this point, Jouvet must have rejected Artaud’s request and offered him alternative options, specifically moving the production outside of Paris. Artaud rejected this option and instead secured space during the off-season for the Folies-Wagram Theatre. While this space does not fit Artaud’s stated goals for the Theater of Cruelty, it represented the only available option. I feel that it is possible, however, to view the Folies-Wagram Theater as potentially fulfilling Artaud’s goal as closely as he could, which I will describe in more detail when I discuss the scenic design for the production.

I agree with Grotowski’s assertions and feel that, even with some limitations, Les Cenci provides as clear a sense as possible of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty ideals in practice. While the entirety of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty might not have been implemented, there is no guarantee that it would have been in future productions. If anything, Grotowski’s examples with Artaud and Brecht argue that no theories, especially those as encompassing as the Theatre of Cruelty, can ever be fully put into practice during a single production. Roger Blin, while discussing his work on this production in an interview, intimates that Artaud acknowledged this while working on Les Cenci.

10 “Moi-même je suis actuellement en pourparlers avec plusieurs théâtres . . . Rien n’est décidé avec personne. Et je me charge, si j’ai la disposition d’un théâtre immédiatement, de passer en trois semaines” (OC V: 248).
11 “Je vous demande de ne pas me faire attendre. Je veux essayer de passer à la fin du mois, et c’est encore possible si l’on commence à répéter tout de suite: Il faut au moins 3 semaines pour mettre au point les appareils sonores” (OC V: 250).
‘Les Cenci’ was for him only a means toward making the public aware of some of his ideas concerning Theatre of Cruelty; concerning the word, gesture, certain little-known musical traditions. That’s why, with Désormière, his conductor, he made experiments with the seven-beat rhythms of Inca music. And, incidentally, it was the first time stereophonic sound was used in the theatre, with the sound of bells on tape and speakers placed in different points of the auditorium. That had never been done before. (‘Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’’ 110)

In keeping with these ideas set forth by Blin (word, gesture, the use of music and stereophonic sound) as especially important in this production, I will look at the ways the script itself adheres to Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty ideals as well as aspects that can be seen at work in two scenes in the production. Before discussing the production itself, a brief examination of Artaud’s script is in order, as such an examination provides evidence of the Theatre of Cruelty concepts at work in the production and insight into why Artaud chose this script as his first Theatre of Cruelty project and how he created a distinct adaptation of the Cenci story.

The Script

In 1932, Artaud published his first manifesto for the Theatre of Cruelty, and wrote a second manifesto the following year. With these ideas developing, he adapted Les Cenci in 1935 from the Percy Bysshe Shelley drama written in 1819, which was itself based on the folk history of the actual sixteenth-century Cenci family. The story remained the same throughout these three (and numerous other versions), with incest, patricide, and religious hypocrisy serving as central themes throughout its history.
In the story, Count Cenci rules his family through wickedness and terror. He has murdered several rivals, paying the Catholic Church large sums of money for these sins to be absolved. When Camillo, the church’s representative, tells Cenci that his latest crime requires an extraordinarily large payment totaling one-third of the Cenci estate, Cenci becomes enraged and vows to make all of his previous sins pale in comparison to his future actions. After his two banished sons are killed, Cenci invites all of his family and acquaintances to a celebratory feast. When everyone has gathered (without anyone knowing the real reason for the feast), Cenci forces his wife, Lucretia, to read aloud the letter that brought the news of his sons’ deaths. Cenci announces to his guests that he sees this letter as proof that God has granted him permission to destroy anyone, including family, who has wronged him and challenges anyone there to stop his tyranny.

Cenci views his daughter Beatrice’s beauty and virtue as the last shred of decency in his family and decides to destroy these as well by raping her. He announces his intentions to her and the rest of the guests at the feast, threatening that she either willingly participates in the incest or face the same fate that befell her brothers. At this point, Beatrice, Lucretia, and Giacomo, another brother who had been expelled from the family, prepare to murder Cenci before he can destroy the entire family.

Beatrice and Giacomo conspire separately to murder Cenci. Orsino, a mutual friend who has romantic feelings for Beatrice, brings the two plans together. The family arranges for two assassins to murder Cenci while the family travels to their country estate. When that fails, they hire two former servants whose lives were also destroyed by Cenci to kill him in his sleep. They fail on their first opportunity to strangle the drugged and sleeping Cenci when they become terrified that Cenci may be powerful enough to exact revenge upon them from beyond the grave.
Beatrice rebukes them for their lack of courage until they finally commit the deed, strangling Cenci and throwing his body out his bedroom window. In a tragically ironic bit of timing, as soon as Cenci dies, Camillo arrives to arrest the Count, according to the Pope’s wishes. They find the assassins outside the castle and they admit to being hired by Beatrice and the rest of the family. The authorities then arrest the entire family and send them to Venice to await trial.

Even after the Catholic Church learns of Count Cenci’s murdering of family members and raping his own daughter, the judge refuses to declare their innocence. The Pope seems determined to receive retribution for the Count’s murder, perhaps because, with Cenci dead, the church will no longer receive payments from the Cenci family. He sentences all of those involved (except Bernarndo, the youngest son, who is still an adolescent and has thus been cleared of any involvement with the murder plots) to be tortured until a confession is made. The play ends with Beatrice heading toward her torture on the wheel, even after her brother and stepmother have already confessed.

At first glance, the literary pedigree of the Cenci legend seems to make it a puzzling choice for Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. Shelley’s version of the play has been considered by some literary scholars as an important work in the author’s career. It took almost a year, though, to find someone willing to stage Shelley’s version of the drama and then for it to pass Britain’s censors. The incest theme created very negative reactions among censors and potential producers alike, which Roland Duerksen claims led to its delayed production history.

The Cenci came to be considered a closet drama, not suited for stage presentation. Efforts to get the play on stage were unsuccessful throughout most of the nineteenth century—a fact for which the British censors later received the full brunt of George Bernard Shaw’s disdainful scorn. It was in 1886 that The Cenci
was first staged, the Shelley Society having circumvented the censors by renting a theater and producing the drama as the business at hand for one of its scheduled meetings. The production was immensely successful with the large audience, and the play has since had a number of other noteworthy successes in professional and amateur theaters of both Europe and the United States. (Shelley xii)

Even with its incestuous theme and the prominence that the threat of violence plays in The Cenci, the critical and literary praise that Shelley’s script garnered would seem to make it stand in contrast to Artaud’s desire to eliminate such “masterpieces” from the stage. Indeed, in “No More Masterpieces,” Artaud takes aim at the production of classics such as this on stage. He wrote “[m]asterpieces of the past are good for the past: they are not good for us” (“No More Masterpieces,” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 74). While this would seem to limit The Cenci’s usefulness for Artaud, Bermel provided possible clarification on Artaud’s thoughts. The plays themselves were not the issue for Artaud. Bermel believes that Artaud, instead, wished to rid the theatre of

Those ‘sacred texts’ droningly recited and accompanied by the striking of hallowed, meaningless poses. After World War II critics in other countries recognized similar tendencies: their own classics grew starched through the infusion of too much awe. A classic had made its mark because it challenged audiences, not soothed them. To muffle the challenges by reverential staging was to destroy the plays. (96)

The static nature in the staging of masterpieces, in other words, disgusted Artaud. The classics that could still challenge audiences, however, could be restaged and adapted to reach current

12 “Les chefs-d’œuvre du passé sont bons pour le passé: ils ne sont pas bons pour nous” (OC IV: 89).
audiences. This seems to be the approach that Artaud took by adapting Shelley’s *The Cenci* for the French stage. While Artaud considered the story of the Cenci family universal, his goals for the theatre required that he adapt the piece for his particular vision.

Artaud’s version kept the same major components of the story as Shelley’s play. The most significant difference can be seen in Artaud’s style of writing. Whereas Shelley created a flowing, poetic text, Artaud presented more direct conversation. The difference in styles can be seen when Cenci rebukes the Catholic Church’s request for one-third of his estate. In Shelley’s text, Cenci displayed a greater eloquence in his response:

The third of my possessions—let it go!
Ay, I once heard the nephew of the Pope
Had sent his architect to view the ground,
Meaning to build a villa on my vines
The next time I compounded with his uncle:
I little thought he should outwit me so!
Henceforth no witness—not the lamp—shall see
That which the vassal threatened to divulge
Whose throat is choked with dust for his reward.
The deed he saw could not have rated higher
Than his most worthless:—it angers me!
Respited me from Hell!—So may the Devil
Respite their souls from Heaven. No doubt Pope Clement,
And his most charitable nephews, pray
That the Apostle Peter and the Saints
Will grant for their sake that I long enjoy
Strength, wealth, and pride, and lust, and length of days
Wherein to act the deeds which are the stewards
Of their revenue.—But yet much remains
To which they show no title. (Shelley 13-14)

Shelley employed a flowing lyrical form to help Cenci describe how he views the arrangement he has made with the Catholic Church. This form, which Shelley utilized according to the conventions of nineteenth-century poetic drama, presents the characters with a passionate lyricism in even their most mundane speeches. These lengthy speeches might have been delivered in a droning chant that Artaud would seem to have hated. Artaud’s version of Count Cenci would convey the same reaction to the attempted extortion, but in a much more direct manner. The corresponding text from Artaud’s play shows the different views the playwrights had regarding poetic style:

CENCI. A pox! A third of my possessions!
CAMILLO. You find that too much?
CENCI. It is too much for one man’s life to be valued at three measures of land with the vineyards that grow on them. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud used a simpler, more straightforward tone for his characters. Count Cenci’s harshness appears to match the tone of the language in Artaud’s text, rather than stand in contrast to it, as it does in Shelley’s. Artaud’s lines, then, became prose rather than poetry, with the linguistic nuances appearing in the way the characters’ lines repeat words. These repetitions created an

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13 CENCI. Peste! Le tiers de mes possessions!
CAMILLO. Trouvez-vous cue ce soit beaucoup?
CENCI. C’est beaucoup que la vie d’un home soit évaluée trios measures de terre avec les vignobles qui sont dessus. (OC IV: 187-88)
aural echo of sorts. As a whole, however, Artaud’s text reads more staccato and concise than Shelley’s script.

Two scenes in particular stand out for me because of their difference from Shelley’s text. The banquet Cenci throws to celebrate his sons’ deaths and Beatrice’s inquisition following the family’s arrest appear in markedly different forms in the two texts. Examining the ways Artaud departs from Shelley in both of these scenes is beneficial in isolating instances of the type of theatre Artaud championed in his manifestos on the Theatre of Cruelty.

The action of Shelley’s banquet scene occurs as the third separate scene in the first act. The description of the scene and opening action is simple: “A magnificent hall in the Cenci palace. A Banquet. Enter Cenci, Lucretia, Beatrice, Orsino, Camillo, Nobles” (Shelley 22). As soon as the guests are seated, Cenci welcomes them and shares the news that moved him to throw this celebration, but through a winding poetic ode that only hints at the reason: his two sons have been killed through chance circumstances that leads Cenci to believe that he has been divinely empowered and protected. After forcing Beatrice to read to Lucretia, her stepmother, the letter announcing her brothers’ deaths, Count Cenci dares the guests to stand against him. When no one does, he warns them against considering any possible future attempts to assassinate him: “Beware! For my revenge / Is as the sealed commission of a king / That kills, and none dare name the murderer” (Shelley 24). Shelley offers very little stage direction or action in this scene, which may have helped scholars to conclude that Shelley wrote it as a closet drama. The only stated action occurs when Lucretia faints and falls into Beatrice’s arms and when the guests disperse after Count Cenci’s vindictive benediction.

Artaud’s script, on the other hand, relies much more on physical action throughout the scene. Like Shelley’s version, Artaud’s scene also appears as the third scene in the first act. His
description of the opening scene, however, provides many more intricate details than Shelley’s and more explicitly presents an active tableau before the spoken lines begin:

CENCI, CAMILLO, BEATRICE, LUCRETIA, guests including PRINCE COLONNA; a large number of mannequins. The scene slightly resembles The Marriage of Cana [by Veronese], but much more savage. Purple curtains blow in the wind, landing in heavy folds on the wall. Suddenly, under a draped curtain, a scene of furious orgy that looks like it was created as a trompe-l’œil painting, erupts to life. The bells of Rome can be heard at full peal, but muffled, matching the turbulent rhythm of the festivities. Voices are amplified, matching the deep or high and almost clear tones of the bells. From time to time, a thick sound spreads out and then dissolves, like being stopped by some obstacle that makes it echo in sharp angles (Rob Connick trans.).

The stage directions in Artaud’s script contain many more details while still maintaining a vagueness that can be seen in most of Artaud’s writing. In the text that follows in Artaud’s script, Cenci also hints at the events that befell his sons (as Shelley also did), but the guests communicate more thoroughly with Cenci in this later version. Count Cenci’s presentation of the events occurs as a response to the guests’ questions instead of as a planned soliloquy, as in Shelley’s script. When the guests hear the truth, the confrontation occurs more strongly and directly in Artaud’s script. After one guest attempts to rouse the others into action against Count

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Cenci, he responds with the threat, “To your seats, or not one living man will be left here” (Rob Connick trans.).\textsuperscript{15} This works in dissuading potential attacks even as Beatrice pleads for the guests to defend her and the remaining survivors of the Cenci family. Count Cenci’s final words to the guests make a more pointed attack in Artaud’s text: “Go on. Join everyone together and attack me. All of your united forces would not be enough. Now, get out, all of you, I would like to be alone with her” (Rob Connick trans.).\textsuperscript{16} Artaud implicitly states Cenci’s intention to rape Beatrice, whereas Shelley leaves it only hinted at throughout the text. In this scene, Artaud’s text more directly situates Cenci as a villainous force, with his intentions being expressed more directly. For Shelley, Count Cenci may be equally as evil as in Artaud’s version, but he still operates with the decorum and grace of a nobleman. Shelley’s treatment of Count Cenci as an eloquent monster creates an arguably more disturbing and sinister villain. Artaud’s Count Cenci acts on instinct, while Shelley’s character methodically approaches his actions. These two distinct approaches to this character highlight the different ways that language operates for these two playwrights.

Beatrice’s inquisition scene, meanwhile, shows the differing level of importance the playwrights placed on spectacle. Shelley’s play ends before Beatrice’s torture begins. Beatrice speaks Shelley’s final lines as she prepares to face her torture and expected execution. She handles this moment with grace and poise, asking her mother to tie her girdle and bind her hair up one final time. The action throughout the scene remains as static as in Shelley’s previous scenes. The script marks only the characters’ entrances and exits. Shelley focuses the conflict

\textsuperscript{15} “A vos places, ou pas un home vivant ne sortira d’ici” (\textit{OC} IV: 206).
\textsuperscript{16} “Allez. Concertez-vous tout pour m’abattre. Vous n’aurez pas trop de toutes vos forces réunies. Maintenant, dehors tout le monde, je veux rester seul avec celle-ci” (\textit{OC} IV: 207).
between Beatrice’s grace and poise and the deceit and betrayal she faces from the Catholic Church and the law.

The conflict in Artaud’s version, however, is still that between Beatrice and the evil personified by Count Cenci. As her torture is about to begin, Beatrice addresses her father’s evil legacy one final time: “My eyes, what a dreadful vision will you see while dying. How can I be sure that, down there, I will not meet my father again? That idea makes my death more bitter. For I fear that death teaches me I have ended up resembling him” (Rob Connick trans.).

For Artaud, Beatrice’s faith has been shaken in ways that Shelley avoids. She acknowledges that her actions may have damned her to an eternity that she may spend with the man who tortured her. She, perhaps understandably, does not retain the same sense of virtue and innocence that Shelley leaves with her. Evil may physically prevail in both texts (with the victimized Beatrice punished as strongly as Count Cenci), but for Artaud, evil wins both the physical and spiritual battle.

As I have described above, the tone in Artaud’s text strikes a potentially more physically imposing note than Shelley’s. Naomi Greene argues that Artaud’s use of violence overshadows any metaphysical intentions he may have had for the production. Citing Cenci’s speech in which he claims to be “a force of nature” and that he commits evil “by intention and principle, unable to resist the forces that “stampede” within him, she writes: “Artaud tries to infuse a feeling of cosmic cruelty into the play by having Cenci represent the evil forces of nature, not unlike the plague. … Speeches such as these, however, pale alongside scenes of murder, rape, and torture” (120). Greene, however, may have allowed the general perception of Artaud to color her examination of the script. While “murder, rape, and torture” pepper the characters’ thoughts and

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17 “Mes yeux, sur quell affieux spectacle en mourant vous vous ouvrirez. Quel est celui qui pourra m’assurer que, là-bas, je ne retrouverai pas mon père. Cette idée rend ma mort plus amère. Car j’ai peur que la mort ne m’apprenne que j’ai fini par lui ressembler” (OC IV: 271).
actions, all of these events occur off-stage. Artaud’s actual portrayal of violent actions on stage mirrors Shelley’s absence. Artaud’s script does, however, call more attention to the action occurring off-stage.

The struggle in Artaud’s text becomes more focused on Beatrice’s battle against a force of pure evil than on Beatrice’s struggle for justice in a corrupt legal system that offers her no protection and no other course of action. The theme of humanity through Beatrice struggling against a seemingly inhuman evil personified by Count Cenci references Artaud’s stated goals for theatre. In Artaud’s second manifesto on Cruelty, he wrote that the themes portrayed in the Theater of Cruelty must be universal, and in them

Great social upheaval, conflicts between people and races, natural forces, interventions of chance, and the magnetism of fatality will manifest themselves either indirectly, in the movement and gestures of characters enlarged to the statures of gods, heroes, or monsters, in mythical dimensions, or directly, in material forms obtained by new scientific means. (“The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto),” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 123)  

Artaud placed Count Cenci into this category of god/monster. Bermel argues that “Artaud contrived a portrait of unredeemed evil, a man with no glimmering of conscience, who blames God or fate for having made him what he is . . . To excel in crime is his ‘destiny’” (73). For Artaud, Count Cenci represented more than a singular diabolical despot; he stood in for the

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18 “les grands bouleversements sociaux, les conflits de peuple et de race à race, les forces naturelles, l’intervention du hazard, le magnetisme de la fatalité, s’y manifesteront soit indirectment, sous l’agitation et les gestes de personages grandis à la taille de dieux, de héros, ou de monsters, aux dimensions mythiques, soit directement, sous la forme de manifestations matérielles obtenues par des moyens scientifiques nouveaux” (OC IV: 147).
unrepentant chaos and cruelty at work throughout the universe. The struggle against him then echoed, at least for Artaud, the struggles of all humanity against the evil that surrounds them.

By placing *Les Cenci* in this level of struggle, Artaud succeeded in choosing a play that fit with the Theatre of Cruelty’s goal to “centre our show around famous personalities, horrible crimes, and superhuman self-sacrifices, demonstrating that it can draw out the powers struggling within them, without resorting to the dead imagery of ancient myths” (“Theatre and Cruelty,” Victor Corti trans., 121).

Since this would be the only play that Artaud produced after he wrote his manifestos on Cruelty, he seems to have picked one that encapsulated much of what he strove for in the scripts that would bring his Theater of Cruelty to life: a specifically-composed text based on a famous personality, in this case Count Cenci, and the horrible crimes he committed. Beatrice provided the superhuman sacrifice by accepting the torture and execution she received for killing her father, knowing that her punishment guaranteed her youngest brother would live. The next sections highlight key points in Artaud’s script that I feel show many of his Theater of Cruelty ideals in practice.

*The Banquet*

From the photograph Hayman provides in his book *Artaud and After* (fig. 1), and Bermel’s accounts, I feel that many of Artaud’s ideals for a theater of cruelty can be seen in the banquet scene of *Les Cenci*. This section will examine the four aspects that I feel most closely

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19 “‘autour de personages fameux, de crimes atroces, de superhumains dévouements, nous essaierons de concentrer un spectacle qui, sans recourir aux images expirées des vieux Mythes, se révèle capable d’extraire les forces qui s’agitent en eux’” (*OC* IV: 102).
coincide with Artaud’s manifestos: the costuming, scenery, special effects, and staging techniques.20

The costuming for the play can be clearly seen in the picture from this scene. The male characters have the outlines of their muscular structure defined through their costumes. The female characters, with the exception of Beatrice (second from left), are clothed in fairly uniform dresses that create the sense that they could be interchangeable. Indeed, many of them appear only in the group scenes, such as the one I describe here. Artaud lauded the modernist painter Balthus, who served as both costume and scenic designer for this production, for “the symbolism of the costume colors, such as ‘green for death, yellow for evil death’” (Bermel 83). Bermel also remarks on the similarities between Cenci’s costume (the dark costume in the left foreground) “and the traditional appearance of Hamlet,” but also notes that “it is unlikely that Artaud desired historical veracity, only a generalized historical tone” (Bermel 83). This would echo Artaud’s desire in his manifestos for a uniform costuming

not from a fetishist or superstitious reverence for the past, but because it seems absolutely evident that certain age-old costumes, of ritual intent, though they existed at a given moment in time, preserve a beauty and a revelational appearance from their closeness to the traditions that gave them birth. (“The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto),” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 96)21

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20 See pages 78-80 for a synopsis of the play.
21 “non dans un gout fétichiste et superstitieux de l’ancien, mais parce qu’il apparaît comme absolument évident que certains costumes millénaires, à destination rituelle, bien qu’ils aient été à un moment donné d’époque, conservent une beauté et une apparence révélatrices, du fait de leur rapprochement avec les traditions qui leur donnèrent naissance” (OC IV: 114).
Thus, the anachronistic, yet uniform costuming fits perfectly with Artaud’s stated ideal. By creating a timeless, but distinctly not contemporary costume design, Balthus gave Artaud the type of design that matched his theoretical writings.

The scenery also appears to be a skeletal outline that functions as a way to eliminate specificity of place. Beyond what can be seen in the picture, Bermel has noted that the set for *Les Cenci* was dominated by a partly realistic, partly abstract version of the Cenci castle with lofty ladders, columns, nets, and irregular scaffolding behind it. Italianate stairways, arches, and balustrades, created an ambiance at once indoor and outdoor, rather like a comment on the magnificent stairscapes wrought by those greatest of Baroque designers, the Galli da Bibbiena family. But the arches were chopped off in the middle to enhance the depth and height of the stage space, and small painted curtains descended for the scene changes (such as the final one which carries the play from the castle to the torture dungeon), without obscuring the background. (82)

With so much of the structure (of the theatre itself as well as the set), the set did not offer a realistic portrayal of any part of the castle or of the cell that held Beatrice. It instead offered the audience a backdrop that could serve as a symbol for the various settings that occur within the play.

While the scenery did not allow the action to surround the audience, which was one of Artaud’s key concepts for the Theatre of Cruelty, I believe that Balthus’s design accomplished Artaud’s stated goal to have scenery that would be “utilized not only in its dimensions and volume, but so to speak, *in its undersides*” (“The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto),” Mary
Catherine Richards trans., 124, emphasis in original). The visible structures that supported the Folies-Berger building that housed the production could be seen as a part of Balthus’s artistic statement. Balthus seemed to accomplish exactly what Artaud had intended for the scenery and costumes, since he praised Balthus for being “just as much at home with the symbolic nature of forms as he is conversant with that of colors” (The Cenci, Simon Watson-Taylor trans., 11).

Perhaps because Balthus served as both costume and scenic designer, I feel that these two aspects shared an aesthetic sensibility. Bermel also drew a parallel between the two designs, noting that “[i]n revealing internal features summarily on the surface, the costumes were therefore at one with the castle setting” (83). The visual connection to the scenery helped to weaken any possible disruption of Artaud’s ideals concerning the scene design. The connection between the two designs would instead have strengthened Artaud’s concept of a fully integrated theatrical language that covers the entirety of the mise en scène.

While the use of the Folies-Wagram Theater may also seem problematic, I believe that this may actually highlight Artaud’s attempts to find the best available compromise for his Theatre of Cruelty space. This space should not be considered one of France’s premiere theatre spaces. Indeed, critics have mentioned that it was not an upscale theatre, but “a music-hall, which did not stage ‘serious’ plays, let alone avant-garde theatre” (Schumacher 160). While not the hangars or barns that Artaud advocates in his manifestos, the Folies-Wagram nonetheless offered Artaud a space that he could use in an unconventional way, since the audiences already would read the space differently than the theatres normally used for “serious” plays. This space,

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22 “non seulement dans ses dimensions et dans son volume, mais, si l’on peut dire, dans ses dessous” (OC IV: 149).
23 “Balthus qui a fait les décors connaît la symbolique des forms comme il n’ignore rien de celle des couleurs” (OC V: 49-50).
instead, would have been more closely associated with alternative performance styles such as concerts and carnival acts.

Artaud’s use of special effects also reflects the sentiments he wrote in his manifestos. The use of mannequins to fill some of the seats in the banquet scene addresses Artaud’s discussion about special effects. Artaud explicitly commented on the use of mannequins as adhering to the Theater of Cruelty ideals when he wrote

The Cenci will include the presence of human dummies, and in this way, again, I shall achieve the Theater of Cruelty by devious and symbolic paths . . . The dummies will be there to force the heroes of the play to describe the things that are troubling them and which human speech is incapable of expressing. The dummies will be there to formulate all the reproaches, rancor, remorse, anguish and demands. (The Cenci, Simon Watson-Taylor trans., 8)\textsuperscript{25}

These remarks provide evidence for the way that Artaud imagined that these technical effects would work within the framework of the entire \textit{mise en scène}. According to the ideas presented in his first manifesto, “[m]anikins [sic], enormous masks, objects of strange proportions will appear with the same sanction as verbal images, will enforce the concrete aspect of every image and every expression” (“The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto),” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 97).\textsuperscript{26} For \textit{Les Cenci}, the mannequins in the banquet scene provided intentionally incomplete bodies with which the human characters could interact. In the same manner in which

\textsuperscript{25} Des mannequins interviendront dans \textit{Les Cenci}. Et c’est ainsi que je rejoins le Théâtre de la Cruauté, par des voies détournées et symboliques . . . Les mannequins des \textit{Cenci} seront là pour faire dire aux héros de la pièce qui les gene et que la parole humaine est incapable d’exprimer. Tout ce qui est reproches, rancœurs, remords, angoisses, revendications, les mannequins seront là pour le formuler” (\textit{OC} V: 46-47).

\textsuperscript{26} “Des mannequins, des masques énormes, des objets aux proportions singulières apparaîtront au même titre que des images verbales, insisteront sur le côté concret de toute image et de toute expression” (\textit{OC} IV: 116).
the scenery and costumes showed their interior structures while still functioning in their intended roles, the mannequins similarly functioned as human bodies even as their artifice could be easily noticed by the audience. When Count Cenci dares the guests to speak up against him, the silence of the mannequins matched that of the actors. These mannequins, then, helped to create the sense of doom and danger inherent in the scene.

Artaud’s staging of this scene highlights the style of acting he was looking for from his troupe. He wanted actors who could simultaneously bring an energy and vitality to their characters while also performing according to a rigid structure of coded language and gesture. For Artaud, “[t]he actor is both an element of first importance, since it is upon the effectiveness of his work that the success of the spectacle depends, and a kind of passive and natural element, since he is rigorously denied all personal initiative” (“The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto),” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 98). Artaud stressed a rigid uniformity in the actors’ movements that he felt would allow those movements to be read as part of the language of the play.

The stage directions in the banquet scene hint at this style of staging. Artaud provides several instances where movements that would normally be considered superfluous (especially when compared to Shelley’s version) are explicitly described, as when Count Cenci “brandishes the letters above his head” while describing his sons’ deaths and then declares, while “raising a goblet of wine,” that the wine be considered sacramentally transformed into his sons’ blood as a blasphemous blessing (The Cenci, Simon Watson-Taylor trans., 24). This creates “noise and confusion” (25) from the guests. Cenci curses his dead sons and then “here, a great silence. The

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27 “L’acteur est à la fois un élément de première importance, puisque c’est de l’efficacité de son jeu que dépend la réussite du spectacle, et une sorte d’élément passif et neuter, puisque tout initiative personelle lui est rigoureusement refuse” (OC IV: 117).
chaos stops suddenly. Everyone freezes in place” (Rob Connick trans.). When Count Cenci threatens the guests’ lives if they do not back down from him, they “surge back from all sides in disorder. Panic-stricken, their tread is uncertain, and they move as though going into battle, but a battle of ghosts. They are off to fight ghosts, arms out-stretched as though their hands were clutching a lance or a shield” (The Cenci, Simon Watson-Taylor trans., 25-26). The guests all make their way to one corner of the stage, as far away from Beatrice as possible, where Cenci corners them and threatens them again. At this point, “Beatrice makes a circle around the stage and stops directly in front of her father” (Rob Connick trans.). As seen in the production photo from The Drama Review (fig. 2), she confronts her father, and “here, the whole crowd holds its breath as if they had received a strong punch in the stomach, and then exhales a great cry; then they rush disorderly to the farthest points on the stage. Beatrice resumes circling the stage and [stops and] faces each member of the crowd’ looking for someone to help her (Rob Connick trans.). Every movement in the action seems to be deliberately planned by the level of detail in their descriptions. Bermel notes that “some diagrammatic sketches in crayon reveal how Artaud mapped out his open floor space (he used few properties) by tracing the actors’ relative movements: where they would meet, separate, cross paths, circle one another, and take up individual stances” (83-84, parentheses in original). These sketches, then, portray the level of

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28 “Ici, un grand silence. Le brouhaha s’arrête tout d’un coup. Tout le monde se fige à sa place” (OC IV: 205).
29 “Les convives refluent de tous côtés en désordre. Ils plétinent, affolés, et avancement comme s’ils allaient à la bataille, mais une bataille de fantômes. Ils partent à l’assaut de fantômes, bras levés comme s’ils avaient dans la main une lance ou un bouciclier” (OC IV: 206).
30 “Béatrice fait en courant le tour de la scène et elle vient se placer devant son père” (OC IV: 206).
31 “Ici, tout la foule, comme si elle avait reçu un grand coup de poing dans l’estomac, respire et exhale ensuite un grand cri; puis elle s’éloigne en désordre vers toutes les sortes. Béatrice reprend son mouvement tournant et fait face maintenant à la foule” (OC IV: 207).
detail that Artaud used to create the staging components of the play, leaving very little to the actors’ imaginations.

Fig. 2. The confrontation between Beatrice and Count Cenci in Artaud’s 1935 production of *Les Cenci*, photograph from Lipnitzki-Viollet, “Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’,” TDR 16:2 (1972), p. 105.
This scene shows how Artaud used almost every aspect of the *mise en scène* to create a unified concept that fulfills many ideas brought forth in his Theater of Cruelty manifestos. The scenery and costumes worked together to create a representational era for the action to occur. The mannequins that filled the seats at the banquet represented characters without the worry of an actor’s own identity overshadowing the emotional intensity of the scene. The silence created by them enhances the silence by the live actors. The staging techniques used by Artaud also hides the actors’ unique talents by carefully orchestrating every movement on stage. As with the final scene in the play, these elements combine to create a moment that provides a glimpse into the Theater of Cruelty in production.

*Beatrice’s Imprisonment and Torture*

The previous section provided one selection that highlights the potential for the Theatre of Cruelty to be seen in Artaud’s production of *Les Cenci*. In this section, I will address those aspects of Artaud’s manifestos on Cruelty that I feel can most clearly be seen at work in the final scene, in particular the staging and Artaud’s use of sound effects. The characters’ costumes have not changed, so addressing them in this section would be superfluous. The scene design also remained virtually unchanged; the only new scenery is a turning wheel that hangs above the stage and a painted drop (fig. 3). I will use this section, however, to address more of Artaud’s staging techniques as well as an aspect that I did not discuss earlier, and which may be one of Artaud’s most lasting contributions to theatre: the development of stereophonic sound.32

Artaud’s ideals regarding staging can again be seen at work, beginning with the opening of the scene.

32 Refer to the play synopsis on pages 78-80 as needed.
From the theatre’s ceiling, a wheel turns on its axis, traversing the stage’s diameter. Beatrice, hung by her hair and thrust forward by a guard who is holding her arms behind her, walks around the [imaginary] axis of the wheel. Every two or three steps she takes, the sounds of winches, turning wheels, or splitting wooden beams creates a cry that comes from all different corners of the stage.

(Rob Connick trans.)\textsuperscript{33}

Throughout this scene, Beatrice continues to move in a circle around the stage as the wheel is cranked. The other characters circle her while they speak, creating a geometric pattern reminiscent of a model of our solar system similar to the patterns that Bermel describes Artaud creating in his diagrams. The addition of an oversized torture wheel descending from the ceiling adds to the uneasy mood that this staging creates while providing the basis for the geometric pattern of the actors’ movements.

Artaud recognized the acting as one aspect that clearly portrayed his Theatre of Cruelty ideals, even though audiences did not seem to notice the intricacies in the performances. Artaud, writing after the production closed, felt that “[f]ew spectators will have noticed the precision, the strictness, the mathematical entrances and exits of actors moving around one another and creating on the stage a spatial geometry, because we only recognize what we know” (“After ‘The

\textsuperscript{33}“Au plafond du theater une roué tourney comme sur un axe, qui en traverserait le diamètre. Béatrice, suspendue par les cheveux et poussée par un garde qui lui tire les bras en arrière, marche selon l’axe de la roué. Tous les deux ou trios pas qu’elle fait, un cri monte avec un bruit de treuil, de roué qu’on tourne, ou de poutres écartelées, venant d’un coin différent de la scène” (\textit{OC} IV: 263).
Even if the audience did not pick up on the staging choices Artaud made, he still acknowledged their utility in this production.

Fig. 3. Beatrice’s torture on the wheel, photograph from Lipnitzki-Viollet, “Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’,” TDR 16:2 (1972), p. 91.

34 “Cette précision, cette rigueur, ces allées et venues mathématiques des acteurs les uns autour des autres et qui tracent dans l’air de la scène une véritable géométrie, peu de spectateurs s’en sont rendu compte, parce que l’on ne remarque que ce qu’on connaît” (OC V: 58-59).
The opening description of this scene also provides an example of Artaud’s reliance on sound as a crucial component of this performance. Artaud and Bermel both describe the soundscape for the show, and the Theatre of Cruelty, in great detail. For *Les Cenci*, Artaud planned to place the audience “in the centre of a network of sound vibrations; but these, instead of emanating from four actual 30 ft. high bells hanging at the four cardinal points of the auditorium [to signify cathedral bells], will be diffused by loudspeakers at these same points” (*The Cenci*, Simon Watson-Taylor trans., 8).\(^\text{36}\) Artaud’s intention to envelop the audience in sound and his description of these sounds can be used to examine their relationship to a practical Theatre of Cruelty.

In his manifestos, Artaud argued that “new means of recording this [integrated bodily and vocal] language must be found, whether these means belong to musical transcription or to some kind of code” (“The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto),” Mary Catherine Richards trans., 94).\(^\text{37}\) In this respect, I believe that this production accomplishes Artaud’s goal because he incorporated new technology into the production that would have created an experience the likes of which his audience would never have previously attended. Bermel notes that with the loudspeaker system Artaud used, he produced “the first stereophonic sound in theatre” (85). In addition, Bermel states that the ways stereophonic sounds are used “are not uncommon today [1977] in the theatre. In 1935, and used in combination to form a ‘network of vibrations,’ they were revolutionary for a play billed as a tragedy” (85). This “network of vibrations” would have allowed the sound to surround the audience, placing them within the world of the play much

\(^\text{36}\) “au centre d’un réseau de vibrations sonores; mais celles-ci, au lieu de provenir de quatre cloches de dix mètres de haut situées aux quatre points cardinaux de la sale, seront diffuses par des haut-parleurs disposés suivant une identique orientation” (*OC* V: 46).

\(^\text{37}\) “il faut trouver des moyens nouveaux de noter ce langage, soit que ces moyens s’apparentent à ceux de la transcription musicale, soit qu’on fasse usage d’une manière de langage chiffre” (*OC* IV: 112).
more than the then-standard monophonic sound could. This outcome seems to encapsulate what
Artaud strove for in his discussions regarding the soundscape.

With the staging and soundscape working together to create the atmosphere in the final
scene, the torture becomes more explicit than in Shelley’s text, highlighting the major shift
between the two authors’ approaches. Shelley created an evil character that haunted the
audience’s thoughts, while Artaud instead focused on reaching his audience on a visceral level.
Even if the audience could not see the action or understand the French spoken on stage, the
sounds of the torturer’s wheel and the cries that accompanied it would allow them to understand
the emotional intensity of the scene.

The final images and sounds that the audience witnessed seemed to embody Artaud’s
ideals for a Theatre of Cruelty. These ideals would go on to be seen in the work of theatre
practitioners to come, including Roger Blin (who received his first professional experience
during this production), Grotowski, Brook and the Living Theatre, among many others. James
Roose-Evans argues that “perhaps the group that most closely follows the spirit, as well as the
letter, of Artaud’s famous manifesto, is the Grand Théâtre Panique, operating in Paris in the
‘sixties, under the direction of Jérome Savary” (95). While Les Cenci may have had only
seventeen performances, Artaud’s legacy has lived on throughout the works of these, and many
other, artists. But, what did these seventeen performances do that left such an indelible
impression of Artaud the artist?

Critical Reception

Artaud’s critics, and even some of his most loyal supporters, point to this show as a
practical failure that highlights Artaud’s own shortcomings as an artist. Les Cenci ran for only
seventeen performances before it closed, and Artaud never ventured to the stage afterwards.

These two points have often been used as evidence that this show failed to achieve its goals. But what was the critical reception of the show? As Kimberly Jannarone has shown in her examination of Artaud’s work while at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, a close examination of the reviews contradicts the notion of a general consensus.

During the rehearsal process, Marcel Idzkowski interviewed both Artaud and Iya Abdy. His article describing the production ran in *Le Jour* on April 15, 1935. Idzkowski acknowledges that this production should not be compared to other productions of the time, because Artaud “makes an attempt to bring something new to the theatre. And even though he might be mistaken, one must admire this artist’s faith when he mounts an artistic play with courage that should be supported” (“Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’” 100). While not entirely supportive of Artaud’s artistic vision, Idzkowski nonetheless praises him for the attempt to challenge the status quo in French theatre.

Pierre Barlatier, perhaps unknowingly, provides us with a couple of reasons why *Les Cenci* did, however, suffer these comparisons. First, a light operetta (‘Breaking in Hearts’ by Max Eddy and Jacques Darieux) preceded it at the Folies-Wagram Theatre. The operetta seems to be the fare that audiences expected to find at this theatre, so the casual theatergoer might have expected *Les Cenci* to adhere to the same artistic ideals. The Folies-Wagram Theatre may have contributed to the misconceptions as well. Barlatier warns his readers that “Antonin Artaud’s *Les Cenci* is not at all an adaptation as it has been announced, but an original tragedy” (107). These two bits of information imply that an audience, and the reviewers who were to see the show, were lead to believe they were seeing a show similar to others at that theatre.
After the show opened, the reviews offered a variety of responses. Some of the more popular newspapers treated the show as an amateur production. Pierre Audiat rips apart the acting in the *Paris-Soir*:

> I do not believe, for example, that one can act at the same time as badly and in a more detached manner than does M. Antonin Artaud in the role of Cenci (the incestuous father). Crying his text as if he were declaiming it at a public gathering, hacking his delivery in a monotone style, M. Antonin Artaud is a deplorable actor . . . Likewise, Miss Iya Abdy, who makes her debut on stage and who hides a foreign accent with difficulty, would not obtain a second honorable mention at the Conservatory. (“Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’” 133)

Given Artaud’s distaste for contemporary acting styles, however, and his views on actor training, I doubt that he would have been happy using Conservatory actors. Audiat, and reviews similar to his, discredit the acting because it does not match the standards upheld in other production at other theatres (and even at the Folies-Wagram Theatre during other events). In an interesting bit of contradiction, Lucien Dubech, one of the play’s harshest critics who wrote for *Candide*, argued that part of the reason for the play’s failure was that Artaud “cast the most prominent theatre orators and offered us an insignificant play” (“Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’” 139). Whether it was because of, or in spite of, the actors’ talents, many of Paris’s reviewers found the play unappealing.

Other reviewers similarly criticized the music and sound design because of its unfamiliarity. Gerald D’Houville took particular umbrage with Désormière’s choices. Writing for *Le Petit Parisien*, he described sitting through the aural assault. “Our ears tortured by deafening music produced by loudspeakers (Why? The talented M. Désormière could have done
well to avoid this), we were in a state of alert as if we were hearing the wail of sirens during an
D’Houville seems to miss the point; the state of alert that he claims to be put into by the music
would be precisely what makes the music a successful component.

In the middle of his damning reviews of the show, Dubech does (unwittingly, I imagine)
provide a reason that the short run of seventeen performances should not mean we view Les
Cenci as a failure. “Ultimately, the Wagram had to be slightly insane. It is hard to understand
how such a play was risked on the brink of quite a difficult year when everything is folding”
(140). This is an important point that often gets overlooked by Artaud’s critics. Les Cenci may
have folded after seventeen performances, but many of the plays the reviewers loved suffered the
same fate.

Several other instances hint at a predetermined distaste by reviewers and the high society.
In Le Figaro, Guermantes discusses an audience that seemed to come ready to deride the play.

There were some I saw a few days ago applauding M. Victor Boucher and Mme.
Marguerite Duval in the Theatre Michodière. They were delighted [then] and did
not try to hide the fact . . . While at the Folies-Wagram we were involved with a
tragedy after Shelley and Stendhal and with an indisputable attempt to organize an
audacious and noble play. Now I assure you that many of the guests listened
without indulgence. They were there (dressed to the nines) hoping that this
tragedy would become comic, and they were not going to forgive the author or
actors for a single mis-step. (“Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’” 129)

This paints a picture of an already hostile audience awaiting any excuse to deride the
performance. Henry Bidou also discusses the audience in these terms for his review in Le Temps.
“Nothing irritates me more, I swear, than these persons who loudly pronounce in front of everyone their advice that no one asked them for and that is often appallingly silly; I find nothing more dishonest than to prevent a work, good or bad, from having a chance and to condemn it without having heard it” (136). Artaud himself seemed to recognize a noticeable shift in tone between the popular and alternative presses. He asks “is it not Colette who gives the opinion of the Journal’s public when she writes for the Journal, and when she writes in an independent and free journal gives her personal opinion of pure enthusiasm” (“Antonin Artaud in ‘Les Cenci’” 142). Artaud brings up an interesting question. Why should he have expected the popular press to give any glowing commendations to the man who so vehemently championed for the overthrow of the type of theatre they enjoyed?

Many reviews had at least moments of true praise for the production. Raymonde Latour wrote in Paris-Midi that “[e]very now and then, the imagination, the brilliance, the luck and the genius of Paris combine to create something bizarre and a little miraculous. Last evening at the Folies-Wagram was an example” (127). A reviewer from Comoedia noted that “[t]he entire ending is done in an intelligent way, offering real grandeur, and an indisputable beauty” (132). Henry Bidou compliments the staging for its novelty “in mixing the text with rhythmic movements” (136). Those that complimented the show overlooked its weaknesses because it was a different type of theatre that the actors were not trained to perform. Those that condemned it viewed everything that did not meet traditional standards as subpar.

Conclusion

Artaud’s production of Les Cenci offers strong evidence that Artaud should receive more attention and credit for his work as a practitioner than he currently does in theatre history.
This production challenges the notion that the Theatre of Cruelty ideals could never be successfully put into practice. Through this examination of the play, Theatre of Cruelty ideals can clearly be seen at work, granting Artaud’s theories a practical component that can be, and has often been, overlooked by scholars. Artaud, as well as other theorists such as Appia and Brecht may have had several moments where parts of their theories can be seen at work in their productions. Likewise, it would prove difficult to find one theorist whose theoretical views have transferred seamlessly to the stage.

Artaud felt that Theatre of Cruelty productions would need to incorporate all aspects of a production into a new, integrated language that would portray the tone and emotions of the texts. At first glance, the text he chose to be the first representation of the Theatre of Cruelty, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Cenci*, seems like an odd fit. It contained several elements, however, that made it appropriate for Artaud’s purposes. The story focused on a grand battle between good and evil and contained historical figures who, through infamy in this case, became legendary. Artaud adapted Shelley’s text, focusing more on the emotional strength of the conflict than on the poetic value of the original text. With a text in place, Artaud focused on producing a show that can be seen as representative of his Theatre of Cruelty ideals.

The stage space, costume design, scenery, sound effects, and special effects (particularly the use of mannequins) all combined to create an integrated language in the *mise en scène*. These aspects functioned in conjunction to accentuate each other’s strengths, with the scenery linked by designer, aesthetics, and color pattern. The sound effects accentuated the scenery, allowing the torture room to sound and feel almost like a factory that created the Catholic empire. Artaud felt a sense of success in the complete integration of actor, stage space, and
technical components, but felt that the audience’s lukewarm reaction to the play showed that these ideals had not been understood.

Artaud’s practical works may not have upheld every aspect of his Theatre of Cruelty manifests. History, however, shows that we should not have expected this to occur. Adolphe Appia and Bertolt Brecht faced similar roadblocks in putting their theories into practice. Jerzy Grotowski argued against unfairly placing theory and practice into consideration with each other; doing so all but guarantees failure for the theories to be upheld. We can instead look for those moments that do connect to those theories and take from them our own formulations and adaptations of Artaud’s oeuvre.
Chapter Three
Theatre, Cruelty, and the Plague

While Artaud’s practical works all arguably point to a developing cohesive aesthetic, his theoretical works appear much more disjointed. According to his critics, including his former psychologist Jacque Latrémolière, even *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud’s most famous collection of theatrical essays, does not “have any importance whatsoever. It’s all about the plague” (Lotringer 24). This attitude towards Artaud’s theoretical writing among his detractors has been as prevalent as the view of him as a failed artist. I believe that these writings have been far too easily dismissed as the work of a mad man, and instead are the work of someone who chose a specific metaphorical concept due to its imagery and social connotations. In this chapter, I will look at the rhetorical, literary, and political motives that may have been behind Artaud’s insistence on writing almost incessantly about the plague and cruelty.

Before addressing these two dominant themes in Artaud’s essays, I would like to counter the claims that Artaud’s works can be easily discarded because they were written by a man with both psychological ailments and chemical dependency issues. One of Artaud’s last essays, written after he had been treated with electroshock therapy numerous times, proved his ability to use language to create vivid imagery while maintaining a lucid linear narrative, and he achieved his greatest literary success through it. In February of 1947, Artaud wrote “*Van Gogh et le suicidé de la société*” (“Van Gogh or Society’s Suicide”) after being prompted by his friend Pierre Loeb.¹ The Musée de l’Orangerie hosted an exhibition of Vincent Van Gogh’s work between January and March 1947, almost a year after Artaud had been released the mental

¹ Loeb served as the director of the Galerie Pierre, a famous art gallery where Picasso and Matisse sold their artwork.
institution at Rodez. Loeb felt that Artaud’s and Van Gogh’s shared experience with institutionalization might spur Artaud’s creativity. Like Artaud, Van Gogh spent a good portion of his adult life locked away. Ronald Hayman chronicles the methods Loeb used to spur Artaud into literary action:

Before the Van Gogh exhibition at the Orangerie had opened, [Loeb] suggested that Artaud should write a book on Van Gogh. Artaud did not go to the exhibition [when] it opened, but Loeb, writing to him at Ivry in another effort to persuade him, enclosed a page from the 31 January issue of the weekly *Arts*. Under the caption HIS MADNESS? it published an extract from Dr. Beer’s sumptuously illustrated book *Van Gogh’s Dream*. Without suggesting that his artistic activity was due to the psychic troubles which provoked his internment and his suicide, Dr. Beer argued that they might have stimulated ‘phenomena of association’ which were conducive to painterly productivity. Van Gogh’s illness could not have been schizophrenia, he argued, because it must have been hereditary. These extracts from the book had the effect Loeb wanted: Artaud was provoked into writing. (16)

Here, we see that, according to Hayman, Artaud’s essay developed out of a need on Artaud’s part to defend Van Gogh’s artistry against a society that marginalized him because of his psychological makeup.

According to Artaud, writes Hayman, Van Gogh, like many other artists, had been othered by society because his artistic abilities superseded the public’s ability to comprehend
what was before them.² Van Gogh, however, chose to reject the world that rejected him and committed suicide. For Artaud, this act proved society’s inability to fully appreciate true artists rather than Van Gogh’s deteriorating mental capacity. Madness, Artaud argued, is a term generated by those in control as a way of silencing those whose artistic and literary prowess may challenge the status quo:

And what is an authentic lunatic?

It is a man who has preferred to go mad in the sense that society recognizes rather than forfeit a certain higher idea of human honor.

This is also the society that has blockaded into asylums all those from whom she wants to protect herself, because they have refused to be complicit in her highly dirty acts.

Because a lunatic is also a man that society does not want to hear and who she wants to prevent from speaking unbearable truths. (“Van Gogh or Society’s Suicide,” Rob Connick trans.)³

According to Artaud, artists who have fallen under the stigma of mental illness did so because they could not blindly follow the guidelines set forth by a morally corrupt social system. These artists instead portrayed life as it actually occurs, rather than hiding the truth behind beauty.

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² Artaud also considered Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Beaudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Hölderlin to be similarly stigmatized artists (Hayman 17).

³ “Et qu’est-ce qu’un aliéné authentique? / C’est un homme qui a préféré devenir fou, dans le sens où socialement on l’entend, que de forfaire à une certain idée supérieure de l’honneur humain. / C’est ainsi que la société a fait étrangler dans ses asiles tous ceux don’t elle a voulu se débarrasser ou se défendre, comme ayant refusé de se rendre avec elle complices de certaines hautes salutés. Car un aliéné est aussi un homme que la société n’a pas voulu entendre et qu’elle a voulu empêcher d’émettre d’insupportables vérités.” (OC XII: 17).
Artaud, speaking perhaps about himself as much as van Gogh, considered madness, then, to be an artificial condition used to separate those who understand (and would expose) the barbarism found in everyday life from those who profit from these behaviors. He opens the essay by comparing Van Gogh’s self-inflicted wounds to the sexual depravity performed against others by those in power. “One can speak of Van Gogh’s good mental health who, in his whole life, cooked only one of his hands and then did nothing more, the rest of his life, than cut off his left ear once in a world where every day one eats vagina cooked in green sauce or the sex of a flagellated, rabid newborn” (“Van Gogh or Society’s Suicide,” Rob Connick trans.)⁴. Society, according to Artaud, punished those who did not use violence as a tool for submission. Those who transgressed social standards by directing this violence against themselves, and away from others, showed more compassion for humanity than those who used violence to dominate others.

By also breaking away from the established social structures of what constitutes acceptable behavior in this way, these individuals were seen more as heretics than saviors.

In the past, heretics might have been burned at the cross. Artaud’s essay suggests, however, that his fellow outsiders suffered a fate even worse than such a death: a life spent institutionalized, sedated or electroshocked into compliance, or at least silence. This may have been perhaps the most monstrous aspect of society for Artaud—it does not allow its dissidents the opportunity to leave. It instead marks them as diseased and marginalizes both their intellectual and emotional capacities. Artaud argued that artists who have been able to see the truth of society would never be able to assimilate into it. Their only choices are to embrace the labels placed upon them or to erase themselves completely from the world through suicide. Van

⁴ “On peut parler de la bonne santé mentale de Van Gogh qui, dans toute sa vie, ne s’est fait cuire qu’une main et n’a pas fait plus, pour le reste, que de se trancher une fois l’oreille gauche, dans un monde où on mange chaque jour du vagin cuit à la sauce verte ou du sexe de nouveau-né flagellé et mis en rage” (OC XII: 13).
Gogh and Artaud had both experienced a life institutionalized. For Van Gogh, and arguably for Artaud as well, returning to that life was not an option.

Julia F. Costich argues that the postscripts to the essay provide the clearest glimpses of Artaud’s ideals at work. She notes that

The two concluding postscripts return to the question of Van Gogh’s madness as it is directly related to Artaud’s own experience of diagnosis and treatment. When he looks into Van Gogh’s eyes in the self-portrait, Artaud sees a being who wanted to live for and in the infinite, whether as plenitude or as void. But the bestial masses were jealous of his relationship with the infinite and so conspired to force him into suicide. Van Gogh found that in death he might achieve union with the infinite; suicide was more appealing than the continuation of a life which he felt to be burdensome to himself and others. When his brother became a father and when [Van Gogh’s attending psychologist] Gachet reprimanded him for his delirium, he had had enough—Artaud says that he would feel the same impulse—and a knot of blood in his throat killed him.5 (90-91)

Artaud felt that the artist’s marginalized life soon became an unbearable burden when the artist became aware that this life will constantly require sacrifice and struggle from both themselves and those closest to him. These burdens “were one day the executioner of Van Gogh, just as they were for Gérard de Nerval, Baudelaire, Edgar Poe, and Lautréamont” (“Van Gogh or Society’s Suicide,” Rob Connick trans.).6 Since the artist can neither engage in the barbaric

5 Artaud knew that Van Gogh died from a gunshot and not by hanging himself, but chose this image because of its strong association with suicide.
6 “Il y a eu un jour les exécuteurs de van Gogh, comme il y a eu ceux de Gérard de Nerval, de Baudelaire, d’Edgar Poe, et de Lautréamont” (OC XII: 60).
behavior of society nor pretend not to see the behavior’s pervasiveness, suicide seemed to be the only choice left.

I would argue that Artaud’s essay brings to light many of the societal issues Artaud had hoped to address with his Theatre of Cruelty. Julia F. Costich could have just as easily been writing about Artaud’s theatrical practices while describing the tone of this essay: “[f]or Artaud, the hypocrisy of a society which condemns innocent aberration while condoning and concealing truly monstrous behavior is an evil which must be denounced” (87). In most of his writing, including his theories on the theatre, Artaud sought ways to denounce this evil hiding behind the curtain of society. This dedication to finding and eliminating the sources of evil in the world dominated Artaud’s writings. Whether discussing performance, religion or history, Artaud’s body of work consistently connected his topics to a search for the most effective way to tear away the curtain hiding the base nature of mankind. These discussions almost always came back to one of two topics: the plague or cruelty.

The Plague

Sickness and disease, specifically through manifestations of the Plague, appear in almost every major work by Artaud. Artaud compared these two manifestations of illness to a variety of topics, including theatre, societal differences, and communication. What qualities does the Plague contain that would make it such an integral part of Artaud’s lexicon? In this section, I will look at the various ways that Artaud, following and perhaps anticipating other writers, has used Plague as a metaphor for centuries.

Artaud used the essay “The Theater and the Plague” (“Le Théâtre et la Peste”) as the first chapter in his collection The Theater and Its Double. In it, he recounts the tale of events that
occurred in Cagliari, Sardinia, in the spring of 1720. The viceroy allegedly had a dream that his entire state was being ravaged by an outbreak of the plague. Through the viceroy’s eyes, Artaud paints a vivid image of the destruction this event can cause: “Beneath such a scourge, all social forms disintegrate. Order collapses. He observes every infringement of morality, every psychological disaster; he hears his body fluids murmuring within him; torn, failing in a dizzying collapse of tissue, his organs grow heavy and gradually turn to carbon” (Mary Catherine Richards trans., 15). As the Plague begins to show its symptoms, physical and psychological decay erupts in a seemingly random fashion. Artaud acknowledged the seemingly illogical pattern of infection. “No one can say why the plague strikes the coward who flees it and spares the degenerate who gratifies himself on the corpses” (Mary Catherine Richards trans., 22). But how do these characteristics manifest themselves in theatre, where the dangers are staged?

Artaud found many similarities between the two. “First of all,” he wrote, “we must recognize that the theater, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative. The mind believes what it sees and does what it believes—that’s the secret of the fascination” (Mary Catherine Richards trans., 27).

7 “Sous l’action du fléau, les cadres de la société se liquéfient. L’ordre tombe. Il assiste à toutes les déroutés de la morale, à toutes les débacles de la psychologie, il entend en lui le murmure de ses humeurs, déchirées, en plaine défaite, et qui, dans une vertigineuse déperdition de matière, deviennent lourdes et se métamorphosent peu à peu en charbon” (OC IV: 19).

8 “Personne ne dira pourquoi la peste frappe le lâche qui fuit et épargne le paillard qui se satisfait sur des cadavres” (OC IV: 27).

9 “Il importe avant tout d’admettre que comme la peste, le jeu théâtral soit un délire et qu’il soit communicatif. L’esprit croit ce qu’il voit et fait ce qu’il croit: c’est le secret de la fascination” (OC IV: 33).
delirium of the imaginative” (Tharu 59). This “delirium of the imaginative” serves as the gateway for both the plague and theatre to transform society.

*Symptoms of the Plague*

The physical evidence of the plague on the sufferer serves as a gruesome signifier of the disease. Jennifer Cooke describes the effects of the plague on its victims:

Buboes are what make the plague famous: the enlarged lymph glands, in the most sensual of areas, the neck, armpits, and the groin, are what distinguish the disease so gruesomely. Buboes force the victim into crooked, misshapen stances to relieve the pressure and lessen the pain: the legs are splayed, the arms uplifted, the head turned away to one side. Protruding unmistakably, they declare the disease of the sufferer to be written on the body, there for all to read. (19)

The sight of a plague sufferer would seem to be more at place in a nightmare than in the real world. The buboes would appear quickly on the body, with the sufferer often showing few signs of possible infection before their appearance. The transformation from healthy to infected body serves as its own form of delirious communication. The bodily processes that are grotesquely transformed by the disease read to both infected and observer.

While the symptoms of the plague communicate the illness of the infected, they also contain theatrical elements in their portrayal and reception. The spectacle of the plague’s impact on its sufferers has been portrayed in actual theatrical texts as well as through Artaud’s theoretical comparisons. In fact, Artaud’s discussion of the plague continued a recurring theme...

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10 Two notable plays focusing on the Plague are Albert Camus’s *State of Siege*, written in 1948, and Karel Čapek’s *The White Plague*, written in 1937.
from antiquity to the present. A look at the discourse of the plague should provide a clearer context for Artaud’s interest in the subject and its relationship to theatre.

Discussions of the plague predate many other topics. Cooke describes the etymology of the term:

‘Plague’ is possibly the oldest name for epidemic disease on record. The Ancient Hebrew word for ‘plague,’ noun and verb, is used primarily in the Old Testament and primarily means ‘touch.’ Ancient Hebrew is pictographic; ‘plague’ is rendered with an eye, a foot, and a sprouting seed, although since Hebrew is read right to left, this means the first letter is the seed, indicative of the plague’s disseminative properties. The detailed definition of the verb is ‘to touch or strike; also, to bring a plague as a touch from God’ and the noun, ‘a plague or other sire or illness as a touch: plague, ore, stroke, stripe, stricken, wound.’ The eye represents seeing, watching and knowledge; the foot stands for walking, carrying or gathering; and the sprouting seed signifies continuation, perpetuation, offspring or heir: the idea of passing on to a new generation. (4)

From that time forward, the Plague has represented a disease that was not only communicable, but also hereditary. This is an important distinction for Artaud’s discussion of the Plague’s impact. The plague impacts both the individual it infects and any future offspring. It leaves its mark on future generations. Artaud saw in theatre another event that could shape current and future generations.

The Plague’s results create spectacles out of its sufferers. Thus, it would make sense that plague would have connections to theatre. Cooke highlights an important aspect of theatre’s fascination with the plague through Elizabethan theatre: “during the Elizabethan upsurge in
theatre, a period when the first permanent public playhouses were built in London and when plague had an almost continual presence and regularly reached epidemic proportions, representations of plague outbreaks were absent from the stage” (46). Why would the theatre of the time refuse to address the epidemic surrounding them? She conjectures

In none of Shakespeare’s plays does plague, as a disease, actually strike a character or afflict a community. One of the most straightforward explanations for this is that the playhouses were closed by authorities during epidemic plague outbreaks for fear of crowds increasing the spread of infection: when death tolls reached over 30 a week from plague, there was no work for the players. If people and players alike were kept away from theatres for fear of plague, a company was unlikely to stage a representation of the disease as soon as they were given the all clear to return to the potentially unsafe space of the playhouse. The reliance of the companies upon the authorities or influential patrons for permission to reopen the theatres and for supplementary payment in times of plague and unemployment probably further ensured a disinclination to present anything that would raise disapproval or be open to the accusation of scare-mongering by those who wielded the power to close them down indefinitely. (47-48)

The plague’s presence outside the theatre doors seemed to make it a topic that hit too close to home to be presented on the stage. Another factor may have worked against the theatres as well: religious discourse at the time had already dominated public attention about the plague.

While the plague may have seemingly chosen its victims at random, the initial cause for its appearance in a given society has often been at the center of religious debates. Other diseases that drew the attention of religious leaders, such as syphilis, affected only those who participated
in immoral behavior. The plague, though, had no such cause. The moral reason for the disease’s appearance was considered societal rather than individual. As far back as Greek mythology, outbreaks of the Plague represented a hidden psychic cancer destroying that city morally while the plague attacks them physically. Only by finding, and eliminating, the cause of the outbreak could the city hope to ward off further disruptions.

This allowed religious groups to attack whatever sinful activity they felt warranted eradication. Pamphlets from Elizabethan England show the various actions that were considered to have instigated the plague’s arrival.\textsuperscript{11} The theatre itself had also long been criticized as a bastion of immorality. In the sixteenth century, John Northbrooke had condemned theatrical practices as outlets for immoral behavior. Using religious rhetoric as the tool for theatre’s demise, he stated that

\begin{quote}
Satan hath not a more speedy way and fitter school to work and teach his desire to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthy lusts of wicked whoredom than those places and plays and theatres are, and [it is] therefore necessary that those places and players should be forbidden and dissolved and put down by authority, as the brothel houses ans stews are. (159-160).
\end{quote}

At approximately the same time, Stephen Gosson directed a more direct legal criticism of the English theatre: that it was a brothel of sorts. “Not that any filthiness in deed is committed within the compass of that ground, as was once done in Rome, but that every John and his Joan, every knave and his queen are there first acquainted and cheapen the merchandise in that place, which they pay for elsewhere, as they can agree” (164). Perhaps because of its own less-than-pristine reputation, the Elizabethan theatre avoided discussing the plague even though the

\textsuperscript{11} Jennifer Cooke’s \textit{Legacies of the Plague in Literature, Theory, and Film} offers many examples of the type of rhetoric used in these materials.
plague’s physically spectacular nature made it a potentially appealing subject. Looking at literary works that focus on the plague show the ways that images of plague can stir the imagination and also how Artaud may have found similarities between these writings and his own writing style.

Daniel Defoe wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722, in which he described the sights and sounds of the plague sufferers during that year’s outbreak in Marseilles. As much a historical record as a fictional narrative, literary scholars have argued that Defoe’s work was written to appeal to an audience’s sensory imagination rather than their intellectual capacities.12 While the physical manifestation of the plague creates visceral responses in its audience, Defoe used language to create an equally uncomfortable, disorienting experience for reader and author alike in an emerging literary genre: plague writings, the fictitional, or fictionalized, accounts of living through plague infestations.

This new genre developed to describe living with and through the plague. Sounds and repetition of words and sounds combined with traditional language to create a world where it is difficult to adequately express one’s thoughts in a traditional literary sense. The plague’s symptoms created a grotesque spectacle in its sufferers that displayed a high level of theatricality. Plague authors like Defoe portrayed the plague as a disease that attacked the process of communication. Jennifer Cooke notes that “[t]o write plague is to struggle against it and to overcome the stultifying effects it can have on language. It is a creative endeavor; a way to testify to the dreadful consequences plague brings and to the possibility of surviving them” (Cooke 43). “Stultifying language” could arguably be used to describe most of Artaud’s career.

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12 Raymond Stephenson’s essay “’Tis a speaking Sight: Imagery as Narrative Technique in Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*” specifically addresses the use of grotesque imagery as a selling point in Defoe’s work as well as in other literature about the plague.
Artaud’s first correspondences with Jacques Rivière dealt with poetry that Artaud submitted to him for publication, but the letters themselves became the lasting piece in Artaud’s career. Julia F. Costich considers these letters “a new mode of discontinuous and fragmented expression which follows the anguishing experience of one who finds himself incapable of normal intellectual activity” (24). Artaud found his own poetry suffered compared to standards aesthetic ideals because of two distinct aspects of Artaud’s writing: “an intermittent absence of thought and an inability to express thought verbally” (25). In one of the letters, Artaud described how these disruptions affect his writing:

I suffer from a frightful disease of the psyche. My thought abandons me at all stages. From the simple act of thinking through the external act of its materialization in words. Words, forms of phrases, inner thoughts, simple reactions of the mind, I am in constant pursuit of my intellectual being. Thus, whenever I can seize upon a form, however imperfect it may be, I hold onto it, out of fear that I might lose the entire thought. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud’s thought processes, and by extension his writing, take the shape of these plague writings. While these similarities may be coincidental, they are too striking to overlook entirely, especially with Artaud’s increased focus on the plague as a metaphor for theatre and performance later in his career. Jennifer Cooke could have just as easily been describing Artaud’s literary career when she describes plague writing’s assault on traditional language. “The creative writing of plague encounters the limits of creative language but demonstrates that

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13 “Je souffre d’une effroyable maladie de l’esprit. Ma pensée m’abandonne à tous les degrés. Dupuis le fait simple de la pensée jusqu’au fait extérieur de sa matérialisation dans les mots. Mots, formes de phrases, directions intérieures de la pensée, réactions simples de l’esprit, je suis à la poursuite constante de mon être intellectuel. Lors donc que je peux saisir une forme, si imparfaite soit-elle, je la fixe, dans la crainte de perdre toute la pensée” (OC I: 30, emphasis in original).
they can be overcome. Plague is insistent, noisy, emotive and also, sometimes, silent in its effects; for the writer of plague, it is a peculiarly challenging and creative encounter” (43).

Artaud would choose to use theatre to combat the primacy of rational language; plague authors used the disease to serve a similar purpose. Artaud, however, took his approach to a much different end than did the other writers. In both his literary and theatrical pursuits, Artaud strove to displace the reliance on traditional language for communication. Toward the beginning of his career, Artaud wrote about his mental illness for the same reasons that Cooke claims plague authors approached their subject: to aid in overcoming the results of their respective ailments.

The history of plague writing provides examples of the spectacular imagery that Artaud would also incorporate into his writing, as seen in his descriptive accounts of society’s decay in his essay on Van Gogh. Artaud similarly portrayed his experiences with his own illnesses. Artaud’s ideal theatre would challenge the notion of language in the same way that plague writers challenged the language of literature. The physical nature of both performance and suffering creates its own process of communication. Susie J. Tharu describes this type of physical communication:

Through this frenzy that has its source in the body, the theatre, like the plague, makes for a certain mutation. It demands that we consider the phenomenon, not for the end it achieves in world (its utility or function), but as a sign that reveals, through its transformation of the act into the spectacular, the sense or the lived meaning of the gesture. (59-60, emphasis in original)

The visible signs of the plague created a sense of what the sufferers experienced for onlookers similarly to how audiences attending a performance create a belief in the world they see portrayed on stage. Artistically, Artaud entered into an established genre with his discussion of
the plague. He, however, transferred the topic from literature to theatre, where the spectacle inherent in the plague could be realized in both literature and performance. There is also an equally powerful political rhetoric that accompanies any discussion of the plague, be it a real or imagined outbreak.

At first glance, Artaud seemed to welcome the anarchy that plague seemed to create. He felt that his new theatre required chaos for its creation, writing in “The Alchemical Theatre” that “[i]t seems indeed that where simplicity and order reign, there can be no theatre nor drama, and the true theater, like poetry though by other means, is born out of anarchy that is organized after philosophical battles which are the passionate side of these primitive unifications [of logic and emotion]” (Rob Connick trans.).

14 Artaud felt that organized anarchy could undermine the unfocused culture that tended to view art at its surface level. In “No More Masterpieces,” Artaud condemned a culture that prefers aesthetically pleasing disorder over meticulously planned artwork.

It is a question of knowing what we want. If we all are ready for war, plague, famine, and slaughter we do not even need to say so, we have only to continue as we are; continue behaving like snobs, traveling en masse to hear such and such a singer, to see such and such an admirable performance which never exceeds the realm of art . . . to marvel at such and such an exhibition of painting in which

14 “Il semble bien que là où règnent la simplicité et l’ordre, il ne puisse y avoir de théâtre ni de drame, et le vrai théâtre naît, comme la poésie d’ailleurs, mais par d’autres voies, d’une anarchie qui s’organise, après des luttes philosophiques qui sont le côté passionant de ces primitives unifications” (OC IV: 62).
impressive forms explode here and there but randomly and without any genuine
consciousness of the forces which they could stir up. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud made an important distinction between beneficial and harmful anarchy. When society
refused to acknowledge the potential power that chaotic creativity possessed, it ran the risk of
being consumed by the most powerful embodiment of anarchy: the plague. Similarly, artists that
create their pieces without considering the importance of every brushstroke, note, or movement
create art more for themselves than for the benefit of others. Artists that do this may impress an
audience once, but finding lasting success would prove difficult. In both cases, Artaud explicitly
condemned this type of chaos.

It is necessary that this empiricism, randomness, individualism, and anarchy cease.

Enough personal poems that benefit those who create them much more than those
who read them.

Enough, once and for all, of this closed, egoistic, and personal art.

Our spiritual anarchy and disorder is a function of the anarchy of everything else—or rather, everything else is a function of this anarchy. (Rob Connick trans.)

15 "Il s’agit de savoir ce que nous voulons. Si nous sommes tous prêts pour la guerre, la peste, la
famine, et le massacre nous n’avons même pas besoin de le dire, nous n’avons qu’à continuer.
Continuer à nous comporter en snobs, et à nous porter en masse devant tel ou tel chanteur, tel ou
tel spectacle admirable et qui ne dépasse pas le domaine de l’art . . . telle ou telle exposition de
peinture de chevalet où éclatent de-ci de-là des formes impressionnantes mais au hasard et sans
une conscience véridique des forces qu’elles pourraient remuer" (OC IV: 94).

16 "Il faut que cessent cet empirisme, ce hasard, cet individualisme et cette anarchie. Assez de
poèmes individuels et qui profitent à ceux qui les font beaucoup plus qu’à ceux qui les lisent.
Assez une fois pour toutes de ces manifestations d’art fermé, égoïste, et personnel. Notre
anarchie et notre désordre d’esprit est fonction de l’anarchie du reste,—ou plutôt c’est le reste
qui est fonction de cette anarchie” (OC: IV: 94-95).
What constituted the difference between useful and harmful anarchy? How could Artaud spend so much time writing about the plague and its connection to anarchy while deriding the same anarchy at work in art?

The answer to that question comes back to the artist’s intention for the chaos. In popular entertainment, the chaos and anarchy hide the artist’s lack of talent. Society’s chaotic clamoring for the next big thing highlights their inability or unwillingness to value art according to the rigor in its creation. Artaud did not seek to create a theatre based on the anarchic values of the plague. He repeatedly declared that his Theatre of Cruelty would be developed out of an intensive organization of gestures and symbols. Indeed, this rigor served as the basis for his use of the term “cruelty,” which I will discuss in more depth in later pages. Artaud intended for the results of this rigor to produce the same effects that the plague does: a chaos and anarchy that forces society to confront its true nature. Thus, Artaud’s chaos results not from a lack of formal precision (as he claims it does in most popular entertainments), but rather as a consequence of it. This chaos emerges in the moment of performance and reception, instead of in the production phases of conception, writing, and rehearsal.

For Artaud, the plague and theatre both had the power to change a society. The plague had physical life-or-death consequences. Theatre, according to Artaud, had the same stakes at the psychological level.

The theatre like the plague is a crisis which is undone by death or cure. And the plague is a stronger sickness because it is a complete crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification. In the same way, the theatre is a sickness because it is the supreme balance which cannot be achieved without destruction. It invites the spirit to share a delirium that exalts its energies; and one
can see, to conclude, that from the human point of view, the action of theatre, like
that of plague, is beneficial, because by pushing men to be seen as they are, it
makes the mask fall, discovers the lie, the spinelessness, baseness, and hypocrisy;
… and in revealing to communities their somber power, their hidden force, it
invites them to take, against their destiny, a superior and heroic attitude than they
never would have without it. (Rob Connick trans.)

Because society does not know how to approach these supposed chaotic forces, both theatre and
the plague can prompt wholesale questioning of established norms. As Jane Goodall notes, “the
theatre that passively reflects the created world gives itself up to be the instrument of those
abusive powers which it is uniquely capable of challenging” (125). In both cases, the true
makeup of a person comes through, be it virtuous or deviant. When that happens, the change can
be permanent, even if, as with theatre, it leaves no visible imprint on the spectator. No one can
tell with any certainty why a performance causes one spectator to respond one way and one
another, much like the way that plague may skip houses seemingly at random. More advanced
strains of plague may prove more likely to infect those it comes in contact with. So, too, would
more rigorously rehearsed theatre, according to Artaud. The ability to transmit psychological
and emotional responses can only occur when the signal has been properly prepared. Otherwise,
no amount of random probability will make it a life-altering experience. Thus, in order to

17 “Le théâtre comme la peste est une crise qui se dénoue par la mort ou la guérison. Et la peste
est un mal supérieur parce qu’elle est une crise complète après laquelle il ne reste rien que la
mort ou qu’une extrême purification. De même le théâtre est un mal parce qu’il est l’équilibre
suprême qui ne s’acquiert pas sans destruction. Il invite l’esprit à un délire qui exalte ses
energies; et l’on peut voir pour finir que du point de vue humain, l’action du théâtre comme celle
de la peste, est bienfaisante, car poussant les hommes à se voir tells qu’ils sont, elle fait tomber le
masque, elle découvre le mensonge, la veulerie, la bassesse, la tartuferie; . . . et révélant à des
collectivités leur puissance somber, leur force cachée, elle est invitée à prendre en face du destin
une attitude héroïque et supérieure qu’elles n’auraient jamais eue sans cela” (OC IV: 38-39).
accomplish the changes to society that Artaud intended, his theatre needed to be highly structured and disciplined. In order to discuss these societal changes, he chose to use the plague as a metaphor, a tactic still employed to this day.

Scholars offer multiple explanations for the appeal of plague rhetoric to describe societies, even when no plague outbreak may be prevalent (or even possible). Political commentators, journalists, and scholars often discuss political freedom in these terms. Cooke describes the two most common reactions to the plague:

Responses to plague epidemics polarise: on the one hand, there is the official, institutional reaction which the authorities organise and police. This is typically the confinement and observation of the plague infected and the quarantining, often upon a large scale, of those exposed to them. The population is scrutinised, measured, counted, treated and disposed of when dead: emergency edicts sanction state control. On the other hand, there exists the millennially inflected anarchy and hedonism notoriously practiced by a minority when faced with an inexplicable disease, resulting in usually short-lived riotousness, drunkenness, crime and a generalised shedding of inhibitions and moral constraints. (45)

These two responses often served to create potentially dramatic conflict. The two sides of Artaud’s anarchic model (intellect/reason and emotion/passion) offer few problems when they are left unchallenged, which is why society so quickly accepts what Artaud considered shallow, flash-in-the-pan artistry. When the status quo gets challenged by events society cannot control, intellect and emotion quickly turn on each other; as Cooke notes, “enforced confinement provokes deliberate acts of rebellious ‘freedom’ to be committed; in turn, such acts and events precipitate even tighter regimes of control and punishments for infringements” (45). This
outcome—the conflict between intellect and emotion that changes society in some form—seems to be the impetus for Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty.

Even before writing about a Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud wanted theatre to affect its audience in this way. While writing about the Théâtre Alfred Jarry’s goals for the inaugural season, Artaud stated that he wanted the audience to be “shaken and irritated by the inner dynamism of the spectacle taking place before their eyes. And this dynamism will be directly related to the anxiety and the concerns of their whole lives” (Rob Connick trans.).

Shaking the audience from their complacency served as motivation for Artaud throughout his artistic career. Artaud stated the goal of his early theatre was to transform the audience in this way.

[W]ith every production, we play a very serious part and the importance of our efforts lies in the very nature of this seriousness. We are not appealing to the audience’s mind or senses, but to their whole existence. To theirs and ours. We play our lives in the spectacle that is taking place on stage. If we did not have a very deep, distinct feeling that piece of our intimate life was invested to that show, we would not think it necessary to push this experiment further. The spectator who comes to our theatre knows they come to be present at a real operation, where not only his mind but also his senses and flesh will be addressed. (Rob Connick trans.)

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18 “Il sera secoué et rebroussé par le dynamisme intérieur du spectacle qui se déroulera devant ses yeux. Et ce dynamisme sera en relation directe avec les angoisses et les préoccupations de toute sa vie” (OC II: 24).

19 “Nous voulons en venir à ceci: qu’à chaque spectacle monté nous jouons une partie grave, que tout l’intérêt de notre effort réside dans ce caractère de gravité. Ce n’est pas à l’esprit ou aux sens des spectateurs que nous nous addressons, mais à toute leur existence. A la leur et à la nôtre. Nous jouons notre vie dans le spectacle qui se déroule sur la scène. Si nous n’avions pas le sentiment très net et très profond qu’une parcelle de notre vie profonde est engagée là dedans, nous n’estimerions pas nécessaire de pousser plus loin l’expérience. Le spectateur qui vient chez
From the beginning, Artaud strove to address both the logical and emotional sensibilities of his audience. By addressing these aspects (which also appear in many forms throughout both fictional and historical plague literature) together, “not only his mind, but also his senses and flesh,” he felt he could potentially cause more change than by appealing to one particular aspect. By refusing to allow the audience to experience the show solely logically or viscerally, Artaud’s theatre sought to create a personal crisis that shared similarities to the societal crisis created by the plague.

The physical and psychological effects of the plague have a storied history. Even today, the plague rhetoric is used in several different forms. Cooke charts the ways that this rhetoric makes its way into contemporary discussions:

These threats, perceptions and necessities which plague created are still present in the disease’s modern metaphysical usages: time and again, plague is wielded as a political or rhetorical weapon in the service of social discrimination or stigmatization; it is mobilised to critique regimes, dictators, or minority groups. Used in this way, plague is frequently accompanied by the powerful ‘body metaphor,’ which renders a state, nation, or people the ‘body’ that can be labeled ‘sick’ or ‘healthy,’ thus making it, with plague alongside, a convenient vector for political and social rhetoric. The body metaphor is so ubiquitous, so familiar, that its status as metaphor, and therefore as a linguistic construct, is often obscured and the lines between real sickness and metaphorical sickness blur. For example, appellations such as the ‘gay plague’ swiftly make the transition from being a

nous sait qu’il vient s’offrir à une operation véritable, où non seulement son esprit mais ses sens et sa chair sont en jeu” (OC II: 21-22).
euphemism for AIDS and the people it affects, to becoming a way of stigmatizing the gay community. (2)

Even today, the concept of a plague is used to further political and religious ideologies. Artaud’s fascination with the plague may have made his writing seem maniacal to some, but now his metaphorical use of the plague might be more easily accepted as a rhetorical strategy\(^20\).

Through current fears of biological and chemical warfare, the plague has kept the hold on our imaginations that it had on Artaud. Cooke describes the way plague has, and continues to have a distinct impact on current culture.

Plague remains a virulent metaphor: a powerful and historically lethal way of labeling enemies and outsiders, a disturbing vector for our fears surrounding the fragility of the social bond, and a puissant figuration of the conceptual and psychic infectiousness at work within psychoanalytic thinking and its reception. Plague’s impact upon our cultural imagination in the West across a range of discourses and its embodiment in a variety of artistic forms is undeniable. But plague is also considered to be a very real bioterrorist threat by authorities in Britain and the US. Its presence in Iraqi laboratories, along with other agents suitable for biological weapons development, was cited in the now infamous September dossier of 2002 which laid out the British position on the question of whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and provided the justification for going to war. (183)

The plague has developed from a natural occurrence into a government sponsored and controlled method of warfare and terrorism. Artaud’s ideas of using a plaguelike experience to institute

\(^{20}\) Cooke argues that the plague discourse has continued through the present day through the zombie myths. This discussion warrants discussion, but would seem out of place in this study.
cultural and social change are now manifest in laboratories and controlled in ways that Artaud may have never imagined. This synthetic plague, however, might best embody Artaud’s view of both plague and theatre. Like Artaud’s theatre, this type of plague has been meticulously created before it reaches the public. Every aspect, from development to distribution, has been carefully predetermined. For both theatre and this plague, the number of people affected by such public occurrences would be unclear until after the event occurs. The facilitating party can, however, increase the likelihood of each event’s success by the amount of planning put into it. Attacks, or performances, carried out at random have far less chance of creating a lasting effect. Only by careful planning can total chaos and political and social upheaval be unleashed upon the intended targets. The plague, like theatre, may be harnessed and refined into a political weapon, challenging the status quo or those who would seek to challenge it.

Artaud wrote many essays that connected theatre and the arts to the plague. While it may seem like an odd connection for those who first encounter Artaud’s metaphor, I have described in this section many ways that these two concept share similar rhetoric outside of Artaud’s writings. The physical effects of the plague on its victims create spectacular theatrical distortions on the human body. Both the historical and fictional literature about the plague highlights the visceral reactions that the plague created. Instead of focusing on the language employed, the body became the site of communication and meaning. Similarly, Artaud strove to create a theatre that put a greater, or at least equal, importance on the bodies and voices of the actors as the words in the script. Both the plague and theatre seemingly affect their audiences at random. In truth, both of these outlets have higher rates of success if their development is refined and organized. Artaud intended his theatre to reach and affect the same cultural spheres as the plague. The plague has the power to eradicate social structures and overthrow political
regimes. Artaud believed that theatre could similarly be employed to influence widespread social upheaval or to reinforce the status quo. Decades after Artaud’s death, the plague has remained at the forefront of popular entertainment through the development of the zombie horror genre. The plague rhetoric is still alive in political discourse and the plague itself lives on in strains developed as an agent of biological and chemical warfare. The plague metaphors Artaud created may be more apt today than they ever have been.

Cruelty

If the plague has been considered Artaud’s most confusing metaphor for theatre, cruelty may be his most misunderstood. His use of this term may lead some readers to consider the Theatre of Cruelty to be pure violence. Robert Leach argues that Artaud’s concept of cruelty has often been reduced to merely “physical cruelty, blood, and gore” (Leach 170). Artaud himself seemed to realize the problems that using that specific word created for helping his audience understand his goals. While discussing his developing theatrical ideals, Artaud acknowledged that “when I have pronounced this word, ‘cruelty,’ everybody will immediately take it to mean ‘blood’” (Rob Connick trans.).

In a letter to Jean Paulhan written on November 9, 1932, Artaud expressed his frustration with the confusion surrounding his ideas, and that this confusion, in fact, has been a constant part of the discussion surrounding Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. “The objections that were made to you and to me against the Manifesto of the Theatre of Cruelty relate to the cruelty, whose necessity in my theatre seems unclear, at least as an essential,

22 “Avec cette manie de tout rabaisser qui nous appartient aujourd’hui à tous, “cruauté,” quand j’ai prononcé ce mot, a tout de suite voulu dire “sang” pour tout le monde” (OC IV: 95).
determining element” (Rob Connick trans.).²³ Artaud’s choice of performances, including those fully realized and those left in the planning stage, required a great deal of violence in their plots (these plays include The Cenci, Seneca’s Thyestes, an adaptation of the Bluebeard legend, and Artaud’s unfinished script the Conquest of Mexico). These plays needed physical violence and cruelty in order to be performed.

A closer look at the scripts, however, may cast doubts on the importance of physically staged violence in these performances. Only one of these scripts, The Cenci, was ever produced, but each of them similarly place an importance on the concept of violence without necessarily making that violence explicitly seen on stage. As I discussed in my earlier chapter on Artaud’s production of The Cenci, the violent acts in Artaud’s performance happened predominantly off-stage. The other scripts also discuss acts of horrific violence, but they are for the most part, indicated in the text to take place unseen. Violence and cruelty are inherent to Artaud’s theatre; he proposed “a theatre where violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator” (Rob Connick trans.)²⁴, but he had also stressed that this cruelty extended beyond the physical bodies on stage. This section will address the many different physical, psychological, and social forms that cruelty takes in Artaud’s uses.

In its most direct sense, “cruelty” refers to the physical actions the characters take on stage. Violence played a large role in Artaud’s aesthetic choices. He admired the artistic qualities in violence and the way it could affect those who view it. “A violent and focused action is a similar to lyricism: it calls forth supernatural images, a blood of images, a bleeding spurt of

²³ “Les objections qui vous ont été faites et qui m’ont été faites contre le Manifeste du Théâtre du Cruauté concernent les unes la cruauté dont on ne voit pas très bien ce qu’elle vient faire dans mon théâtre, du moins comme élément essential, determinant” (OC IV: 136).
²⁴ “Je propose donc un théâtre où des images physiques violentes broient et hypnotisent la sensibilité du spectateur” (OC IV: 99).
images in the poet’s head as well as in the spectator’s” (Rob Connick trans.).\(^\text{25}\) Artaud sought to show the heinous crimes committed by infamous historical figures. I believe that by choosing these specific moments as the basis for his productions, Artaud prepared his audience to receive and process violence before the play began. These famous characters, and their possibly equally famous crimes, would arguably have been familiar to the audience members before they entered the theatre. As the plots in each of these works progress, the spectators would know what would soon be occurring. They would not need to see Count Cenci rape Lucretia, for example, to know what had happened. This indeed creates the “bleeding spur” of images, but only in the spectator’s heads. The violence occurs as much, if not more so, in their imaginations as on the stage. Thus, the cruelty in the play acts not as an example of gratuitously violent spectacle, but as the inciting agent to trigger whatever violent impulses lie in each individual spectator’s psyche.

We can see the way Artaud expresses his intentions for cruelty as an unseen violence in his writings. Artaud explicitly addressed this while discussing his proposed Theatre of Cruelty.

And, on the plan of this representation [of onstage cruelty], it is not a matter of the cruelty which we can exert upon each other by carving up each other’s bodies, by sawing our personal anatomies, or, like the Assyrian emperors, by sending bags of human ears, noses, or nostrils through the mail, but of the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exert upon us. (Rob Connick trans.)\(^\text{26}\)

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\(^\text{25}\) “Une action violente et ramassée est une similitude de lyrisme: elle appelle des images surnaturelles, un sang d’images et un jet sanglant d’images aussi bien dans la tête du poète que dans celle du spectateur” (\textit{OC} IV: 98).

\(^\text{26}\) “Et, sur le plan de le représentation, il ne s’agit pas de cette cruauté que nous pouvons exercer les uns contre les autres en nous dépeçant mutuellement les corps, en sciant nos anatomies personelles, ou, tels des empereurs assyriens, en nous adressant par la poste des sacs d’oreille
Artaud’s theatre intended to make the spectators feel like they had witnessed violent acts without ever explicitly presenting them on stage. Thus, even though the violence is unseen, unphysical, in fact the cruelty is potentially even more terrible and necessary. By allowing the audience to create the images of violence for themselves, Artaud felt that true transformation could occur.

> Whatever conflicts that haunt the minds of that era, I defy any spectator to whom these violent scenes will have passed their blood, who will have felt in himself the passage of a higher action, who will have seen extraordinary facts illuminate the extraordinary and essential movements of his thought—violence and blood having been placed at the service of the violence of the thought—I defy them to go back to the outside world with ideas of war, riot, and premeditated murder.

(Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud’s violent imagery did indeed evoke a cruelty taking place to his characters. This cruelty, however, was more metaphysical than physical. This approach benefited from the use of historical figures and/or infamous crimes, as these foundations for the plots could have been known by the audience beforehand and already in their minds and imaginations. How did Artaud intend to affect his spectators in this way? What staging techniques could he use to create these reactions? The answers to these questions provide another approach to “cruelty.”

Cruelty, in Artaud’s theatre, has often been thought of as the physical violence that occurs between characters on stage. Artaud, however, directly refuted these beliefs. Artaud

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27 “Quels que soient les conflits qui hantent la tête d’une époque, je défie bien un spectateur à qui des scènes violentes auront passé leur sang, qui aura senti en lui le passage d’une action supérieure, qui aura vu en éclair dans des faits extraordinaires les mouvements extraordinaires et essentiels de sa pensée—la violence et le sang ayant été mis au service de la violence de la pensée, - je le défie de se livrer au dehors à des idées de guerre, d’émeute, et d’assassinats hasardeux” (OC IV: 98-99).
Connick wrote a letter to Jean Paulhan on September 13, 1932 that clarified his approach to Cruelty.

“This Cruelty is an act of neither sadism nor bloodshed, at least not in an exclusive way. I do not systematically cultivate horror. This word “cruelty” must be taken in a broad sense, and not in the rapacious material sense that is usually lent to it” (Rob Connick trans.).\(^{28}\) Artaud felt that instead of mindless acts of violence committed in the heat of the moment, Cruelty better described the mental dedication needed to address and embody these horrific characters and actions.

One can imagine a pure cruelty very well, without carnal tearing. And philosophically speaking what is there besides cruelty? From the point of view of the spirit, cruelty means rigor, relentless application and decision, irreversible and absolute determination. The most current philosophical determinism is, from the point of view of our existence, one of the images of cruelty. One wrongly gives the word “cruelty” a meaning of rigorous bloodshed, of disinterestedly seeking gratuitous physical suffering . . . Cruelty is not indeed synonymous with spilled blood, martyred flesh, crucified enemies. This identification of cruelty with these torments is a very minor aspect of the question. There is, in the cruelty one exerts, a kind of higher determinism, to which the executioner-torturer himself is subjected and which he must be \textit{determined} to receive if necessary. Cruelty is most of all lucid, a kind of rigid direction and submission to what needs to be

\(^{28}\) “Il ne s’agit dans cette Cruauté ni de sadism ni de sang, du moins pas de façon exclusive. Je ne cultive pas systématiquement l’horreur. Ce mot de cruauté doit être pris dans un sens large, et non dans le sens matériel et rapace qui lui est prêté habituellement” (\textit{OC} IV: 120-121).
done. There is no cruelty without conscience, without a kind of applied conscience. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud intended cruelty to be enacted as much on the actors as by them. He indicates that not only should cruelty be thought of in a larger sense than mere physical cruelty, but in fact, to think of cruelty in the physical sense is completely off-base, or at least only a minor aspect. The consciousness about their actions, and the effects that they would have if real, should weigh on the actors, as the executioner must think about the ramifications of their actions.

The executioner is not a homicidal maniac. He or she is instead someone who has made the choice to participate in a morally sanctioned action that transgresses the established societal values. Actors may also participate in objectionable behavior, but they also do so for the betterment of mankind. Artaud felt that his form of cruelty “which, when it is necessary, will be bloody, but it will not be systematically so,” and compared it to “a kind of intense moral purity which does not fear to pay life the price that must be paid” (Rob Connick trans.).

The public execution and the performance of cruelty serve the same purpose: to provide the public with a visceral deterrent to immoral activity, to show the price that these actions have. The execution

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29 “On peut très bien imaginer une cruauté pure, sans déchirement charnel. Et philosophiquement parlant d’ailleurs qu’est-ce que la cruauté? Du point de vue de l’esprit cruauté signifie rigeur, application et décision implacable, détermination irréversible, absolue. Le déterminisme philosophique le plus courant est, du pointe de vue de notre existence, une des images de la cruauté. C’est à tort qu’on donne au mot de cruauté un sens de sanglant rigeur, de recherché gratuite et désintéressée du mal physique . . . Cruauté n’est pas en effet synonyme de sang versé, de chair marytre, d’ennemi crucifié. Cette identification de la cruauté avec les supplices est un tout petit côté de la question. Il y a dans la cruauté qu’on exerce une sorte de déterminisme supérieur auquel le bourreau suppliciateur est soumis lui-même, et qu’il doit être le cas échéant déterminé à supporter. La cruauté est avant tout lucide, c’est une sorte de direction rigide, la soumission à la nécessité. Pas de cruauté sans conscience, sans une sorte de conscience appliquée” (OC IV: 121).

30 “Cette cruauté, qui sera, quand il le faut, sanglante, mais qui ne le sera pas systématiquement, se confond donc avec la notion d’une sorte d’aride pureté morale qui ne craint pas de payer la vie le prix qu’il faut la payer” (OC IV: 146).
allows the public to see the legal outcome to these actions, while the performance allows them to see the horrific nature of the actions themselves. Performance, however, can occur without the spilling of actual blood, something the execution cannot claim.

As I have said, this cruelty does not need to take an overtly visual form. Artaud did not intend for his productions to compare to the scenes of violence at the Grand Guignol. He felt that this type of violence only furthered the gratuitous and superfluous nature of the contemporary theatre he disdained. His cruelty had a purpose for its occurrence.

I employ it not in an episodic, extraneous sense, by sadistic taste and a perversion of spirit, by love of the created feelings and unhealthy attitudes, therefore not at all in a circumstantial sense; it is not a question at all of vicious cruelty, cruelty budding with perverse appetites and expressed in bloody gestures, such as the morbid buboes on an already contaminated flesh, but on the contrary, a detached and pure feeling, a true movement of the spirit, copied from the gestures of life itself. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud’s cruelty would be seen in the clear intentionality of the performers’ actions. The cruelty portrayed by the characters would be mirrored by the cruelty that develops from rigorous training. Actors in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty portrayed a sense of impending violence while maintaining control over their actions. A character in full control of their mental capacities participating in violent acts is arguably more disturbing than the acts of a mentally unstable

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31 “... je l’emploie non dans un sens épisodique, accessoire, par goût sadique et perversion d’esprit, par amour des sentiments à part et des attitudes malsaines, donc pas du tout dans un sens circonstanciel; Il ne s’agit pas du tout de la cruauté vice, de la cruauté bourgeonnement d’appétits pervers et qui s’expriment par des gestes sanglants, telles des excroissances maladives sur une chair déjà contaminée; mais au contraire d’un sentiment détaché et pur, d’un véritable mouvement d’esprit, lequel serait calqué sur le geste de la vie même” (OC IV: 136-137).
killer. Thus, Count Cenci is portrayed not as a madman, but a man acutely aware of the transgressions in which he participates.

For the actor portraying Cenci, his approach to the character must be similar. Artaud repeatedly condemned the contemporary practice of internalizing a character’s needs and motives. “Psychology, which is used to reduce the unknown to the known, i.e., the everyday and the usual, is the cause of the theatre’s abasement and its alarming loss of energy, which seems to me to have come to its terminal point” (Connick trans.). Rather than immersing himself in the psychology of the character, the actor would use a carefully staged and rehearsed set of blocking to create the character. This approach allows the actor to refine the action to its most effective gesture. This takes the impetus for the action away from the actor, but it also allows critical distance to develop between the actor and the violence he or she portrays. These actions are not the actor’s, but the character’s. Artaud did not want to see how his actors would engage in violence. He instead wanted his actors to show the violence in which the characters engaged because this violence created a more lasting impact on the audience while not causing actual harm to anyone involved. Artaud compares the violent actions of an actor onstage to the murderer who commits violence in real life.

Unlike the fury of the murderer who becomes exhausted, that of the tragic actor remains in a pure and closed circle. The murderer’s fury has accomplished an act, discharges, and loses contact with the force that inspired it but will no longer feed

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32 “La psychologie qui s’acharne à réduire l’inconnu au connu, c’est-à-dire au quotidien et à l’ordinaire, est la cause de cet abaissement et de cette effrayante déperdition d’énergie, qui me paraît bien arrivée à son dernier terme” (OC IV: 92).
it. This fury takes a form, that of the actor, that denies himself to it as it becomes more clear and dissolves into universality. (Rob Connick trans.)

Real violence occurs in a moment of emotional outburst and that level of cruelty proves unable to be sustained. Conversely, by not attaching the violence to the actor’s own emotions, he or she is able to sustain the emotional intensity much longer. While this may seem like a minor difference, when connected to Artaud’s view of theatre as plaguelike, this difference becomes more important.

If the theatre holds the potential to transform its spectators, then it would also have the potential to transform its performers. In order to guarantee that the actors would not be affected negatively (physically or emotionally) by the violence done by or against their characters, safeguards would need to be implemented. One way to do that would be to organize the bits of action into coded series of actions. By doing this, the violence becomes a part of a predetermined structure and not an outlet for the actor’s psyche. This method fits with both the plague and executioner metaphors Artaud used in his writings, where he compares the cruelty in undertaking violent acts onstage to the role the executioner plays in social order. “There is in the cruelty one exerts a kind of higher determinism, to which the executioner-tormentor himself is subjected and which he must choose to endure if necessary” (Connick trans.).

The reasons for the violence, on stage or during an execution, occur in the realm of, and according to, social standards instead of in opposition to them. The executioner does not become a murderer,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{33}}\text{En face de la fureur de l’assassin qui s’épuise, celle de l’acteur tragique demeure dans un cercle pur et fermé. La fureur de l’assassin a accompli un acte, elle se décharge et perd le contact d’avec la force qui l’inspire, mais ne l’alimentera plus désormais. Elle a pris une forme, celle de l’acteur, qui se nie à mesure qu’elle se dégage, se fond dans l’universalité” (\textit{OC} IV: 31).}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{34}}\text{“Il y a dans la cruauté qu’on exerce une sorte de déterminisme supérieur auquel le bourreau suppliciateur est soumis lui-même, et qu’il doit être le cas échéant déterminé à supporter” (\textit{OC} IV: 121).}\]
although he or she does take human life. The action of the execution becomes a ritual, a series of movements and gestures outside of the participant’s personal life. The executioner follows the same pattern of action for each execution. This dissociative behavior allows the person to separate from the occupation. Similarly, the rigid blocking employed by Artaud allowed the actors to dissociate from the abhorrent behavior of the characters. By making the violence theatrical instead of psychological, Artaud felt a disconnect between the violence and the actor. “But do not forget that although a theatrical gesture is violent, it is not involved” (Connick trans.).

By this, Artaud meant that the violent theatrical gesture never motivates itself or other gestures; it simply exists as a theatrical element. While an actor who focused on finding the psychological realism of Count Cenci might find himself occupying a mindset he may not easily enter (or leave), Artaud’s actors could remain detached from the character while portraying their most base desires.

By considering the theatre as a form of plague, one can also see the importance of rigid codification. One of the ways to combat illness is through homeopathic medicine—curing like with like. Artaud employed violent acts on stage to combat the violent nature of the world. Jane Goodall argues that this approach showcases the homeopathic view of medicine, with real (“bad”) violence occurring both as a natural occurrence and as a reaction to improperly utilized performances of violence. “Bad violence shows the homeopathic principle gone wrong. The true remedy is ‘a form of violence that will put an end once and for all to violence itself’, but the successful treatment of like with like here depends precisely upon the strategic deployment of violence to re-establish difference” (107). Artaud explicitly mentions using theatre to curb the

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35 “Mais qu’on n’oublie pas qu’un geste de théâtre est violent, mais qu’il est désintéressé” (OC IV: 99).
“bad violence” in “war, riot, and blatant murder” (Richards trans. 82). Portrayals of violence that do not create a sense of difference in both actor and spectator glorify the violence. Rather than helping to eradicate violence, it romanticizes and glorifies the actions. The actors, then, need to be aware of the reason for the use of violent imagery and consistently work to differentiate themselves from the character. For both actor and spectator, the potential for violence to “infect” them exists. One can become numb to violence by overexposure or one can fetishize it when portrayal invites them into its experience without showing its aftereffects. Similarly, someone who attempts to introduce a plague outbreak runs the risk of exposure to it themselves if proper precautions have not been followed. Becoming infected, either by plague or by the violence portrayed on stage, prevents the intended audience from receiving the end result as originally planned. When the actor is fully aware of the risks and strongly guarded against personalizing the violence, however, the result can be much more effective.

Conclusion

Artaud’s writings on theatre and the plague have often been considered a hallmark of his mental illness. However, one of Artaud’s last essays, “Van Gogh et le suicidé de la société,” was also one of his most critically acclaimed pieces, throwing doubt on the idea that Artaud’s illness forced his later writing to be illogical ramblings and connections. This essay highlights Artaud’s use of painful imagery in his writing and shows his distrust of a public that had become unwilling to accept those who questioned the status quo. Society had found that the best way to silence those who threaten it was to label them as mentally ill and institutionalize them. Artaud, like Van Gogh, had seen firsthand the dehumanizing effects of institutionalization. He claimed

36 “[J]e le défie de se livrer au dehors à des idées de guerre, d’émeute et d’assassinats hasardeux” (OC IV: 99).
that Van Gogh committed suicide because he had learned that he could neither exist in a society that stigmatized him nor in an institution that dehumanized him. It was this society that Artaud had aimed to destroy through his Theatre of Cruelty.

Artaud intended his theatre to attack French society in the same way that the plague attacked and transformed the societies that housed its outbreaks. While the use of the plague metaphor may have seemed strange to some, the plague has a long history of literary usage. The plague itself develops with a theatrical spectacle in its victims. This theatricality attracted many performers to its portrayal, continuing through today with the zombie film genre. Artaud argued that the plague and theatre held many similarities. Both had the ability to be channeled by dominant powers into a method of subjugation, but both could also be used to topple the established systems of a society. Both also had the ability to reach certain people in its audience while leaving other unaffected. Both also had their greatest chance of effectiveness when the product was highly refined and researched/rehearsed before being released on the public.

The cruelty that Artaud constantly talked about as the foundation for his Theatre of Cruelty has often been considered a visibly violent spectacle, but nothing could be farther from the truth. The violence was more often than not implied, using the audience’s imaginations to create spectacles more graphic than could be portrayed on stage. The cruelty Artaud referred to more closely resembled that of the executioner, who had to do morally abhorrent actions for the benefit of the society he or she served. Similarly, actors portrayed violent behavior on stage, but only to show the audience the futility of such actions. The actors also used strictly coded gestures to break their true selves even further from the characters’ actions. This allowed them the ability to portray horrific events without personalizing them, reducing the risk of glorification or fetishization of the violence for both actor and audience.
Cruelty and the plague can be seen working together in Artaud’s theatre as what Goodall considers a homeopathic cure for society. Artaud intended to treat a society that glamorized and/or ignored real violence by showing them the horrors of these actions on stage. This homeopathic approach could only work if the use of violence was strategic and deliberate. Thus, the mindless violence that may have been attached to Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty has been proven to be the antithesis of his ideals. But all of Artaud’s disparate and confusing terms—plague, cruelty, and theatre—can be seen working together in this method of violence as the cure for the plague that affects French society.
Antonin Artaud decried the state of theatre in France during his career. He believed that contemporary French theatre mimicked the audience’s life without ever attempting to truly benefit or alter their lives. He critiqued the reliance on text and on topical, everyday problems as the driving points of plots. In his essay, “Metaphysics and the mise en scène,” he challenged the importance contemporary theatres and theatre critics placed on these aspects over others.

“[W]ho said that theatre was created to elucidate a character, to solve the conflicts of society and passion, to take on a current and psychological nature as currently fills our contemporary theatres?” (Rob Connick trans.).

This type of theatre, Artaud would argue, holds little value to its spectators. If this theatre presented a picture of contemporary life, then contemporary life held little excitement and even less fulfillment and depth.

Being given the theatre as we see it here, one would say there are more pressing questions in life than to know if we kiss well, whether we will create war or are cowardly enough to make peace, how we cope with our small moral anguishes, and if we will become aware of our ‘complexes’ (as they are known in erudite language) or if our ‘complexes’ will suffocate us. Rarely does the debate rise to a societal level where we cross-examine our social and moral systems. Our theatre

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1 “[M]ais qui a dit que le théâtre était fait pour éclaircir un caractère, pour la solution de conflits d’ordre humain et passion, d’ordre actuel et psychologique comme notre théâtre contemporain en est rempli?” (OC IV: 50).
never goes about wondering whether this social and moral system might not by chance be iniquitous. (Rob Connick trans., parentheses in original)²

This theatre, which Artaud would term Occidental, became the antithesis of everything Artaud believed theatre can and should be able to do. He set out to find a model to which he could compare both his new theatre and the established conventions. He found this in the ritual performances of the Balinese and Tarahumara cultures.

Due to the nature of this study, I will be focusing solely on Artaud’s interaction with Balinese performance: I am choosing to approach the subject in this way because Artaud’s visit to Mexico occurred after his practical work had ended and he had already finished writing the essays that were included in *The Theatre and Its Double*. While he did write about the performance practices he saw during his trip to Mexico, these had no effect on any of his theatrical works.³ Artaud’s interest in indigenous Mexican performance is compelling and of interest to scholarship because of its importance to Artaud’s concepts of mysticism, the importance of ritual, and even his views on human sexuality. While these subjects must be brought to bear on any understanding of Artaud’s later work or his oeuvre in its entirety, these are topics for further speculation and outside the scope of this dissertation’s delimitations. This chapter will describe the elements of Balinese performance that he felt could be applied in his new form of theatre as well as the other reasons that he chose this culture as his model for

² “Etant donné le théâtre tel que nous le voyons ici on dirait qu’il ne s’agit plus dans la vie que de savoir si nous baiserons bien, si nous ferons la guerre ou si nous serons assez lâches pour faire la paix, comment nous nous accommodons de nos petites angoisses morales, et si nous prendrons conscience de nos ‘complexes’ (ceci dit en langage savant) ou bien si nos ‘complexes’ nous étoufferont. Il est rare d’ailleurs que le débat s’élève jusqu’au plan social et que le procès de notre système social et moral soit entrepris. Notre théâtre ne va jamais jusqu’à se demander si ce système social et moral ne serait par hasard pas inique” (*OC* IV: 50).
³ The only performances Artaud would engage in after this trip would be lectures and a recording of a radio performance that never aired.
performance. By showing these connections, I contend that Artaud’s writings on Balinese performance should be viewed as explorations on the applicability of these methods of performance in French theatre production rather than as historical records of Balinese performance traditions, their plots, and their importance to the Balinese culture. As my other chapters have argued, Artaud intended to create a theatre that completely broke away from contemporary French traditions. In these non-Western forms of performance, Artaud found practical examples that showed the efficacy of these performative aspects. Many scholars have argued that Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty techniques are inherently unstageable; by looking at the Balinese performances, I will counter that many of the foundational elements of his proposed Theatre of Cruelty can be seen at work in these productions. These texts from Artaud, then, should be viewed as extensions of Artaud’s manifestos instead of disconnected theoretical assumptions.

Non-Western Performance

Artaud’s disdain for contemporary French theatre has already been discussed here. In his search for a way to create performance that goes against the performative norms of that time, Artaud began to discuss and draw examples from non-Western theatre. I feel that it is important to start by acknowledging that Artaud rarely discussed non-Western performance for what it is rather than what it is not. By this, I mean that when Artaud discussed the Balinese performances he witnessed, for example, he sought to provide examples of how these performances differed from contemporary French performance rather than looking at the performances as a whole. While it may seem to be a minor observation, this information showcases the main reason Artaud focused so much of his time and effort on exploring non-Western culture and performance: these
were established performance practices that had become accepted as legitimate performance styles by their respective societies. Scholars have often dismissed Artaud’s writings on non-Western culture because of their misrepresentations of these cultures. Brian Singleton, among others, takes Artaud to task for his marginalization of those cultures he cited.

Artaud raids the larder of traditional cultures, ignoring their right to speak or not speak for themselves. His neo-colonial plundering, unintentionally blind to the consequences given his desire for a cultural revolution in his targeted Europe, denied the source cultures a voice. And it is this absence of a politicization which partly rendered his practice impotent. A naïveté, amateurism, and lack of a cultural base were also contributing factors. (xxxv)

While many of these claims may arguably be true, I believe it is still important to look at what Artaud was saying about French theatre by commenting on what was absent from Balinese performance. While these essays may not be examples of responsible performance ethnography, they nonetheless have significant value for scholars. These texts offer scholars a detailed look at the performance styles ingrained in a culture; that culture, however, was not Balinese, but French. Artaud was as much a theatre practitioner as he was a theorist. He sought to change French theatre completely, but he could not accomplish this just by incorporating new staging practices into his productions. He needed to prove that these practices had purpose and had been used by performers and received by audience before in ways that were not marginalized or devalued. He found these elements in Balinese rituals.

Before I begin discussing the specific Balinese performances Artaud attended, I feel that a discussion of the Artaud’s important elements of non-Western theatre would be beneficial.
non-Western performance) theatre dealt with the text. While Artaud’s terminology is explicitly
colonialist, I will avoid discussing the problems that arise from colonialist appropriation during
this chapter. I have chosen to do this for several reasons. First, Artaud never included specific
aspects of any of these performances nor did he label any of his staging techniques “Oriental,”
“Balinese,” or “Indian.” He used these performances instead to spark discussions of other ways
to perform plays. Whatever we may think of his grossly simplified view of ritual and
performance, we should keep in mind that he never appropriated any of the performance
elements in ways that others, including Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook, have. Artaud
instead used the “Orient” to highlight the aspects missing from French theatre. Unlike other
artists, Artaud never intended to exoticize Occidental theatre; he aimed to destroy it and develop
a new style of performance, and the text became the first, and potentially most famous, aspect of
contention.

Artaud places the text at the center of Occidental theatre:

For us [the French theatre], the Word is everything and there is no possibility
apart from it; the theatre is a branch of literature, a kind of tonal species of
language, and if we admit a difference between text spoken on stage and text
read by the eyes, if we restrict theatre within the limits of what appears between
cues, we do not manage to separate theatre from the idea of a performed text.

( Rob Connick trans.)

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4 “Pour nous, au théâtre la Parole est tout et il n’y a pas de possibilité en dehors d’elle; le théâtre
est une branche de la literature, une sorte de variété sonore du langage, et si nous admettons une
différence entre le texte parlé sur la scène et le texte lu par les yeux, si nous enfermons le théâtre
dans les limites de ce qui apparaît entre les répliques, nous ne parvenons pas à séparer le théâtre
de l’idée du texte réalisé” (OC IV: 82).
If the Occidental theatre relied on the text, the Oriental theatre could, in some cases, do without it entirely. Artaud believed that this was because of a foundational difference between the two types of theatre.

The Occidental theatre relied on the text because it presented psychological conflicts that might feel more like debates than active physical conflict. This focus on the characters’ psychological journey allows the text to remain the primary method of communication.

The word in the Occidental theatre is only used to express psychological conflicts particular to man and his situation in the daily reality of his life. His conflicts sound definitely appropriate to spoken language, and whether they remain in the psychological field or leave there to return to the social field, the drama will always remain interested in his morals by the way in which its conflicts tackle and disintegrate the characters. And it will indeed always be a field where the verbal resolutions of words will preserve their advantage. But these moral conflicts by their very nature have no absolute need to be resolved on stage. (Rob Connick trans.)

These psychological dramas are best expressed through language and the text, but they do not need to be active in order to be resolved. Conversely, the Oriental theatre focuses on the metaphysical nature of performance. This concept of the metaphysical is an important

5 “La parole dans le théâtre occidental ne sert jamais qu’à exprimer des conflits psychologique particuliers à l’homme et à sa situation dans l’actualité quotidienne de la vie. Ses conflits sont nettement justiciables de la parole articulée, et qu’ils restent dans le domaine psychologique ou qu’ils en sortent pour rentrer dans le domaine social, le drame demeurera toujours d’intérêt moral par la façon dont ses conflits attaqueront et désagrégeront les caractères. Et il s’agira toujours bien d’un domaine où les résolutions verbales de la parole conserveront leur meilleure part. Mais ces conflits moraux par leur nature même n’ont pas absolument besoin de la scène pour se résoudre” (OC IV: 85).
consideration for Artaud’s views of theatre. Susie J. Tharu provides some clarification on Artaud’s use of this term:

The term obviously does not designate something supernatural or supra-sensory, or even ahistorical in the Derridean sense of ‘Presence.’ Rather it speaks of a fusion of our vision and the object. A fusion that magically transforms substance into knowledge. This knowledge is finally mysterious and outside the scope of the cogito, very simply outside physics, but it is given to us with the ease and the simplicity with which the word itself is given us. It is never a datum, always an experience. (67)

Theatre, for Artaud, should be constantly experienced rather than examined. Performances that use the body in conjunction with language, rather than in service to language, more closely resemble Artaud’s view of the metaphysical. Artaud found this use of body and gesture to be the most important aspect of non-Western theatre. The metaphysical nature of these performances allow them take on multiple meanings, but it also allows the audience to be able to receive the intention of the performance without a knowledge of the performer’s native language:

In the Oriental theatre with metaphysical tendencies, as opposed to the Occidental theatre with psychological tendencies, forms take possession of their directions and their significations on all possible levels; or, if you want, their consequences of their vibrations are not shown on a single level, but on every level of the mind at once. And it is by this multiplicity of their aspects that they have the power to charm and shock and continually excite the mind. (Rob Connick trans.)

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6 “Dans le théâtre oriental à tendances métaphysiques opposé au théâtre occidental à tendances psychologiques, il y a une prise de possession par les formes de leur sens et de leur significations sur tous les plans possible; ou si l’on veut leurs conséquences vibratoires ne sont pas tirées sur un
Artaud felt that psychological intentions only challenge the mind in one way. Embodied characterization has the ability to be read a multitude of ways, working at times with and against the intentions of the text. Actors can use gesture and movement to show either the truth of their spoken lines or the falseness of these claims. Artaud felt that the voice could perform similar changes to the text by embodying or contradicting the aural qualities of the emotions in the text. Laughter during tragic moments or sobbing during festivities can both cause these types of disruptions in the text. These open the performance up to multiple levels of interpretation during one performance, making it more likely to leave a lasting impression on its audience, which had been Artaud’s goal.

This does not mean, however, that Artaud thought that gesture and movement alone created value in performance. As I discussed in the last chapter, Artaud stressed that his theatre would be a rigorous exercise for his actors, with little room for improvisation. Improvised action could be as damaging to Artaud’s metaphysical theatre as no action.

However extremely they plunge into the concrete and external, so that they get a foothold in the freedom of the natural and not in the narrow chambers of the brain, they are not, for all that, delivered to the whim of the untrained and unwise inspiration of the actor, especially the modern actor who, left without text, plunges in and does not know anything about the scene. I would not care to risk the fate of my plays and of the theatre to that kind of chance. No. (Rob Connick trans.)

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7 “Si fort qu’ils plongent dans le concret, dans le dehors, qu’ils prennent pied dans la nature ouvert et non dans le chambers fermées du cerveau, ils ne sont pas pour cela livrés au caprice de
Gestures still had to have the meaning, the datum, behind them in order to make the performance worthwhile. Each movement holds the potential for multiple interpretations, so it cannot be used without considering how it might be construed.

The next important aspect of non-Western theatre dealt with its connection to ritual. While Artaud focused many of his writings on the spiritual, I believe that it would be a mistake to read religion as an important aspect of Artaud’s theatre into his description of non-Western performance. Artaud separated the spiritual realm into two different aspects—the religious and the supernatural. While Artaud’s writings at times combine these two elements, they were never necessitated by the other; for Artaud, not all supernatural elements were religious and not all religious discussion focused on the supernatural. Artaud also never placed any particular religious belief over another while discussing theatre. He felt more concerned with their focus on the supernatural than on their specific set of beliefs. 8

But French theatre, and French culture as a whole, had forgotten the importance of both aspects. Artaud began The Theatre and Its Double with this call to action: “We need most of all to live and accept what makes us live and that something makes us live” (Rob Connick trans., emphasis mine). 9 Artaud felt society had become consumed by individual desires and needed to reconnect with those things that could bring people together for a common purpose, to “divert


8 Artaud would go through several religious conversions throughout his life, and his writings at these times reflect those beliefs (born in a Catholic family, an increased interest and association with Gnosticism, and in the last ten years of his life, numerous crises of faith in which Artaud either identified himself as Christ or rejected the concepts of Catholicism). But at these times, Artaud’s interest in theatre became almost nonexistent and I have therefore chosen to omit them from this discussion as I feel that it would be unfair to compare these different aspects of his career to each other.

9 “Nous avons surtout besoin de vivre et de croire à ce qui nous fait vivre et que quelque chose nous fait vivre” (OC IV: 11).
current theatre’s human, psychological meaning and to find in it the religious, mystical meaning 
our theatre has forgotten” (Rob Connick trans.). This led to many of the parallels that Artaud 
drew for this theatre: disease, contagion, and ritual. Plagues occurred at times when judgment 
was needed against a society and the plague served both as warning and call to action to those 
that encountered it. Plagues also traditionally required a ritual offering to help ensure its 
cessation. Artaud felt that theatre could serve as both the plague that infects and the ritual that 
helps to cleanse society. If, as I argued earlier, the theatre-as-plague causes the true nature of a 
society to be revealed, then theatre-as-ritual allows that society to begin to heal itself. Ritual can 
also serve as a celebration for society. As either a joyous occasion or somber ceremony, ritual 
brings members of that society together for a common purpose

I believe that this is the most important aspect of ritual for Artaud: the bringing together 
of a society for its own betterment. For many cultures, theatre and performance had served this 
type of purpose. Artaud felt that French culture had not only abandoned this view, but had even 
stripped other rituals of everything but their aesthetic value. Art no longer had a purpose beyond 
art. This dissociation between art and life had led to the importance of the supernatural. Artaud 
called these pieces of religious art whose religion had been taken out of them “the gods who 
sleep in the museums.” Because it was an embodied art, theatre had the power to place the 
spiritual back into the art itself. This dissociation is one reason why Artaud felt that French 
theatre relied so heavily on psychological, and by extension self-centered, struggles.

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10 “[D]étourner de l’acception humaine, actuelle et psychologique du théâtre, pour en retrouver 
l’acception religieuse et mystique dont notre théâtre a complètement perdu le sens” (OC IV: 56). 
11 As I addressed in my chapter on the Alfred Jarry Theatre, even though the Surrealists 
contended the opposite (that Artaud’s work lacked social efficacy), Artaud later used plague and 
ritual to go beyond the political means by which the Surrealists hoped to effect change. 
12 “Les dieux qui dorment dans les Musées” (OC IV: 15).
Perhaps that means that we are at the point where we have lost any contact with the true theatre, since we limit it to the realm of what daily thought can reach, the known or unknown realm of consciousness; and if we address ourselves through theatre to the unconscious, it is only to tear from it what it has been able to store (or hide) of accessible everyday experience. (Rob Connick trans.)

The current theatre makes no connection to the spectator’s spirit; at most, it pretends to do so by addressing those issues found in everyday life. Artaud’s theatre would break away from this method and address issues that would reach the audience spiritually, in ways that more closely resemble religious rituals than they do current theatrical practices.

Artaud wanted to create a theatre that avoided conflicts over everyday trivialities. His theatre would break from the traditions and concepts that glamorize these events.

It is then understood that the theatre, even to the degree that it remains locked up in its language, where it remains in correlation with it, must break with its topicality, because its object is not to resolve social or moral conflicts, to serve as the battlefield for moral passions, but to objectively express secret truths, to bring to the light of day through active gestures those pieces of truth that have hidden their forms due to their encounters with Becoming. To do that, to bind the theatre to the possibilities of expression by these forms, by everything that makes up gestures, noises, colors, movement, etc., is to return it to its original destination, to

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13 “Cela veut peut-être dire qu’au point où nous en sommes nous avons perdu tout contact avec le vrai théâtre, puisque nous le limitons au domaine de ce que la pensée journalière peut atteindre, au domaine connu ou inconnu de la conscience;—et si nous nous addressons théâtralement à l’inconscient, ce n’est guère que pour lui arracher ce qu’il a pu amasser (ou cacher) d’expérience accessible et de tous les jours” (OC IV: 57).
return its religious and metaphysical aspect, to reconcile it with the universe.

(Rob Connick trans.)¹⁴

“Becoming” refers to the metaphysical transformation that needed to occur for meaning to be given to gesture. Artaud’s connection of ritual and art was not unique to his approach. Indeed, the Cambridge Ritualists (Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, Francis M. Cornford, and A.B. Cook) argued that ritual and art have been intertwined since their inceptions in Greek society. While not aligning himself directly with their views, Artaud nonetheless shares many of their beliefs on the connections between performance and ritual. Jane Ellen Harrison drew numerous comparisons between performance and ritual, succinctly stating that “[i]t is at the outset one and the same impulse that sends a man to church and to the theatre” (9-10). Artaud sought to use that impulse to recreate French theatre and return it to its roots in ritual.

The emphasis on theatre-as-ritual implied the importance of gesture. According to the Cambridge Ritualists, rituals, from the Eucharist of the Christian churches to the peyote rituals of the Tarahumara Indians, rely on the symbolic nature of both the gestures and materials used. Harrison considers rituals “a stereotyped action, not really practical, but not yet wholly cut loose from practice, a reminiscence or an anticipation of actual practical doing” (Harrison 26). Art, and theatre, operates with the same impetus for action: “to utter, to give out a strongly felt emotion or desire by representing, by making or doing or enriching the object or act desired” (26). What separates both ritual and art from becoming mimicry is the intention of the gesture or

¹⁴ “On comprend donc que le théâtre, dans la mesure même où il demeure enfermé dans son langage, où il reste en corrélation avec lui, doit rompre avec l’actualité, que son objet n’est pas de résoudre des conflits sociaux ou psychologiques, de servir de champ de bataille à des passions morales, mais d’exprimer objectivement des vérités secrètes, de faire venir au jour pas des gestes actif cette part de vérité enfouie sous les formes dans leurs rencontres avec le Devenir. Faire cela, lier le théâtre aux possibilités de l’expression par les formes, et par tout ce qui est gestes, bruits, couleurs, plastique, etc., c’est le rendre à sa destination primitive, c’est le replacer dans son aspect religieux et métaphysique, c’est le réconcilier avec l’univers” (OC IV: 84).
artwork. When ritual or art intends to create a representation, and not a recreation, the results are not dull, formal rites that make no connection between audience and action. With both of these aspects instead working together, the artifacts and gestures take on the metaphysical qualities Artaud sought to create in theatre. I will examine the two examples of non-Western culture with which Artaud interacted, however briefly that may have been, to see how Artaud’s concepts on gesture and ritual as performance might have been influenced by these encounters.

The Balinese Dance Drama

In 1931, after Artaud’s experiences with the Alfred Jarry Theatre and before he produced The Cenci or wrote his manifestos on Cruelty, he witnessed a performance by a Balinese theatre troupe at the Colonial Exposition in Paris. While the impact this performance had on Artaud cannot be questioned, it is important to note that he had already began experimenting with the power of gesture and the importance of ritual and myth during his work years earlier at the Alfred Jarry Theatre. In 1927, Artaud discussed the importance that gesture had, even then, on his theatrical pursuits. The movements and gestures on stage “have to be regarded only as the visible signs of an invisible or secret language. Not a single theatrical gesture will fail to carry behind it the fatality of life and the mysterious occurrences of dreams” (Rob Connick trans.).

Even though he had already placed an emphasis on gesture, though, the Balinese performance left a lasting impression on Artaud regarding their power.

Artaud witnessed a series of performances and wrote a review of these for the Nouvelle Revue Française. Nicola Savarese attempted to detail the events that surrounded those

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15 “La mise en scène, proprement dite, les évolutions des acteurs ne devront être considérées que comme les signes visibles d’un langage invisible ou secret. Pas un geste de théâtre qui ne portera derrière lui toute le fatalité de la vie et les mystérieuses rencontres des rêves” (OC II: 30).
performances. While he does not guarantee its complete validity, he nonetheless has pieced together the program that Artaud most likely saw. He lists the variety of performances that Artaud had the opportunity to see at the Exposition:

Along with known genres and ancient traditional dances, such as the legong and the calonarang, there are some contemporary dances, such as the gong dance, the kebyar, and the janger, the choreographies for which, while based on genre dances and traditional steps and movements, were created at the beginning of the 1920s. (Savarese 67)

As evidenced here, many of the dance performances that occurred at the Colonial Exposition were not ancient Balinese performances, but fairly modern dance routines. While these may still be authentic Balinese performances in that they developed there, many of these definitely did not tie back to ancient rituals. Savarese also researched the “value” of these pieces. Balinese dances are ranked based on where the dance starts in relation to the most sacred space in the area and their ranking descends based on the distance from this space. He notes that the performance at the Exhibition included none of the “most sacred” dances that would have occurred inside the temple “but begins with those forms performed outside the temple (legong, kebyar, the gong dance, kebyar duduk), followed by a secular dance (janger) and finishing with the dance drama calonarang, a magico-exorcistic ritual of recent composition” (Savarese 68). This is noteworthy because it shows that Artaud had no direct contact with the performances that would still be considered part of the sacred rituals. Instead, he witnessed the secularized performances.

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16 Savarese describes in great detail the potential for error in Leonard Pronko’s account of the events at the performance, chief among them a lack of any written evidence of what was performed and who performed them (Savarese 52).

17 A more complete guide for this ranking system can be found in I Wayan Dibia and Rucina Ballinger’s Balinese Dance, Drama, and Music (10-11).
Savarese argues that Artaud could not have seen the entire schedule of performances. Based on Artaud’s performance review and his later writings, Savarese contends that Artaud saw the janger and most likely the calonarang. “Taking the program details into consideration, as well as the various reviews of the performances, and following the trail of the story that was presented . . . we can thus conclude that the janger was the first Balinese performance seen by Artaud” (68). If the janger was the first performance then, according to the schedule provided by Savarese, the calonarang would be the only other performance Artaud could have witnessed. Although both of these performances had fairly recent origins, that does not mean that these performances should be discredited. If one uses as the criterion that authentic, historical performances are the most valuable, then yes, Artaud saw something less. I feel that it is important, though, to replace the criterion of cultural authenticity with what Artaud found efficacious. Rather than argue that Artaud’s texts have no benefit because of the inauthentic history of the Balinese performances upon which he based them, I believe it is more useful to examine the ways that these performances shaped Artaud’s overall views of staging. This method of evaluation strengthens the comparisons between Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and the Balinese performance. Artaud’s theatre did not intend to stand in for true ritual, but it should carry the same type of attention to detail in its execution as occurred with these Balinese performances. Even if they were not true rituals, they were nonetheless performed with a level of precision and attention to detail that Artaud would find inspirational.

Perhaps more importantly, Artaud himself acknowledged the commercial nature of the performances he viewed. While describing the Balinese performances, he noted that “[t]his purely popular and not sacred theatre gives us an extraordinary idea of the intellectual level of a people who base their civic celebrations on the struggles of a soul preyed upon by ghosts and
phantoms from the beyond” (Rob Connick trans.). Critics seem to have overlooked this important information, choosing instead to portray him as a naïve tourist who took for granted the authenticity of the performances he viewed. This acknowledgement on Artaud’s part instead confirms that the performative elements, not the ritual connection to spirituality and religion, seemed to serve as Artaud’s primary interest in examining these dances.

These Balinese performances appealed to Artaud on numerous levels. Bettina L. Knapp describes the spectacular elements Artaud observed:

> Its mythical power revealed to him a spectral, phantomlike world beyond human imagination. Its structured stage language—the importance accorded gesture, facial expressions (including eye rolling), pantomime, chantings, evocative rhythms, and tonalities (sounds from what seemed to him to be newly created instruments)—ushered a whole new dimension into being. Nor did he believe the Warriors, Dragons and Heroes evolving in space before him to be human actors, but rather, depersonalized forces empowered to transform the infinite into finite terms. (89)

This account points out many theatrical elements that would become the foundation of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty: rigorously coded gestures; famous characters and scenes of turmoil; language that became an element of the soundscape of the performance rather than the driving force behind the performance; and a performance space that combines the stage and auditorium, causing the spectator to be enveloped by the performance. A closer examination of the two

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18 “Ce théâtre purement populaire, et non sacré, nous donne une idée extraordinaire du niveau intellectuel d’un peuple qui prend pour fondement de ses réjouissances civiques les lutte d’une âme en proie aux larves et aux fantômes de l’au-delà” (*OC* IV: 68).
performances, the *janger* and the *calonarang*, will further illuminate the importance of these aspects to Artaud’s developing theatrical aesthetics.

*The Janger Dance Drama*

The *janger* style of dance is a choreographed combination of elements from many different cultures. I Madé Bandem and Fredrik Eugene deBoer provide a brief history of the genre. “The genre was created in the early twentieth century, probably in North Bali, although it is not known precisely when. The name Janger can be translated as ‘infatuation,’ with a connotation of someone who is *madly* in love” (97, emphasis in original). The *janger* begins with a tableau vivant and a song that welcomes the audience. The main part of the performance begins with the entrance of the twelve male dancers (*kecak*) who “execute an elaborate, highly gymnastic, close-order routine involving marching and counter-marching, acrobatics, saluting, and other movements quite alien to classical Balinese dancing. But for all its exoticism [to the Balinese culture], the drill quite clearly belongs to the ancient Baris Gedé tradition” (Bandem and deBoer 98). The movements, while not completely based on traditional Balinese gestures, arguably participate in the same type of cultural “borrowing” for which Artaud has been criticized. After the men finish their routine, they sit facing each other in two rows of six and the women (also called *janger*) enter while singing a traditional Balinese folk song. While the men’s dance was acrobatic, Bandem and deBoer describe the women’s dance as “slow and elegant, with much emphasis on fluid, undulating, arm movements; it has nothing of the martial staccato quality of the *kecak* routine” (98-100). When they finish, they also form two lines of six, sitting across from each other and, with the men, forming a boundary around the playing area. Two musical interludes occur, one percussion-based and one that is more lyrical. After this, the
drama starts, usually presenting a family struggle – in this particular instance, a father who disapproves of the man his daughter is in love with.

While the story of good and evil presented during the *calonarang* may have easily fit with Artaud’s ideals for his new theatre, the *janger* seems more akin to the contemporary theatre that Artaud despised, with its focus on the everyday concerns of love. Nicola Savarese offers a list of reasons why it seems odd that this particular performance would affect Artaud so deeply:

It is not one of the most sacred and mysterious rituals, nor is it particularly moving; it does not deal with a furious battle between magical figures nor with the finale trance of dancers armed with krisses [daggers] who turn their weapons against themselves. Nothing of the kind. Janger is a little ‘family playlet’ (unconventional in Bali but certainly not in Paris), and does not, moreover, have a particularly elaborate choreography. It is not part of the great tradition of ancient dances and is purely ‘recreational’ (68).

While Savarese may be devaluing the difficulty of the movements used by the performers (since they more closely resemble gymnastics than traditional choreography), he does present a great deal of evidence against the utility of this performance for Artaud.

Why, then, does Artaud choose to begin his essay on Balinese theatre with a glowing review of this performance? The precision of their movements and gestures seem to have been the aspect that most caught Artaud’s attention. He described how, through this attention to detail, even the mundane aspects of life can become moments of true theatre.

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19 I disagree with Savarese on this claim. Research done by I Madé Bandem, Fredrik Eugene deBoer, I Wayan Dibia, Rucina Ballinger, and many others has proven that the *janger* genre has become a common performance throughout Bali.
It is very remarkable that the first of the small pieces which compose this spectacle, where we observe a father’s remonstrances to his daughter who opposes their traditions, begins with an entrance of phantoms; or, if one wants, the characters, male and female, who will be used for the development of a dramatic but familiar subject, appear to us initially in their spectral state and are seen in that hallucinatory perspective which is characteristic of every theatrical character, before allowing the situations of this kind of symbolic sketch to evolve. Besides, here situations are only a pretext. The drama does not evolve between feelings, but between states of mind, themselves ossified and reduced to gestures—diagrams. All in all, the Balinese carry out, with most extreme rigor, the idea of pure theatre, where everything, conception and realization alike, has worth, has existence only by its degree of objectification *on the stage*. (Rob Connick trans., emphasis in original)\(^{20}\)

Artaud felt that the level of precision in the performers’ dances and gestures took the story out of the mundane everyday and placed it in the metaphysical realm. It also proved that the themes that dominated French theatre could be presented in ways that took text/language away from its dominant role and used the entire realm of theatrical communication equally.

\(^{20}\) “Il est très remarquable que la première des petites pièces qui composent ce spectacle et qui nous fait assister aux remontrances d’un père à sa fille insurgée contre les traditions, débute par une entrée de fantômes, ou, si l’on veut, que les personnages, hommes et femmes, qui vont servir au développement d’un sujet dramatique mais familier, nous apparaissent d’abord dans leur état spectral de personnages, soient vus sous l’angle de l’hallucination qui est le propre de tout personage de théâtre, avant de permettre aux situations de cette sorte de sketch symbolique, d’évoluer. Ici d’ailleurs les situations ne sont qu’une pretexte. Le drame n’évolue pas entre des sentiments, mais entre des états d’esprit, eux-mêmes ossifiés et réduits à des gestes – des schémas. En somme les Balinais réalisent, avec la plus extrême rigeur, l’idée du théâtre pur, où tout, conception comme réalisation, ne vaut, n’a d’existence que par son degré d’objectification *sur la scène*” *(OC* IV: 64-65).
The gestures and their communicative powers dominated the rest of Artaud’s discussion of the *janger*. For Artaud, this performance proved the value of a theatre based as much on gesture/movement as on voice/language. Artaud saw the gestures used as a way to embody the atmosphere of the performance. “The Balinese, who have gesture and a variety of imitations for all the circumstances of life, reinstate the superior value of theatrical conventions that show us the effectiveness and greater performative value of a certain number of well-learned and especially masterfully applied conventions” (Rob Connick trans.). In this performance, Artaud felt that the precision of the movements outweighed the relative simplicity and repetitiveness of the dance. Gesture in the Theatre of Cruelty may likewise not be incredibly elaborate or difficult to perform, but could still be used to effectively communicate the emotional state of the characters on stage. This performance may not have involved many technically challenging movements, but the few gestures that were used proved, at least for Artaud, that intensity and rigor in rehearsal and performance could result in a clearly understood language of gesture that did not rely on traditional linguistic means of transmission.

Artaud found the lasting power of gesture to also be an incredibly important aspect of performance. Although he mistakenly considered the *janger* to be centuries, instead of decades, old, Artaud’s argument over the impact that a refined gesture can have still resonated in his essay.

One of the reasons for our pleasure in this flawless performance lies precisely in the use by the actors of an precise quantity of specific gestures, of tested mimicry coming at the right moment, but especially in the spiritual overtones, the deep and

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21 “Les Balinais, qui ont des gestes et une variété de mimiques pour toutes les circonstances de la vie, redonnent à la convention theatrical son prix supérieur, ils nous démontrent l’efficacité et la valeur supérieurement agissant d’un certain nombre de conventions bien apprises et surtout magistralement appliquées” (*OC* IV: 66).
disciplined study that has governed the development of these sets of expressions, of these effective signs which give us the impression that their effectiveness has not weakened in millennia. (Rob Connick trans.)

The effectiveness of gesture as a timeless language drew Artaud to its use. The gestures used had been tested, keeping those that have proven effective while adapting those that have not. These gestures have also been rehearsed in order to be delivered at the most appropriate time. While a written text depends on the reader for its sense of timing, the immediacy of physical action requires an attention to detail that Artaud found fascinating. Written and spoken language may eventually seem outdated as it continues to develop. We can see this at work in the current discussions surrounding the language in Shakespeare and its accessibility for modern audiences. Artaud might argue that, as time goes on, even the most well-written text will eventually have difficulty connecting to an audience because its language is fixed, incapable of meeting a current audience on its terms. Conversely, these gesture-driven performances, because of their reliance on embodiment, cannot help but be dynamic, creating what Diana Taylor, in The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, considers the repertoire by which the archive becomes embodied. As Taylor would do decades later, Artaud sought to elevate the repertoire of performance (through gesture, spoken language, and ritual) to equal standing with the text, which could be archived and saved for centuries, if necessary. The gestures in ritual have been concretized over time, but this refining process has allowed for changes to be made as necessary until the most appropriate gesture has been rehearsed and applied to the point that its...

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22 Une des raisons de notre plaisir devant ce spectacle sans bavures, réside justement dans l’utilisation par ces acteurs d’une quantité précise de gestes sûrs, de mimiques éprouvées venant à point nommé, mais surtout dans l’enrobement spirituel, dans l’étude profonde et nuancée qui a présidé à l’élaboration de ces jeux d’expressions, de ces signes efficaces et dont on a l’impression que depuis des millénaires, l’efficacité ne s’est pas épuisée” (OC IV: 66).
meaning becomes an almost universal definition. If the gestures in ritual, and ritual
performance, can achieve this, then, Artaud felt, so could theatre.

If the gestures used truly addressed the metaphysical nature of their subject, they would
not feel stale and antiquated.

This may possibly shock our European senses of artistic freedom on stage and
spontaneous inspiration, but no one can say that this mathematics creates staleness
or uniformity. The marvel is that a feeling of richness, imagination, and generous
prodigality emerges from this spectacle regulated with a distracting
meticulousness and awareness. And the most pressing connections constantly
fuse sight to sound, intellect to sensibility, the gesture of a character to the
evocation of a reed’s movement across the scream of an instrument. (Rob
Connick trans.)

Artaud felt that the gestures themselves held considerable dramatic interest. But by combining
these with the musicality of the performance, an all-encompassing performance could occur.
These elements worked together to create a performance that affected spectators through all of
their senses.

Artaud wanted to change the way language was used in the theatre. He set out not to
abolish language, but to drastically reshape its utility in performance. He sought to make the

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23 “Que cela choque notre sens européen de la liberté scénique et de l’inspiration spontanée, c’est
possible, mais que l’on ne dise pas que cette mathématique est créatrice de sécheresse, ni
d’uniformité. La merveille est qu’une sensation de richesse, de fantaisie, de généreuse
prodigalité se dégage de ce spectacle réglé avec une minutie et une conscience affolantes. Et les
correspondances les plus impérieuses fusent perpétuellement de la vue à l’ouïe, de l’intellect à la
sensibilité, du geste d’un personnage à l’évocation des mouvements d’une plante à travers le cri
d’un instrument” (OC IV: 67).
words of theatre a malleable object instead of a fixed, archival form that did not allow for continued discussion and creation.

However, to change the role of the word in theatre is to make use of it in a concrete and spatial sense, insofar as it combines with everything in the theatre that is spatial and significant in the concrete world; it is to handle it like a solid object, which shakes things, in the air initially, then in an infinitely more mysterious and secret domain but one that allows extension, and it will not be very difficult to identify this secret but wide domain with that of formal anarchy on the one hand but also with that of continuous formal creation on the other.

(Rob Connick trans.) 24

By playing with the aural qualities of the words, Artaud attempted to unlock the range of intentions that these words could have. This allowed for “formal anarchy,” since words could now take on any form, but also for continuous creativity and adaptation. He again found examples of this aspect of his theatrical ideals in this Balinese performance. Artaud listed all of the ways that this performance used various visual and aural stimuli to create its own language. By doing this, he pointed out the ways that assorted stimuli directly affect the reception of words and texts.

What is indeed curious about all these gestures, these angular and brutally sharp attitudes, these syncopated modulations from the back of the throat, these musical

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24 “Or changer la destination de la parole au théâtre c’est s’en servir dans un sens concret et spatial, et pour autant qu’elle se combine avec tout ce que le théâtre contient de spatial et de signification dans le domaine concret; c’est la manipuler comme un objet solide et qui ébranle des choses, dans l’air d’abord, ensuite dans un domaine infiniment plus mystérieux et plus secret mais qui lui-même admet l’étendue, et ce domaine secret mais étendu il ne sera pas très difficile de l’identifier avec celui de l’anarchie formelle d’une part mais aussi de la création formelle continue d’autre part” (OC IV: 87).
sentences that break off short, these flights of elytra, these rustling branches, these sounds of hollow drums, these robotic squeaks, these dances of animated mannequins is this: that through their maze of gestures, attitudes, and unexpected cries, through gyrations and turns which do not leave any portion of the stage unutilized, the sense of a new physical language, based on signs and no longer on words, emerges. (Rob Connick trans.)

This “new physical language” makes use of both the text and the world that embodies it. The interpretation of meaning now requires a lived experience rather than a logical reading of the text. Artaud felt this new language would be the basis for his Theatre of Cruelty, making the embodiment of performance as important as the message in the text. He found examples of this incorporated physical language in the ways that the aural components of the Balinese performance combined to create a soundscape that placed as much emphasis on sound creation as on music and traditional language.

The Balinese performers communicated through traditional instrumental music, but also through singing, chanting, call-and-response, and sound-making. Bandem and deBoer describe the type of musical interludes that Artaud may have heard, in the first description, the use of human sounds accentuate the words of the song.

As the women dance, they sing a folk-song in ordinary Balinese to the accompaniment of chanting and rhythmic sounds made by the kecak... Between

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25 “Ce qu’il y a en effet de curieux dans tous ces gestes, dans ces attitudes anguleuses et brutalement coupées, dans ces modulations syncopées de l’arrière-gorge, dans ces phrases musicales qui tournent court, dans ces vols d’élytres, ces bruissements de branches, ces sons de caisses creuses, ces grinements d’automates, ces danses de mannequins animés, c’est: qu’à travers leur dédale de gestes, d’attitudes, de cris jetés dans l’air, à travers des évolutions et des courbes qui ne laissent aucune portion de l’espace scénique inutilisée, se dégage le sens d’un nouveau langage physique à base de signes et non plus de mots” (OC IV: 65).
the lines of the song, nonsense syllables are inserted as part of the musical composition. These are ‘si do re si do’, based on the syllables of Western solfeggio, but sung to the pitches of a Balinese tuning system. (98)

The use of nonsense syllables coincides with Artaud’s call for a theatre language based on sound rather than the logic of words and phrases. From the above description, it appears that Artaud’s call for a language that incorporates sounds as well as words had been successfully used in janger performance. This approach continues during the music interludes before the drama begins. The use of sound effects as well as nonsense syllables creates an even more stylized theatrical language for these interludes.

The first, called tetamburan (drumming), takes its name from a special single-headed drum, the tambur (sometimes called a rebana), which is of Arabic origin. The piece is a composition in pure Kebyar style performed by the gamelan and the male dancers, who clap in rhythm and vocalize mnemonic syllables employed in teaching Balinese drumming. ‘Byung Pyak Be Byung Pyak’ the men chant as they clap, while the janger, still seated, move in unison to the rhythm. (100)

By incorporating the non-linguistic vocalizations into percussion sounds, clapping, and chanting, this interlude introduces several elements that Artaud considered valuable aspects of a new theatrical language. The second interlude more closely resembles traditional lyrical performance but aspects of it also mirror Artaud’s goals, specifically the way that the mood of the song, instead of a change in lyrics, guides the changes in theme.

The second musical interlude is more lyrical. The male and female semi-choruses sing back and forth to each other in question-and-answer style. The songs, sung to simple melodies in straight-forward rhythm, resemble those in
Adar. After several choruses sung in a flirtatious mood, the men and women rise and change places and sing again. Finally, after perhaps twenty minutes, a more serious tone is adopted, to prepare the audience for the start of the drama to follow. (100)

The shifts in dramatic mood that occur in this piece do so through musical changes. Rather than rely on the text to guide these dramatic shifts, the soundscape works as the driving emotional force. Throughout the janger performance, the soundscape used changes drastically, but always works in conjunction with the dance elements to create a theatrical language that Artaud would seek to adopt in his Theatre of Cruelty.

The janger performance provided practical evidence for two key elements of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, rigorously coded gestures and a new theatrical language. The other Balinese performance that he saw at the Colonial Exposition, the calonarang, showed Artaud the other aspect he had searched for: the use of famous characters and scenes of great struggle between good and evil.

The Calonarang

Like the janger, the calonarang also developed fairly recently, “about 1890 in the Batubulan area of Gianyar Province” (Bandem and deBoer 113). If the janger dealt with fairly light-hearted issues, the calonarang provided Artaud with an example of performance that centered around the universal struggle between good and evil. Many of the Balinese dances require the performer to manifest the spirit they summon, but the calonarang differs slightly in this aspect partially because the drama is usually commissioned as part of an exorcism. “In the calonarang dance-drama, attempts were made to provide a frame in performance for the Rangda.
A crucial difference is that the godhead manifesting in the mask can not be contained by any human agency, for Rangda cannot be fully tamed” (Bandem and deBoer 114). The performance occurs at the graveyard and the main crossroad, two spots inhabited by demons. Bandem and deBoer also provide a synopsis for this type of dance, showing that this performance was meant to protect the inhabitants of the village by directing evil spirits to their natural habitat rather than attempting to drive them out completely:

The Calonarang play was created to counteract and neutralize the supernatural power of black magicians who are specific individuals in the community, and the play . . . can still be applied to this purpose. For this reason, the Calonarang repertoire is quite distinct from ceremonies designed to chase or propitiate evil spirits who are ‘natural’ demons rather than malevolent humans in transformed shape. It would be absurd to attempt to cleanse a graveyard of demons, for such beings can never be destroyed, but only displaced, and if they were driven from the graveyard, they would enter the village and rice-fields . . . A demon in a graveyard is where it belongs, if it is not in the ocean. (Bandem and deBoer 124)

By bringing the demons back to the graveyard, the village acknowledges that there is a natural habitat for the evil forces. Instead of seeking to destroy these evil forces (which would prove to be a fruitless endeavor and only serve to place the village at greater risk), the dancers attempt to entice the demons back to the areas set aside for them to inhabit. This concept of the everyday interaction with evil connects to Artaud’s view that the world is controlled by forces outside of society’s control and that seeking to eliminate them only results in prolonged pain and suffering. Artaud’s plays used characters such as Count Cenci and Bluebeard to embody the struggle against evil. For the Balinese, Rangda served as the gateway between good and evil forces.
During the drama, performers can become entranced by the black magic used to attack Rangda. This performance uses some of the more memorable elements of Balinese performance: tranced dancers, the Rangda mask, and the battle between good and evil.

These elements combined to create a spectacle that also left a lasting impression on Artaud. As I noted earlier, Artaud knew that he was attending a commercial production, but still saw in them “the intellectual level of a people who base their civic celebrations on the struggles of a soul preyed upon by ghosts and phantoms from the beyond.” This comment, beyond proving that Artaud knew he was not attending actual ritual performance, hints at the respect Artaud held for the theme of universal struggle. It also signaled that Artaud had at least a passing knowledge about the Rangda legend. The performance in Paris would not have led to a cemetery as it would have in Bali, but Artaud seemed to understand the struggle that occurred during the performance. Artaud further expressed his esteem for the way the Balinese performance addressed this struggle between humanity and the supernatural, between good and evil. “And one can note in passing the degree of theatrical sumptuousness the Balinese have been able to give this struggle: their sense of the plastic requirements of stage is equaled only by their knowledge of physical fear and the means of unleashing it” (Rob Connick trans.).

The palpable fear that this performance generated in its audience attracted Artaud.

In the Balinese performances, the gods and demons are thought to manifest themselves in the entranced dancers that embody them and the masks used to portray them. Evil forces abound in this performance. The play begins uses an attendant (the condong) to inform the audience about most of the background story about the characters and the important information about the

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26 “Et l’on peut en passant remarquer le degré de somptuosité théâtrale que les Balinais été capable de lui donner. Les sens de nécessités plastique de la scène qui y apparaît n’a d’égale que leur connaissance de la peur physique et des moyens de la déchaîner” (OC IV: 68).
battle between the *leyak* (sorcerers) and Rangda. The threats that the *leyak* create for the community, and the *condong* in particular, create the sense of danger in this performance.

The role of the *condong* is considered to be a dangerous one, because her explanation tells both how to work magic and how to combat it. From each kind of *leyak* the proper formulae and antidotes are explained, which requires a knowledge of the magician’s art contained in certain sacred manuscripts. Local sorcerers are said to hate the *condong*’s explanation, for it tells the public how to ward off their tricks. The dancer is therefore thought to be in danger of attack by the *leyak* at this time – the first challenge to the performance. (Bandem and deBoer 116-117)

The *condong* provided the audience with the ability to counteract the evil forces at work. By addressing one of the dangers to their society, the *condong* not only offers the means to safety but also opens themselves to the possibility of attack. The *leyak* (in the village, not the ones portrayed in the drama) might seek to silence the actor before the *leyak*’s mystical powers are negated. But they are not the only performer whose embodiment of their character places them at risk. Those characters that also do the work of the *leyak* risk real injury by the Rangda.

The Pandung character is the Prime Minister in the play and the character’s actions place both character and actor at risk. “Because he will later attack Rangda with a kris, he is vulnerable to destruction for his temerity. The dancer who plays this role must undergo a special ceremony in which he is consecrated to the part” (Bandem and deBoer 117). By attacking Rangda, who has been manifested through the mask but cannot be fully controlled by the performer she inhabits, this performer runs the risk of sustaining real injury during the struggle. When the Pandung attacks Rangda, the performance becomes more somber and the sense of
danger becomes more palpable for both actor and audience. According to Bandem and deBoer, the violence that occurs on stage shifts from staged choreography to a seemingly real threat.

The Pandung enters the stage area with his attendants. One of the clowns creeps silently up the ladder, peeks into the Widow’s [Rangda’s] shack, and then returns. The Pandung resists the idea of attacking a sleeping enemy, which his servants urge him to do. Yielding at last to pressure, he mounts the ladder and steps inside. He drags out Rangda and hauls her, kicking, down the ladder, stabbing furiously with his magic kris. The dancer literally tries to kill Rangda, but is prevented by the magical power of the mask and that of the man inside it. Rangda laughs exultantly, and quickly chases the Pandung off the stage. (118-119)

Although highly choreographed, a very real sense of danger seems to be prevalent in this staging. Without creating a gratuitously bloody spectacle, the calonarang seems to tap into the audience’s fear of realized violence. As Artaud mentioned throughout his manifestos on Cruelty, this was the type of cruelty and violence he sought to create: one that required the audience to create the truly violent images in their own mind. At this point, the performer in the Rangda mask has been embodied by the spirit of Rangda herself. Rangda then begins the most dangerous conflict in the performance by further transgressing the boundaries between theatre and real life.

The dancer performing Rangda is now at the peak of excitement, and is possibly in a state of trance. He now begins to challenge the leyak to attack him. In the context of the story, Calonarang as Rangda, in a transcendental state of anger, is here calling her sisya [students or fellow witches] to join her for further depredations on the countryside. But more literally, the dancer at this moment
invites and dares all local practitioners of the dark arts to test his power. (Bandem and deBoer 119-120)

If the local leyak felt pressured into action when the condong taught the locals how to protect themselves, they now had no choice but to confront Rangda. The performance has now become a way for the town to combat the evil spirits at work there. Rangda travels from the stage to the graveyard (where the demons and spirits reside), constantly challenging any dark forces to confront him. As the performance reaches the graveyard, the crowd has dwindled, with the very real possibility of spiritual combat sending many audience members to the safety of their homes.

While deBoer and Bandem are describing a calonarang performance that would have occurred in Bali, it seems that Artaud understood the conventions at work in this performance. It is unclear at the moment if this was due to information from an announcer at the Colonial Exposition, program notes, or some other form of announcement. It does seem that Artaud was aware of the shift in venue, or at least in the ways that the performance encroached upon the audience. What is clear is that the sense of fear and danger that arose from this performance drew Artaud to it. He found the embodiment of the spirits noteworthy. “A kind of terror captures us at the thought of these mechanized beings, whose joys and pain seem to be their own but ordered by established rites and as dictated by higher intelligences” (Rob Connick trans.).

The calonarang proved to Artaud that the metaphysical struggle between good and evil could be presented in physical form on stage and provided him a framework from which he could address the cultural concerns that haunted the French stage.

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27 “Une espèce de terreur nous prend à considérer ces êtres mécanisés, à qui ni leurs joies ni leurs douleurs ne semblent appartenir en propre, mais obéir à des rites éprouvés et comme dictés par des intelligences supérieures” (OC IV: 70).
The final aspect of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty that can be seen at work in the Balinese performances is the demarcation of performance and audience spaces. The *calonarang* combined the spaces in ways that Artaud would later advocate in his manifestos. As I have already mentioned, the original performance in Bali would have started on stage but travelled through the town to the cemetery. The audience would be surrounded by the performance at times. Their world served as the world of the play as well. There may have been a stage, but that convention was used only at specific moments in the performance. For most of the performance, the audience existed in the same space as the performers. This created a performance where, writes Artaud, space “is used in all its dimensions and, one could say, on all possible planes” (Rob Connick trans.).

The performance, by surrounding the audience, made it difficult for the audience to separate themselves from the world of the drama. This was clearly the intention for the *calonarang*; Rangda, while staying firmly in the play, brings that action into the world of the audience. This creates a drama that operates as a metaphysical bridge between the spiritual and physical world. The action occurring on stage had real-life ramifications for the Balinese audience who saw specific places in their towns used as the spiritual battlefields in this drama. Even in the performance at the Paris Exposition, Artaud seemed to have the knowledge that these performances were used to draw attention to the spiritual forces that rest just outside the realm of consciousness.

Like the *jarang*, the *calonarang* used gesture and sound to create a new (at least for France) theatrical language. However, this language was used to tell a much different story in this performance. Instead of addressing everyday life experiences, this performance dealt with the struggle between the town and the dark magic possibly used against them by sinister forces.

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28 “L’espace de la scène est utilisé dans toutes ces dimensions et on pourrait dire sur tous les plans possible” (*OC* IV: 74).
By combining this struggle between good and evil with a performance space that united actor and spectator, the *calonarang* brought several other aspects of Artaud’s new theatre together. Looking at Artaud’s manifestos, one can see these aspects marked as key ideals for a theatre style that would differ from the contemporary stage.

*Conclusion: The Oriental Theatre and the Theatre of Cruelty*

As I have discussed here, Artaud found four aspects of this Balinese performance in 1931 noteworthy for their difference from Occidental/French theatre: the importance of gesture, aural differences in language (including noise, music, nonsensical syllables, tonal changes, and traditional language), themes relating to the metaphysical struggle between good and evil, and a theatre space that combines performance space with the audience. One year after seeing the *janger* and *calonarang* performances at the Paris Colonial Exposition Artaud would write his first Manifesto of Cruelty. He addressed each of these aspects specifically in his conceptualization of a new performance style.

Artaud sought to create spectacles, performances that would overwhelm the spectator. His description of these spectacles echoes the descriptions he used for the Balinese performances:

Cries, groans, appearances, surprises, dramatic turns of events of all kinds, magic beauty of costumes taken from certain ritual models: resplendent lighting, spell-binding beauty of voices, charming harmonies, rare notes of music, colors of objects, physical rhythm of movements whose crescendo and decrescendo will join with the pulsation of movements that are familiar to all, concrete appearances of new and surprising objects, masks, oversized mannequins, abrupt changes in
light, the physical action of light which brings up the sense of heat and cold, etc.

(Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud found several of these elements at work in the Balinese performances, most notably the cries, groans, and vocalizations of the performers; the harmonies and music created by both instruments and the human body; the physical rhythm in the movement of the bodies on stage; and the power and importance of the Rangda mask. This new spectacle would rely on the aspects used in the Balinese performances to create a performance that engulfs the audiences and brings them into the world of the production.

To create a performance that would be able to withstand the tests of time, Artaud intended to make use of gesture and movement. These gestures would be orchestrated so that no movement would be wasted. The actor is then placed in a unique relationship to the performance. “The actor is at the same time an element of first importance, since it is upon the effectiveness of his work that the success of the spectacle depends, and a kind of a passive and neutral element, since any personal initiative is rigorously refused to him” (Rob Connick trans.).

Artaud also explicitly addressed the structured nature of his spectacles. “The spectacle will be quantified from one end to the other, like a code. Thus there will be no lost movements,

29 “Cris, plaints, apparitions, surprises, coups de théâtre de toutes sortes, beauté magique des costumes pris à certains modèles rituels, resplendissement de la lumière, beauté incantatoire des voix, charme de l’harmonie, notes rares de la musique, couleurs des objets, rythme physique des mouvements dont le crescendo et le decrescendo épousera la pulsation de mouvements familiers à tous, apparitions concrètes d’objets neufs et suprenants, masques, mannequins de plusieurs mètres, changements brusques de la lumière, action physique de la lumière qui éveille le chaud et le froid, etc.” (OC IV: 111).

30 “L’acteur est à la fois un élément de première importance, puisque c’est de l’efficacité de son jeu que dépend la réussite du spectacle, et une sorte d’élément passif et neutre, puisque toute initiative personelle lui est rigoureusement refusée” (OC IV: 117)
since all movements will obey a rhythm” (Rob Connick trans.). The movements and gestures in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty would thus strongly resemble the dance performances with their elaborate and highly structured series of movements. These gestures would combine with everything that the audience could hear, both as spoken text and as sound effect to create a new theatrical language.

One can imagine, given the descriptions, that Artaud’s new theatrical language would also sound similar to the Balinese performances. Artaud acknowledged that language, in its normal understanding, still had importance for the theatre, but that more could be done with sound.

   Every popular audience has always loved the delicacies of direct expressions and images; and the articulated word, the explicit verbal expressions will intervene in all the clear and sharply elucidated parts of the action, the parts where life rests and consciousness intervenes.

   But, in addition to this logical direction, words will be taken in their incantational, truly magical sense—for their form and their sensitive emanations, not only for their meaning. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud did not plan to do away with existing language, but combine it with sounds to create a soundscape that formed the aural component of his theatrical language. Artaud found this type of language in use during the Balinese performances.

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31 “Le spectacle sera chiffré d’un bout à l’autre, comme un langage. C’est ainsi qu’il n’y aura pas de mouvement perdu, que tous les mouvements obéiront à un rythme” (OC IV: 118)
32 “N’importe quel public populaire a toujours été friand d’expressions directes et d’images; et la parole articulée, les expressions verbales explicites interviendront dans toutes les parties claires et nettement éclucidées de l’action, dans les parties où la vie se repose et où la conscience intervient. Mais, à côté de ce sens logique, les mots seront pris dans un sens incantatoire, vraiment magique;—pour leur forme, leurs émanations sensible, et non plus seulement pour leur sens” (OC IV: 149).
The themes at the heart of the *calonarang* drama also would be presented in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. In this Balinese performance, the struggle between good and evil forces manifest themselves physically, as the Rangda defends himself against the black magic of the *leyak*. Artaud saw in this a way to renounce the contemporary French theatrical style of psychological concerns. “In renouncing psychological man, with his compartmentalized character and feelings, it is the total man, and not the social man, subjected to laws and deformed by religions and their precepts, which we will address” (Rob Connick trans.).

To reach this “total man,” Artaud sought to use themes similar to those in the *calonarang*.

The Theatre of Cruelty will choose subjects and themes that respond to the agitation and unrest characteristic of our time. It hopes not to leave cinema the task of distributing of the Myths and modern life. But it will do so in its own way: i.e., by resisting worldly economics, utilities, and techniques, it will make known the great concerns and great essential passions that the modern theatre has covered with the patina of the falsely civilized man. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud wanted to address issues that affected society, but not those ideas that are so minute that they distract people from the larger issues facing them. Artaud chose to address these issues in performance through the same means used by the Balinese.

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33 “Renonçant à l’homme psychologique, au caractère et aux sentiments bien tranchés, c’est à l’homme total, et non à l’homme social, soumis aux lois et déformé par les religions et les préceptes, qu’il s’adressera” (*OC* IV: 147).

34 “Le Théâtre de la Cruauté choisira des sujets et des thèmes qui répondent à l’agitation et à l’inquiétude caractéristiques de notre époque. Il compte ne pas abandoner au cinéma le soin de dégager les Mythes et de la vie moderne. Mais il le fera d’une manière qui lui soit propre, c’est-à-dire que, par opposition avec le glissement économique, utilitaire et technique du monde, il remettra à la mode les grandes préoccupations et les grandes passions essentielles que le théâtre moderne a recouvertes sous le vernis de l’homme faussement civilisé” (*OC* IV: 146-147).
Moreover, great social upheavals, conflicts between people with people and race with race, natural forces, chance interventions, and the magnetism of fate will appear there either indirectly, in the movement and gestures of characters elevated to the statures of gods, heroes, or monsters, with mythical dimensions, or directly, in material forms obtained by new scientific means. These gods or heroes, these monsters, these natural and cosmic forces will be interpreted according to images from the most ancient sacred texts and old cosmogonies. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud’s new theatre intended to use the same type of myths as the Balinese performances. Seeing this performance put this concept into practice, and seeing how easily the audience accepted these performances as ways to approach these themes, gave Artaud proof that performance could accomplish this goal.

The final concept I believe Artaud took from the Balinese performances was the ability to merge performance and spectator spaces, or perhaps incorporate the spectator into the world of the performance. Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty planned to present its performances in ways much different than the established theatre spaces in France at the time.

We remove the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single place, without division or barrier of any kind, which will become the theatre of action.

A direct communication will be restored between the spectator and the spectacle,

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35 “En outre, les grand bouleversements sociaux, les conflits de peuples à peuples et de race à race, les forces naturelles, l’intervention du hasard, le magnetism de la fatalité, s’y manifesteront soit indirectement, sous l’agitation et les gestes de personnages grandis à la taille de dieux, de héros, ou de monstrès, aux dimensions mythiques, soit directement, sous la forme de manifestations matérielles obtenues par des moyens scientifique nouveau. Ces dieux ou héros, ces monstres, ces forces naturelles et cosmiques seront interprétés d’après les images des textes sacrés les plus antiques, et des vieilles cosmogonies” (OC IV: 147).
between the actor and the spectator, owing to the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is wrapped up and shaped by it. (Rob Connick trans.)

Artaud’s theatre, like the Balinese performances, would bring the audience and performers together in one space. The *calonarang* extended this concept by taking the action of the drama from the performance space to the graveyard. Both types of performances, however, created a connection between audience and performance by placing the audience and their world directly into the area of the action.

Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty never developed beyond the manifestos. His production of *The Cenci* addressed certain aspects, but he was not able to incorporate all of them into that production, since there were no performance spaces that could accommodate his new theatrical vision. This does not mean, however, that Artaud’s manifestos were written without regard to their practical values. Artaud sought to create a theatre that served as the antithesis to contemporary French performance. In his manifestos, he did exactly that – going point by point to highlight each way that his theatre would differ from the Occidental theatre. When he attended the Balinese performances in Paris in 1931, Artaud saw many of these concepts in practice, and they gave him proof that these concepts could indeed be staged. He may not have completely understood the Balinese culture, but he never claimed he did. He instead used these performances to show that an alternative to the psychologically-driven character pieces popular in France did exist and could be produced.

36 “Nous supprimons la scène et la salle qui sont remplacées par une sorte de lieu unique, sans cloisonnement, ni barrière d’aucune sorte, et qui deviendra le théâtre même de l’action. Une communication directe sera rétablie entre le spectateur et le spectacle, entre l’acteur et le spectacle, du fait que le spectateur placé au milieu de l’action est enveloppé et sillonné par elle” (*OC* IV: 114-115).
Conclusion

Artaud died on March 4, 1948. Over sixty years later, his works remain a complex, sometimes seemingly inpenetrable collection of topics. One thing most scholars have been able to agree on, however, is the fact that Artaud’s mental illness forced his career to become a series of unfulfilled expectations and failures. Claude Schumacher details the issues that led to the end of Artaud’s practical career:

Because of Artaud’s lack of mental ‘stability,’ the various theatre directors who had worked with him between 1922 and 1924 (and who praised his acting talents) soon ceased to offer him employment, despite Artaud’s frequent requests that he should be given another chance. Cinema directors similarly exploited his extraordinary quality of screen presence, but no one ever offered him the star role he so desperately wanted. The sad fact is Artaud fell out with practically all his collaborators and sponsors . . . He was obviously unbalanced and his instability damaged both his relationships with other people and his career in the theatre.

(xxiv)

Schumacher is not alone in tying Artaud’s theatrical career to his mental illness. Gene A. Plunka contends that “Artaud’s writings cannot be divorced from his personal afflictions” (4). Even Artaud would draw parallels between his life and another famous artist who would spend a great deal of his life institutionalized, Vincent van Gogh. Unlike van Gogh, however, scholars seem still to have little use for Artaud’s practical experiences. But is this the legacy we should continue to pass on to future generations? Can we say with Susan Sontag that, “one can be inspired by Artaud. One can be scorched, changed by Artaud. But there is no way of applying
artaud” (Artaud “Selected Writings” lvii)? In this dissertation, I have challenged this notion by examining the way that his theories have been and/or can be applied to theatrical practice.

In order to counter this claim of Artaud as failed practitioner, I have examined his practical work at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, his production of The Cenci, his writings on the plague and cruelty, and his views on non-Western performance. In these varied aspects of Artaud’s career, I have found that he continually connected his theoretical writing to practical considerations for the theatre. These connections point to the importance Artaud placed on practical work. He was not an author who experimented with the theatre; he was a theatre professional constantly searching for ways to change French theatre away from what he considered the stale, dead performances occurring throughout the country.

While the Alfred Jarry had a very brief run from June 1927 to January 1929, I do not believe the claims that these were colossal failures proving Artaud’s lack of theatrical talent. Jannarone presents critical responses that suggest otherwise. I have argued that each production with which Artaud was involved at the Alfred Jarry Theatre provides a clear glimpse at the key aspects of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty manifestos that would be formulated in the coming years. The first production provided a clear and explicit break from the Surrealists, as they considered theatre a bourgeois and worthless art form. By forming the Alfred Jarry Theatre with other ex-Surrealists, Artaud cemented theatre as a central part of his legacy. Where the Surrealists saw a worthless art form, Artaud saw an art with the potential to change society. Instead of merely advocating theatre’s beneficial qualities in essays and manifestos, Artaud attempted to prove them in practice. The second production showed the influence of film on Artaud’s career as well as a clearer look at Artaud’s developing Theatre of Cruelty aesthetics. Artaud’s views on religion, spirituality, and the possibilities of surreal staging techniques were tested on stage with
this performance before they made their way into the Theatre of Cruelty manifestos. The third production foreshadowed a great deal of Artaud’s writings. The sense of impending doom hanging over the blissfully ignorant human race would also become a dominant theme in Artaud’s writings about the plague and cruelty. Of the four productions at the Alfred Jarry Theatre, this one seems to most closely resemble Artaud’s developing views of a Theatre of Cruelty. The final production at the Alfred Jarry Theatre began to explicitly incorporate sound design as a vital component of the production. Artaud’s view of non-realistic theatre had now moved beyond the visual and into the aural qualities of the play. As he began his search for a theatre unbound from language, this play would have been an ideal place for that experimentation to start.

I believe that Artaud’s full-length production of *Les Cenci* also offers the strongest evidence for Artaud’s practical talents and that his Theatre of Cruelty aesthetics can indeed be staged. Through my examination of the play, I show how many Theatre of Cruelty ideals can clearly be seen at work, granting Artaud’s theories a practical component that can be, and often has been, overlooked by scholars. Artaud felt that his Theatre of Cruelty would need to incorporate the various aspects of a production onto a new, integrated, all-encompassing language. At first glance, an adaptation of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Cenci* seems like an odd choice for Artaud’s first Theatre of Cruelty production. It contained, however, several elements that made it appealing for Artaud. With a text in place, Artaud focused on producing a show that can be seen as representative of his Theatre of Cruelty ideals, using the metaphysical battle in the script in combination with the stage space, costume design, scenery, sound effects, and special effects (particularly the use of mannequins) to create a *mise en scène* that encapsulated many of Artaud’s aesthetic goals.
Les Cenci may not have followed every aspect of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty manifestos, but history shows us that we should not have expected this to occur. Many theorists, including, Adolphe Appia and Bertolt Brecht, faced similar challenges when putting their theories into practice. As Jerzy Grotowski argued, expecting theories to be strictly upheld in production almost certainly dooms the production to failure, since no production ever comes together without taking external factors into account. We should instead look at the moments that do successfully connect to theories and develop our own formulations and uses for these manifestos.

Artaud’s writings on theatre and the plague have often been considered emblematic of his mental illness. He, however, wrote one of his most critically praised essays after his years of institutionalization. This throws doubt on the idea that Artaud’s illness forced his later writing to consist of primarily illogical ramblings and obscure connections between topics. “Van Gogh” highlights Artaud’s use of painful imagery in his writing and shows he distrusted public sentiments on art since they seemed unwilling to question the status quo. It was the society that marginalized artists as “mad” that Artaud aimed to destroy this society through his Theatre of Cruelty.

Artaud intended to use his theatre to attack French society and culture in the same way that the plague drastically transformed the places that housed its outbreaks. Artaud’s use of the plague continued a long artistic tradition of using the plague as a metaphor for societal ills. Artaud argued that the plague and theatre both had the ability to be channeled by dominant powers into a method of subjugating the lower classes, but both could also be used to topple the established systems in a society. In both instances, they affect people seemingly randomly, allowing two people to have much different responses to their exposure.
The cruelty that Artaud constantly placed at the forefront of his developing theatrical aesthetics has often been considered a visibly violent spectacle. He actually opposed these representations, with the violence in his productions more often than not only implied on stage. The cruelty Artaud referred to instead dealt more closely with the mental rigor needed to handle and harness the violent context of the characters. Artaud’s actors similarly would portray violent and cruel behavior on stage, but only to show the audience that these actions were, in essence, useless, since this violence changes nothing.

Artaud found the importance of gesture, aural differences in language (including noise, music, nonsensical syllables, tonal changes, and traditional language), themes relating to the metaphysical struggle between good and evil, and a theatre space that combines performance space with the audience as key differences between Oriental and Occidental theatres. One year after seeing these aspects used in Balinese dance performances, he would write his first Manifesto on Cruelty. These performances proved to Artaud that these ideas could indeed be staged. This aspect is key, because it challenges the notion that Artaud’s theories are inherently unstageable.

Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty never developed beyond the manifestos. His production of Les Cenci addressed certain aspects, but he was not able to incorporate all of them into that production, since there were no performance spaces that could accommodate his new theatrical vision. This does not mean, however, that Artaud’s manifestos were written without regard to their practical values. Artaud sought to create a theatre that served as the antithesis to contemporary French performance. In his manifestos, he did exactly that—going over his arguments point by point to highlight each way that his theatre would differ from the Occidental theatre. When he attended the Balinese performances in Paris in 1931, Artaud saw many of
these concepts in practice, and they gave him proof that these concepts could indeed be staged. He may not have completely understood the Balinese culture, but he never claimed he did. He instead used these performances to show that an alternative to the psychologically-driven character pieces popular in France did exist and could be produced.

Taken as a whole, these chapters illuminate Artaud’s focus on the practicality of his theories. All of Artaud’s major works regarding performance seem to come back to the practicality of their application. This positioning significantly refigures Artaud’s legacy. Where previous generations of scholars saw a theorist with limited practical talent, I instead see a theatre professional whose theories were bound to their utility in his development of a new type of theatre. As other recent scholars have noted, Artaud had a fairly distinguished career as actor, director, and designer. Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty combined all of the production aspects (including, to some extent, the actor) into one metteur en scène who would actively incorporate all of the practical aspects into one unified language of the theatre.

Artaud’s new theatrical language has, to various degrees, become an important aspect of current theatre practice. Artaud’s sense of a theatre production that seamlessly integrates all aspects into an organized, efficient spectacle is not all uncommon today. Whether we call that person the director, artistic director, producer, etc., we still seek to combine all theatrical aspects to a unified idea or theme. Our use of sound has also changed dramatically and reflects Artaud’s influence. Stereophonic sound was an alien concept in French theatre when Artaud introduced it during Les Cenci; now, it is routinely used and may arguably be considered the “standard” soundscape.¹ By any account, Artaud’s influence over twentieth century has been notable. Gene

¹ Adrian Curtin’s “Cruel Vibrations: Sounding Out Antonin Artaud’s Production of ‘Les Cenci’” addresses the nature of Artaud’s soundscape in relation to his Theatre of Cruelty ideals.
A. Plunka connects Artaud’s theories to the development of many directors and innovations of our time.

Some of the twentieth century’s most innovative theater directors, including Jean-Louis Barrault, Julian Beck, Roger Blin, Peter Brook, Joseph Chaikin, John Dexter, Victor Garcia, Peter Hall, Jorge Lavelli, Judith Malina, Jérôme Savary, and Andrei Serban, have been disciples of Artaud. The ‘happenings’ of the 1950s and early 1960s were precipitated by John Cage’s reading of Artaud at Black Mountain College in 1952 and emphasized the visual rather than the verbal elements of staging in Cage’s multimedia shows. Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theatre, Julian Beck and Judith Malina’s Living Theatre, Richard Schechner’s environmental theater presentations staged by the Performance Group as early as 1968, and Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre de Soleil were influenced by Artaud’s theories. During the autumn of 1963, Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz founded their own experimental company that trained young performance artists in acting styles modeled upon Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. Joseph Chaikin’s ‘transformations,’ in which performers would assume multiple roles, was initially an Artaudian idea designed to divest the theater of the overriding influence of characters driven by psychology . . . (3-4)

As evidenced by Plunka and others, Artaud’s influence can be seen in the works of various theatre directors and other practitioners. But, in a twist that Artaud might have found bitterly amusing, given his regard for the dramatic text, Plunka also lists those playwrights to whom Artaud was an inspiration. “In addition, several precepts of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty have had a direct or indirect effect on such playwrights as Edward Albee, Fernando Arrabal, Amiri
Baraka, Samuel Beckett, Kenneth Brown, Antonio Buero-Vallejo, Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Kopit, Peter Shaffer, Sam Shepard, Jean Vauthier, and Peter Weiss” (Plunka 4). Hints of Artaud’s aesthetics have made their way through theatre theory and practice in the decades since his death. What, then, should we expect the future to hold?

As I point out with this study, I believe that scholars will continue to develop a more positive view of Artaud’s practical works. His influence can be seen throughout the late twentieth century. It makes little sense, then, to continue furthering the notion that Artaud was a madman who had no talent in his field. If this were the case, his ideas would have dissipated rather than continue to spread. Further, what would that say about a theatre culture that knowingly continues to experiment with techniques they know cannot be realized? If we still believe Artaud to be a madman, then those theatre professionals that Plunka listed must be equally mad, since they continue to use the same failed techniques and expect different results. It makes more sense, I would argue, to reevaluate Artaud’s place in applied theatre considerations. Others continue to use his techniques and ideas; I feel it benefits our field, as well as Artaud’s legacy, to properly acknowledge the originator of these developments and to note his applications of them as equally valid as those who would later incorporate them into their practices.

**Limitations and Areas of Future Research**

This study focused primarily on Artaud’s writings as they pertained to practical theatre application. I chose not to address many of the political overtones at work, particularly in Artaud’s metaphorical use of the plague. Kimberly Jannarone, Naomi Greene and Steven D. Brown have each addressed the political undertones at work in Artaud’s texts and what
implications those undertones have concerning the political climate in France and Europe at that time. I believe further research could continue this research while also addressing Jennifer Cooke’s history of political and religious rhetoric centered on the plague.

I have also not addressed Artaud’s fascination with Mexican Indian cultures and rituals. Artaud wrote many pieces detailing the importance of performance and ritual to these cultures; he did not, however, attempt to incorporate any of these aspects into a practical performance or distinct staging theory, as he had with the Balinese performances. Luis O. Arata chronicles Artaud’s experiences with the Tarahumara culture and its impact on his views of performance as well as the misinterpretations made by Artaud during his visit. Future research might examine the similarities between the Tarahumara rituals and the Balinese performances that Artaud attended to determine if there are any striking similarities between the two types of rituals that might have led Artaud to so highly value both styles of ritual. It might also prove beneficial to look at the ways that Artaud seemingly misinterpreted both types of ritual to determine if Artaud may have been trying to read specific ideals into these cultures.

This study ends its examination of Artaud’s practical work without considering his non-theatrical career, specifically his work in film and his audio recording of *Pour en enfir avec le jugement de dieu*. These artistic works represent the other aspects of Artaud’s career and should also be examined for their possible connections to Artaud’s theatrical works. These works may prove to be just as important to his Theatre of Cruelty ideals as the works I have discussed here. I touched briefly on Artaud’s inclusion of a film screening in his Alfred Jarry Theatre productions, but I did not discuss either his work as an actor or his screenplays. *Pour en enfir avec le jugement de dieu* may be the most interesting piece left to study in this way. Intended to be a radio broadcast, this piece creates arguably Artaud’s penultimate soundscape, as there are no
other aspects used in this production. It has been argued that this may have been Artaud’s “truest” Theatre of Cruelty production. Artaud, however, made no use of many of the elements of his theatrical language; with the importance he placed on gesture, I find it difficult to believe that he would discard it entirely. So what was this recording: a new development in the Theatre of Cruelty, another shift in Artaud’s creative work, or something in between?

Much has been written about Artaud. Much more could still be written. Artaud’s legacy spans beyond theatre, into film, radio, literature, theology, aesthetics, rhetoric, linguistics, and more. But it was to the stage that Artaud kept returning; his other works seem to reflect either his previous experience or his goals for reshaping theatrical aesthetics. While it might be a stretch to credit him for all of the changes that have occurred in theatre since his death, I believe that he did indeed have a hand in fostering a climate that demanded these changes be made and infected the stoic classicism of theatre from the inside, slowly changing it until its appearance looks much different than it did before the Plague.
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Appendix A: Artaud’s Practical Work

1920  May - Walk-on roles at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre.

1921  February 17 - Theatrical debut as a member of the bourgeois in *Les scrupules de Sganarelle* by Henri de Régnier at the l’Œuvre, directed by Lugné-Poe.

1922  Scenic and costume designer for *Les Olives* by Lope de Rueda, directed by Charles Dullin.

February 22 - Ansare in *L’Avare* by Molière, directed by Charles Dullin.

March 2 - Galvan in *Moriana et Galvan* by Alexandre Arnoux and Sottinet in *Le Divorce* by Jean-François Regnard (double bill) at the Salle Pasdeloup, directed by Charles Dullin.

April 1 – Scenic designer and role of Blind Man in *L’Hôtelerie* by Francesco de Castro and Don Luis in *Visits of Condolence* by Jose Calderón (double bill) at the Salle Pasdeloup, directed by Charles Dullin.

June 20 - Scenic Designer, Costume Designer, and role of Basile, King of Poland, in *La Vie est un songe* (Life is a Dream) by Jose Calderón at the Théâtre Vieux-Colombier, directed by Charles Dullin.

November – Apoplexie in *La Condamnation de Banquet* adapted by Roger Semichon and a member of the council in *The Pleasure of Honesty* by Luigi Pirandello at the Théâtre de l’Atelier (double bill).

December 20 - Tirésias in *Antigone* by Jean Cocteau at the Théâtre Montmartre, directed by Charles Dullin.
1923  Pedro Urdemala in *Mr. Pygmalion* by Jacinto Grau at the Théâtre de l’Atelier, directed by Charles Dullin.

March - Charlemagne in *Huon de Bordeaux* by Alexandre Arnoux at the Théâtre de l’Atelier, directed by Charles Dullin.

May 18 - Retiarus in *Androclès et le lion* by George Bernard Shaw at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, directed by Georges Pitoëff.

June 8 - Heavenly Policeman in *Liliom* by Ferenc Molnar at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, directed by Georges Pitoëff.

October 9 – A guard in *Le Club des Canards Mandarins* by Henri Duvernois at the Studio des Champs-Élysées, directed by Georges Pitoëff.

November 22 - First mystic in *La petite baraque* (The Fairground Booth) by Alexandr Blok at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, directed by Georges Pitoëff.

December 6 - Jackson in *He Who Gets Slapped* by Leonid Andreev at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, directed by Georges Pitoëff.

1924  March 4 - The Prompter in *Six personnages en quête d’auteur* (Six Characters in Search of an Author) by Luigi Pirandello at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, directed by Georges Pitoëff.

March 24 - The robot Marius in *R.U.R.* by Karel Čapek at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, directed by Theodore Komisarjevski.

1925  Small role in *Au pied du mur* by Louis Aragon at the Théâtre Vieux-Colombier (also directed).
1927  June 1 and 2 - first performances at the Théâtre Alfred Jarry – directed *Les Mystères de l’amour* by Roger Vitrac, *Ventre brûlé ou la mere folle* by Artaud, and *Gigone* by Max Robur, pseudonym for Robert Aron.

1928  January 14 – directed third act of *Partage de midi* by Paul Claudel and showed the film *The Mother* at the Théâtre Alfred Jarry.

June 2 and 9 – Theology in *Le Songe* by August Strindberg at the Théâtre Alfred Jarry (also directed).

December 24 and 29 - and *Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir* by Roger Vitrac at the Théâtre Alfred Jarry.

1931  May 31 – Lighting designer for dance recital for Helba Huara at the Salle Pleyel

1932  February-March - Assistant director to Louis Jouvet on *La Patissière du village* by Alfred Savoir.

1935  May 6-22 – Count Cenci in 17 performances of *Les Cenci* at the Théâtre Folies-Wagram (also adapted text and directed).