

## The Movements: The Theatre of Cruelty

[Poppy Bullard](#) reviews Antonin Artaud's resounding legacy in contemporary theatre

Tuesday 5 March 2013



Antonin Artaud is the father of cruelty – the gut-wrenching, spine-squirring discomfort that only a direct confrontation with physical reality can produce. His ideas about the Theatre of Cruelty redefined the limits to which an audience could be pushed, and the horrors to which they could be subjected. This sinister genre has had a varied performance history, ranging from pieces such as *The Cenci*, written by Artaud, which features the death and execution of an entire family, to far more contemporary subjects who use the theory to create an alternative take on existing texts.

The Theatre of Cruelty is not bent on fostering public sadism or masochism, instead the cruel aspect of the theatrical discipline concentrates on dissolving the image of theatre as synonymous with fiction. Artaud's own brand of surrealism attempts to shatter the illusion of theatrical falseness, and focus on creating reality within the theatre. But this is not reality as we know it. Artaud's reality is one that comes from within; the inescapable inner-workings of the human mind and relationships that are usually hidden and suppressed by outer appearances. The confrontational style aims to shock, unsettle and disturb the audience by juxtaposing jarring images of fiction and reality, often using distorted or warped human figures.

The Theatre of Cruelty's advantage as a stylistic genre is that it allows pre-existing existing plays to be considered in a new, and often more challenging, context, none more so than the sell-out production of *The Changeling* at the Young Vic theatre in 2012. This Jacobean tragedy is known as an example of the struggle against the patriarchal domination of the seventeenth century, but its latest performance – brain child of Joe Hill-Gibbins, the Deputy Artistic Director of the Young Vic – takes on a much more Artaudian persona, allowing the production to become the centre of a bone-chilling exposé of mental illness and life in an asylum. This emphasis on the subplot about “madmen and fools” is almost too close to Artaud, who spent most of his later life in asylums, suffering from undiagnosed schizophrenia.

The confrontational components of his Theatre of Cruelty are projected onto the audience throughout the creative vision of the piece. As Hill-Gibbins told *Exeunt Magazine*, people “pay money to look at mad

people because they find them funny, or because they find something profound or intriguing about watching mad people". His blunt, yet uncannily accurate, reasoning is a stark contrast to his theatrical prowess. For Hill-Gibbins, the asylum's inhabitant is presented as a wheelchair-bound, dribbling, sufferer of physical and mental disabilities. This is such a far flung image from the original text by Middleton and Rowley, that, combined with the ethereally clinical hospital-green lighting of the mental asylum, the patient becomes a representation of every audience member's internal, yet unspoken, captivation and morbid fascination with the mentally and physically ill. Artaud's belief that the realities within every person can confront them in a physical form allows the seventeenth-century opus to become more contemporarily and culturally relevant.



It does not stop there. In keeping with Artaud's fascination with human nature, another element of cruelty is sex and sexuality. The Changeling, as with much of Artaud's work, is about "the mess of being a human being, the mess of the body. Maybe that's what all really good plays are about; no matter how much you try to control your body and you have all these ideas about how the world should be and how you should be, the problem of being a human being is that you can't live outside your body. Its needs, for power or sex or food, will always be there". This metaphorical mess of internal emotions and ideas is translated into a very physical performance, where food and drink become a substitute for bodily fluids and bodily desires. The creation of the internal mess of adultery on stage, is performed through the mutual smearing and massaging of red, oozing liquid upon each other and the blanched marriage bed. The highly sexualised rubbing, slaving and massaging is not only a highly disturbing image, but also a physical representation of the complex nature of adultery itself. It maintains Artaud's belief that staging the internal externally shatters the false reality of the stage.

The Theatre of Cruelty attempts to penetrate far deeper than naturalistic theatre. The exposure of such physical translations of raw emotion leaves more naturalistic pieces of theatre appearing to be emotionally stunted and filled with false pretences. The most repulsive aspects of human nature are translated into captivating art, where, by some strange paradox, the only thing that would seem out of place is reality.



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Anastasia

13 Oct '15 at 1:10 pm

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Jennis

27 Mar '18 at 3:37 am

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