



THEATRE
MAKERS

THE THEATRE AND ITS DOUBLE

ANTONIN ARTAUD

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY MARK TAYLOR-BATTY



Loggia 13

The Theatre and Its Double

OTHER TITLES IN THE THEATRE MAKERS SERIES:

- Theatre across Borders by Abhishek Majumdar
Notes from the Rehearsal Room: A Director's Process
by Nancy Meckler
- Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations during a Pandemic
by Caridad Svich
- The Uncapturable: The Fleeting Art of Theatre
by Rubén Szuchmacher and translated by William Gregory
Adrian Lester and Lolita Chakrabarti: A Working Diary
by Adrian Lester and Lolita Chakrabarti
- Movement Directors in Contemporary Theatre:
Conversations on Craft by Ayse Tashkiran
- Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations
on Craft by Paulette Marty
- Julie Hesmondhalgh: A Working Diary by Julie Hesmondhalgh
- Julius Caesar and Me: Exploring Shakespeare's
African Play by Peterson Joseph
- The Actor and His Body by Litz Pisk and introduction
by Ayse Tashkiran
- Steppenwolf Theatre Company of Chicago:
In Their Own Words by John Mayer

The Theatre and Its Double

Antonin Artaud

*Translated by
Mark Taylor-Batty*

methuen | drama

LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

METHUEN DRAMA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, METHUEN DRAMA and the Methuen Drama logo are trademarks of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2024

Copyright © Mark Taylor-Batty, 2024

Mark Taylor-Batty has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgements on p. viii constitute an
extension of this copyright page.

Cover design: Ben Anslow

Cover image: Roger Blin, 'Bacchante', 1953. Reproduced with the
permission of la Bibliothèque Nationale de France

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any
form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or
any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the
publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-
party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were
correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience
caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no
responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Artaud, Antonin, 1896–1948, author. | Taylor-Batty,
Mark, 1966- editor, translator.

Title: The theatre and its double / Antonin Artaud ;
translated [and edited] by Mark Taylor-Batty.

Other titles: The a^tre et son double. English

Description: London ; New York : Methuen Drama, 2024. |

Series: Theatre makers / Antonin Artaud ; translated by Mark

Taylor-Batty | Include bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023025269 (print) | LCCN 2023025270 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781350288713 (paperback) | ISBN 9781350288720 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781350288737 (epub) | ISBN 9781350288744 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Theater.

Classification: LCC PN2021 .A713 2024 (print) |

LCC PN2021 (ebook) | DDC 792–dc23/eng/20230731

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023025269>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023025270>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3502-8872-0
PB: 978-1-3502-8871-3
ePDF: 978-1-3502-8874-4
eBook: 978-1-3502-8873-7

Series: Theatre Makers

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgements viii

Introduction: The Routes to Cruelty 1

Preface: Theatre and Culture 25

The Theatre and the Plague 32

Staging and Metaphysics 48

The Alchemical Theatre 60

On the Balinese Theatre 65

Theatre in the East and Theatre in the West 80

No More Masterpieces 85

Theatre and Cruelty 93

The Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto) 97

Letters Concerning Cruelty 107

Letters Concerning Language 110

The Theatre of Cruelty (Second Manifesto) 124

An Affective Athleticism 130

Two Notes 137

Seraphim's Theatre 143

Notes, Interviews and Correspondence 148

Appendix: Dossier of The Theatre and Its Double 194

Notes 225

Bibliography 267

Index 270

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 Xiuhtecuhtli, the Aztec god of fire, within the Codex Borgia: Public Domain 31
- 2 Lot and his Daughters, ca. 1520, unknown artist, previously attributed to Lucas van Leyden: J. E. Bulloz. Reproduced with the permission of Getty images 47
- 3 Staged photograph of the Balinese dancers, 24 June 1931: Keystone-France, 1931. Reproduced with the permission of Getty images 79
- 4 Jean-Louis Barrault and Jean Dasté in *Autour d'une mère* at the Salle de l'Atelier, Théâtre Montmartre, June 1935: Lipnitzki, 1935. Reproduced with the permission of Getty images 142

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My very special thanks go to Juliette Taylor-Batty for her advice on and suggestions for a whole range of translation challenges and solutions. I am grateful to my many colleagues who have offered thoughts or suggestions: Paul Hammond, David Jackson, José Alberto Pérez Díez and Nigel Saint. Thanks also go to my social media friends and acquaintances who have very usefully responded online to my numerous notes, queries and frustrations: Alex Chisholm, Anthea Fraser Gupta, Paul Kleiman, David Pattie, Mic Spencer, Carole-Anne Upton, Lisa Whistlecroft and Martin White. Thanks to Anna Brewer at Bloomsbury for entrusting me with this work, and to Aanchal Vij for ongoing support. A final thanks to Donald Roy and Michael Walton for first setting me on this road.

Introduction

The Routes to Cruelty

*If I am a poet or an actor it is not to write or recite poetic lines, but to live them.*¹

ANTONIN ARTAUD

Early stages

Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) was a French poet, actor, director, critic and essayist. *The Theatre and Its Double* is his most famous work outside of France, and his influence on contemporary theatre practice from this book is so pervasive as to be unquantifiable. The volume, first published in 1938, is a compilation of essays, lectures, letters and reviews written between 1931 and 1937. Artaud sought in these texts to outline his vision for the theatre, one that began by rejecting the contemporary European theatre practice of psychological realism centred around the staging of a script, and which aimed instead to promote the specifically theatrical visual and auditory languages of the stage, via the intermediary of the augmented role of the director as author of stage imagery and choreography. His theatre would serve substantial themes in a way that might impact upon an audience in an irresistible, immersive mode of persuasion.

Artaud had come to Paris in 1920 from Marseille on the south coast of France. He was the son of a relatively wealthy mercantile family and had ambitions of establishing a career in the arts. He was to gain an introduction into a number of cultural avenues and opportunities through the intermediary of doctor Édouard Toulouse, with whom he first resided after his move to Paris. Toulouse, who ran the psychiatric hospital at Villejuif in Paris, would be Artaud's doctor for the next decade. His professional attachment to cultural modes of addressing and surveying well-being made him particularly well suited to his young charge.² He gave Artaud responsibilities writing articles and arts reviews for the journal *Demain* and recommended art galleries and theatres. Artaud was introduced to Parisian cultural life at a time of rich post-war creative industry, and would witness productions by notable progressive theatre directors such as Gaston Baty, Charles Dullin, Louis Jouvet and Georges Pitoëff.³ To assist in his ambition to become an actor, Toulouse put Artaud in touch with Aurélien Lugné-Poe, the manager of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre who had mounted the scandalous première of Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu* there in the year of Artaud's birth, 1896.⁴ Artaud would first tread the boards in small roles at the Oeuvre in 1920 and 1921,⁵ before moving to join Charles Dullin's company at the Théâtre de l'Atelier following a successful audition in October 1921.⁶

In Dullin's theatre company Artaud happened upon one of the twentieth century's first theatre laboratories. He was exposed to innovative forms of actor training and would witness and participate in having theory and artistic ambitions tested in practice in the commercial arena, all of which would serve to hone and steer his own thoughts on theatre-making. He explained of Dullin that 'beyond just purifying the stage, he is seeking to *renovate* it, or I should say seeking modes of innovation. In other words he wants his performances to offer an ongoing sense of something *never before seen*'.⁷ He expanded upon his observation of Dullin's 'purifying' approach to the theatre in an article he later wrote on the company for *La Criée*, in which we get a first proper sense of his own reform agenda for the theatre: 'the hypertrophied theatre of entertainment has brought about, alongside and over and above the established concept of theatre, a kind of game with easy rules which is pretty much now the norm for the theatre, obscuring the very concept of theatre itself'.⁸ He first articulated here the notion that an authentic

theatre, as he understood it, had been abandoned and obscured by an industry that pimps the medium's integrity to offer only cheap entertainment: 'There are those who go to the theatre as they would go to a brothel'.⁹ In opposition to this theatre of easy distraction, which he located in the boulevard theatres and the Comédie-Française, he proposed 'another kind of theatre [...] conceived as the realisation of the purest human will'.¹⁰ He developed this argument no further than to offer the Atelier as exemplary, but he name-checks his contemporaries Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia as 'liberators of theatre' whom he postulated might now find a welcoming home in France.¹¹ His 1922 critique of the Comédie-Française came to fuller fruition in a letter of 21 February 1925 to the artistic director of that theatre, originally drafted to be published in the third edition of *la Révolution Surréaliste* alongside Artaud's dismissive letters to the Pope, the rectors of the European Universities and other similar articles.¹² He repeated the analogy of the brothel he had first used three years earlier, this time referring to the establishment directly as such: 'Your brothel is too greedy. The representatives of a dead art need to stop their deafening noise', he declared, and promoted again his idea for another theatre, one that recovered its true purpose;

The theatre has no need of you. It is made of different stuff than your worthless drapes [...] The theatre is the Land of Fire, the lakes of Heaven, the battle of Dreams. The theatre is Ceremony [...] Make way for the theatre, gentlemen, make way for a theatre for all, in which the limitless field of being is more than enough.¹³

Artaud left Dullin's troupe in 1923. Famously, during a rehearsal for Alexandre Arnoux's *Huon de Bordeaux*, Artaud in the role of the Emperor Charlemagne entered the stage and climbed into his throne on all fours, only to be interrupted by Dullin and asked to come on in a less stylized way: 'Well, if realism is what you're doing! Right then!' retorted Artaud.¹⁴ He joined Georges Pitoëff's company at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, an actor and director he admired.¹⁵ Pitoëff had a broad theatrical experience, had assimilated naturalistic and symbolist aesthetics and had been influenced by the scenic aesthetics of Edward Gordon Craig. Importantly, for Artaud, he asserted the autonomy of the director

over the text, and specialized in foregrounding the work of the actor on empty stages, or employing a single abstract decor:

The monarch of the theatre is the actor, the bearer of the author's words, and he alone replaces the written word within this place where they are born, which is to say the person, soul, subconscious, body, which gives birth to them.¹⁶

From Dullin's actor-centred, training-centred approach to Pitoëff's directorial skill in finding and revealing the essential conceptual material at the heart of any script in tandem with the actor, this was the soil within which a young Artaud forged a wish-list for a new approach to theatre that would be the seed-bed of the ideas that would later come together as *The Theatre and Its Double*.

The Alfred Jarry Theatre

As his acting career developed, Artaud pursued a parallel literary career, and sought to have a number of poems published in the prominent literary journal, the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Though his submission was rejected by the journal's editor Jacques Rivière, a correspondence between the two men on the subject of the difficulty of expression, specifically Artaud's own pained experience converting creative thought into words and his perceived inefficiency and inadequacy of those poetic processes, would itself be put in print.¹⁷ This extraordinary account of creative impotence was the cause of Artaud's early renown in French literary circles, and its focus on creativity and the mind was no doubt attractive to the members of the Surrealist group, led by André Breton.¹⁸ 'I know all about surrealism', Artaud wrote in 1924, 'It is the system of thought and of the world that I have always adopted'.¹⁹ Recognizing a kindred rejection of bourgeois cultural norms, Artaud would join the group towards the end of the year, and rose quickly in its ranks to become the director of the Surrealist bureau de recherche in January 1925.

Through his participation with the Surrealists between 1924 and 1926, Artaud made the acquaintance of Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron,²⁰ and together they would found the Alfred Jarry

Theatre, a project through which Artaud would seek for the first time to exercise his own ideas concerning revitalizing the theatre.²¹ Vitrac acted as something of an artistic director, and wrote plays to be presented, Aron took the role of producer, taking care of practicalities, and Artaud was the director. 'As things stand, we cannot accept a theatre that goes on cheating us' Artaud wrote in an early 1926 manifesto for the venture, promising that 'the audience should have the sense that their own existence is being played out in front of them'.²² The challenge they were addressing was set out in the form of a research question: 'If the theatre is not just a game, if it is a genuine reality, by what means can we give it that status of reality, make each performance a kind of event? That is the problem we have to solve',²³ and this was elaborated in the 1927 'Manifesto for an Aborted Theatre' where Artaud explained that 'if we are establishing a theatre it is not to put on plays, but to accomplish the rendering of everything obscure, suppressed, and unmanifest in our being through a kind of material, real projection.'²⁴ His rejection of the text as the central pillar of all production had always been a key tenet of his evolving aesthetic. In one of his earliest pieces of writing on the theatre, an article from 1924 entitled 'The Evolution of Décor', he berated the routine 'servitude to the author, submission to the text, what deathly outmoded claptrap! Each text though has infinite possibilities. The spirit of the text, not the letter!'²⁵ and he resurfaced this attitude in a 1928 manifesto, declaring that he had 'no respect for authors or for texts',²⁶ and again in 1929, arguing that he would 'refuse to think of the theatre as a museum for the display of masterpieces, however pretty and humane they might be'.²⁷ Instead, where scripts were involved, and taking perhaps a lead from Pitoëff, he advocated 're-establishing a kind of magnetic communication between the mind of the author and the mind of the director' and 'above all to look for plays that might offer a sort of transubstantiation of life'.²⁸ Although he rejected the centrality of the script in his approach to theatre making, this did not necessarily involve the outright rejection of a text as a premise for performance. Instead, he sought to define a particular approach to projecting the essential substance of what had been captured in text, and looked for works with 'the element of disquiet capable of casting the audience into the kind of uncertainty that is sought'.²⁹

The Alfred Jarry Theatre had no permanent home or troupe of actors and manifested itself in a series of productions at various

venues on eight different afternoons and evenings between 1927 and 1929. These included premières of Vitrac's surrealist dramas *Les Mystères de l'amour* (*The Mysteries of Love*) in 1927, *Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir* (*Victor, or Children in Power*) in the winter of 1928–9, and the French première of August Strindberg's *Le Songe* (*A Dream Play*) in 1928.³⁰ The events that the team arranged were well attended and attracted a range of prominent cultural figures as well as regular theatre-going audiences. If the work had some artistic merit, it was not fully embraced by theatre critics and it certainly failed to be successful financially. The production limitations of the venture also implied a series of compromises of Artaud's ideals: 'The Jarry Theatre is not in good health', he wrote to Jean Paulhan in July 1927, 'for want of funding [...] I am the first to acknowledge the shortcomings in our first venture'.³¹ The venues that were available, via their Cartel des Quatre contacts, were traditional nineteenth-century proscenium arch theatres where the stated ambition that 'the theatre will no longer be closed-in, bound within the restricted space of the stage' could not be effectively realized.³²

The two years of sporadic activity for the Theatre Alfred Jarry represent by far the bulk of all Artaud's entire output as a director,³³ testing a set of aesthetic inclinations, and incarnating a surrealist spirit of provocation and shock tactics; the choice of material and the framing and staging sought to enact a brusque re-alignment of the relationship between audience and performance, in keeping with his earlier rejection of theatre as a medium of comforting entertainment. For all the flaws and compromises of the Alfred Jarry Theatre adventure, and the managed controversy that surrounded the production of Strindberg's play,³⁴ there is evidence in some critical responses that Artaud was true to his word in seeking theatre that addressed 'the most imposing problems [...] evoked in a concrete form that is also mysterious'.³⁵

The Doubles of Theatre

Though plans to mount Vitrac's *Le Coup de Trafalgar* persisted,³⁶ The Alfred Jarry Theatre project had no further issue, and Artaud's parallel pursuit of writing for the cinema in the late 1920s had

borne no substantial fruit.³⁷ Attempting to return to the security of the mainstream to realize his projects,³⁸ Artaud approached Louis Jouvet in April 1931 with proposals for mounting Vitrac's play, Strindberg's *Sonate des spectres* (*A Ghost Sonata*) and his own scenario *La Pierre Philosophale* (*The Philosopher's Stone*).³⁹ As he sought opportunities and backers, he distanced himself from the limitations of the Alfred Jarry work. He entreated Jouvet: 'I hope you won't judge me on the improvised presentations of the Alfred Jarry Theatre', citing difficult circumstances and inadequate actors as central to the creative betrayal he felt.⁴⁰ In a letter to the writer and critic Jean-Richard Bloch the same month, he characterized those earlier productions as 'hastily arranged and contrived through compromise' and outlined a tentative new project as 'the theatre of the incarnation of dreams, of thoughts projected on the stage in pure, unbridled form', seeking Bloch's support.⁴¹ He corresponded with Jouvet again that summer while based in Reims for film work,⁴² hoping to follow up on the possibility of a collaboration, and outlining that he wanted to discuss his approach to directing:

Like a contemporary painter who might bring his own vital formula to pitch alongside others. And I think that the public are waiting, without knowing it, for the theatre to give them what painting, music or poetry *has given them*. No modern play [...] offers the stage the equivalent, for example, of a de Chirico painting.⁴³

This determination to start over in the theatre and pursue his own singular approach to stage directing represented the first shoots of a project that would evolve over the coming years into the Theatre of Cruelty. The lectures, manifestos and correspondence that were born of that project would later be brought together to become the individual chapters of *The Theatre and Its Double*, collectively an extraordinary expression of a vision for theatre production.

Shortly after his return to Paris from his stay in Reims, Artaud would witness a production that so affected him that it would galvanize his resolve, and act as a spur and in some ways a focal point to the burst of creative and theoretical thinking that he would produce over the next few years. This was the ninety-minute presentation of a series of short traditional dance dramas by a Balinese theatre troupe in the Dutch pavilion at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris.⁴⁴

Artaud witnessed heavily truncated versions of these traditional performance pieces, but the experience had a profound impact on him, providing a remarkable template for physical theatre, sacred in origin and ambition, and compelling in how, as he perceived it, a whole stage language was embodied in a choreography of movement and gestures, to which actors contribute as ‘animated hieroglyphs’.⁴⁵ Adrian Morfee summarized this perceived language as ‘a signifying process in which poetry, no longer confined to words, is realized in the flesh of the performer’.⁴⁶

The reflections Artaud was having on how theatre might be rejuvenated through an affective physical stage language were sustained with inspiration from numerous sources beyond the theatre. In September 1931 he visited the Louvre and saw a painting there that made a powerful impression upon him, *Lot and his Daughters*, at the time attributed to Lucas Van Leyden. He read the painting scenographically and wrote of his appreciation of how its various visual elements collided and came together to have a particular impression upon its viewer. He articulated this in terms of a visual language that might be applied theatrically to choreograph the imagery, rhythm and flow of staged action to directly affect an audience, overwhelming and bypassing their processes of critical analysis, formulating further a practical notion of how, as he had put to Bloch, one might arrange ‘thoughts projected on the stage in pure, unbridled form’. His critical reflection on the impact of this painting formed the opening section of a well-received public lecture he gave at the Sorbonne in December, in which he argued against dialogue and for a new language of the stage. He articulated a need to explore ‘spatial poetry’; ‘a poetry for the senses just as there is for words’.⁴⁷ Two days before his lecture he participated in a symposium entitled ‘The Destiny of the Theatre’, decrying the state of contemporary French theatre, and openly demoting and demeaning the role of playwright.

Another striking experience he had late that year was seeing the Marx Brothers’ film *Monkey Business*, screened in Paris at the Panthéon Cinema in October. His review of the film would be published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in January 1932. Artaud had previously expressed a dislike for the recent innovation of films with sound, advocating in the late 1920s against voice on screen (‘talking pictures are nonsense, absurd. The very negation of the Cinema’),⁴⁸ but in the rhythms of the Marx brothers’ banter and the

soundscape of the film, he perceived ‘a special kind of magic [...] released through the screen’ and lauded the cry of a calf in the final scene as having the qualities of ‘a paean to anarchy and to utter rebellion’. He recognized ‘a certain distinct poetic spirit that might be called *surrealism*’ in the film’s humour, in how it challenged orthodoxy and embraced chaos.⁴⁹ The wielded power of laughter had always been a keen aspect of Artaud’s theatrical vision, and had been integral to the intended satirical bite of Alfred Jarry Theatre. In a letter to Génica Athanasiou in 1923, disappointed after seeing the Fratellini clowns for the first time, he wrote of how he might instead imagine ‘the farces one might put together on the edge of sinister, something crazy where even *tone of voice* itself has meaning, with the burlesque pitted against real humanity, everyday humanity’.⁵⁰ The hilarious revelation of the Marx brothers gave him some sense of how that might operate theatrically.

Artaud’s theatrical ambitions began to materialize in practical terms in early 1932, when he was able to gain the backing of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* journal. His December lecture ‘La Mise en scène et la métaphysique’ (‘Staging and Metaphysics’) was published by the journal in February 1932, and Artaud hoped it would be promoted as something of a manifesto. On 7 March, he wrote to the editor Jean Paulhan to indicate that he believed he could get financial backing for a venture that would pursue a theatrical model inspired by his article, and wondered if various esteemed contributors to or editorial members of the journal might offer their moral support.⁵¹ In then writing to these people, he outlined that they might form an honorary steering committee of sorts for the production company he would put together.⁵² In March, he began drafting the essay ‘Le Théâtre Alchemique’ (The Alchemical Theatre), for publication in the Argentinian journal *Sur*, and with it sought to expand on the argument he had outlined in ‘Staging and Metaphysics’. Whereas his earlier lecture had drawn inspiration from the impact a painting might have, in terms of its compelling visual arrangement, in his new article he outlined a comparison between the ambitions and discourses of alchemy, and those of the theatre that he was seeking to engender. He expressed this notion using the word ‘double’ for the first time, encouraging his readers to comprehend the transformative nature of a true theatrical experience as akin to the alchemical process of forming precious metals from base materials. The double considered as a

form of allegory is compelling; as a literary device, an allegory is a secondary narrative that represents or implies a hidden, earlier, primary narrative, but if Artaud's new theatre was the primary narrative implied in constructions of 'doubles' of theatre, it was one that did not yet exist; Artaud would deploy these secondary 'double' narratives of metaphysics and alchemy (and later the plague) to conjure a narrative of a theatre that is absent, to encourage presence from that absence, to compel an understanding of how that invoked theatre might function through outlining the affects of its doubles.

Artaud would propose that his new theatrical venture might be called 'The Alchemical Theatre' or 'The Metaphysical Theatre' after his first two articles. In the meantime, though, given the backing of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and some of its authors, 'The N.R.F Theatre' acted as a provisional title for the project, one that carried the distinguishing clout of that esteemed journal, and Artaud aimed to open in the new season later in the year. In the national newspaper *l'Intransigeant* in June 1932,⁵³ he declared that the first production would be of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*.⁵⁴

The Introduction of Cruelty

As the summer of 1932 progressed, the reality of an autumn opening receded. Artaud failed to find a producer to manage the practical and financial side of arrangements,⁵⁵ but persisted with his media campaign to attract financial backing. An article entitled 'Le théâtre que je vais fonder' ('The Theatre that I am Establishing') was published in the national newspaper *Paris-Soir* on 14 July 1932 and in August he drafted his first proper manifesto for publication in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. In a letter to André Gide on 20 August he declared that he will now name his project 'The Theatre of Cruelty'.⁵⁶ He explained this choice of title over his earlier choices of 'Alchemical' or 'Metaphysical Theatre' in a letter to Jean Paulhan of 29 August.⁵⁷ Other titles were discussed, including 'Theatre of the Absolute' suggested by Paulhan⁵⁸ and 'Theatre of Ordeal' that Artaud briefly considered.⁵⁹ Though Artaud still held a strong preference for 'Alchemical Theatre' he recognized that this risked coming across as pretentious and was ultimately persuaded that 'Theatre of Cruelty' captured both the essence and

the intended experience of his planned work. And so, in September 1932, in a letter published in the arts paper *Comœdia*, Artaud announced his 'Theatre of Cruelty' ahead of the publication of his manifesto for that theatre in the October edition of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.⁶⁰

That manifesto opened with a rejection of script-centred theatre, to be replaced by a physical language of the stage which could 'facilitate the transgression of ordinary limits of art and of speech by manipulating the nervous susceptibility of the body'.⁶¹ A schematic listing of various aspects of the new approach followed, including the status of staging, lighting, music and this new language of the stage, and the manifesto closed with a list of potential productions. The concept of 'cruelty' was deposited in passing, and not elaborated upon. At the time, Artaud was all too aware that the title risked attracting simplistic understandings:

This Cruelty has nothing to do with sadism or blood [...] I don't intend to cultivate horror systematically. This word cruelty needs to be taken in a broader sense, not just in the material, predatory sense usually attributed to it.⁶²

Artaud's premise was that cruelty is a fundamental condition of all existence. Alain Virmaux outlined how 'it is not at all a question of physical or even moral cruelty, but above all of an ontological cruelty, linked to the suffering of existence and to the misery of the human body'.⁶³ Artaud's phrase '[t]out ce qui agit est une cruauté' is key here, but presents a crucial challenge to the translator: it carries important conceptual weight while resisting a straightforward translation.⁶⁴ The verb 'agir' means to act, as in to do things, to intervene, to have an impact. But a literal translation such as 'everything that acts is a cruelty' fails fully to capture the implications that Artaud sets in motion because of the ambiguity that 'acts' presents in English, not least the suggestion of performance, pretence, which is at utter odds with what is intended. The slight liberty taken with the translation of this phrase in this volume, 'everything with agency is cruelty', attempts to avoid the unhelpful literal and remain close conceptually without de-coupling the shared etymology between 'agir' and the 'agency' used as its proxy. To be present in the world, the living have necessarily displaced and consumed other living matter. We might anthropomorphize

the larger animal chasing and killing the smaller animal as an act of cruelty, but the hunt and kill is a vital choreography between two facets of the same thing, a chain of absorption that retains balance, but which is manifest as physical suffering. 'Cruelty' then, is a default, and all else is effort: 'Good is willed, it is the product of an act; evil endures', Artaud emphasized.⁶⁵ In a letter written in November 1932, later added to *The Theatre and Its Double* as one of his 'Letters Concerning Cruelty' he expanded:

There is a kind of elemental wickedness within the flame of life, the appetite for life, the irrational impulse toward life. [...] each stronger life passes through others, so devouring them in slaughter that is both transfiguration and beneficial. In the visible world, metaphysically speaking, evil enjoys permanent rule.⁶⁶

The inclusion of the three 'Letters Concerning Cruelty' from September and November 1932 in *The Theatre and Its Double* foregrounds Artaud's reliance on the epistolary form, which he used to outline and rehearse thoughts through intellectual appeal to an interlocutor. Another four letters form the chapter 'Letters Concerning Language', and span 1931–3, the first written within days of Artaud's seeing the Balinese Theatre, and serve as detailed expression of his understanding and promotion of a stage language of visuals, rhythms, lighting and sound.

Artaud's plans continued regardless of the lack so far of finances, and, in accord with ambitions expressed in the manifesto, he sought in September 1932 to find a 'hangar, factory or disused chapel' to construct his ideal theatrical space.⁶⁷ But the manifesto did not receive the acclaim that he had hoped ('we have to face facts: it's a failure', he conceded).⁶⁸ He began to lose hope that his venture would receive the backing that it needed to get off the ground, and at this stage plans for the production of theatrical work that year were effectively put on ice.

The following year, he attempted to resurrect his project, and composed a second manifesto which he would have published and distributed this time as a six-page pamphlet. The emphasis in this manifesto was on the thematic ambitions to progress the staging of cruelty, the form his new theatre will adopt and an example of a scenario as a prompt to devised performance. He returned to the intellectual engagement that first motivated him, and composed

a lecture in which he would theorize and present the plague as another double of the theatre. 'Le Théâtre et la peste' ('The Theatre and the Plague') was delivered at the Sorbonne on 6 April 1933. A week before, he sent invitations to the lecture along with ten of these Manifesto pamphlets to Alexandra Pecker, and included a number of subscription forms, asking her to address these to as many potential backers as possible, indicating that the lecture would serve in part to promote the thus far unrealized theatre project.⁶⁹ A lengthy opening section of the lecture was concerned with examples of historical outbreaks of the plague and of the symptoms of the contagion. Artaud researched the history of the pestilence in some detail, examining medical texts and examples of social breakdown in accounts of the plague in history and literature to compile what he referred to as 'a poetico-clinical description of the plague'.⁷⁰ At the point in his lecture at which he considered the impact of the disease on a victim's body he began to illustrate the content by acting out the symptoms, bringing his experience as an actor to bear in his lecture delivery. In her diary, Artaud's friend Anñas Nin, who had been sitting on the front row as Artaud gave this lecture, described how he introduced performative elements into his delivery:

he let go of the thread we were following and began to act out dying by plague. No one quite knew when it began. To illustrate his conference, he was acting out an agony. 'La Peste' in French is so much more terrible than 'The Plague' in English. But no word could describe what Artaud acted on the platform of the Sorbonne. [...] His face was contorted with anguish, one could see the perspiration dampening in his hair. His eyes dilated, his muscles became cramped, his fingers struggled to retain the flexibility. He made one feel the parched and burning throat, the pains, the fever, the fire in the guts. He was in agony. He was screaming. He was delirious. He was acting his own death, his own crucifixion.⁷¹

Artaud's lecture, punctuated with performance and the ambition to 'infect' the audience with a sensation of plague, did not go down well and he left the lecture room deflated and angry.⁷² The hoped-for subscriptions that the lecture and new manifesto might attract failed to materialize. The augmented text of the lecture, which

would later take pride of place as the first chapter in *The Theatre and Its Double* in Artaud's initial plans for the ordering of his book, and which would even lend its title to the collection as a whole before he hit upon its definitive name, represents one of the most crucial examples of the double of the theatre-to-be that would be defined by cruelty. Like the plague, the theatre should transform its audiences, and even cause the collapse of societal structures, and wield a 'kill or cure' severity. Jane Goodall identified this approach as essentially homeopathic: "Cruelty" itself subverts alterity by operating on the homeopathic principle of fighting like with like' and she suggests that this attests the influence of Artaud's doctor René Allendy, who had set up the lecture series to which Artaud was contributing, and who published and lectured on alternative medicines alongside mainstream Freudian psychology.⁷³

This intellectual attraction to the occult and systems that frame themselves beyond orthodoxy was a symptom of Artaud's belief in fundamental principles of existence founded in or branching from Gnostic thought. Susan Sontag in 1973 foregrounded the Gnostic premise to much of Artaud's thinking,⁷⁴ and Jane Goodall in her *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* very importantly builds on this and accounts for that Gnosticism within and across Artaud's writing, outlining that 'it is possible to identify certain key areas of Gnostic thematics which find analogues in Artaud's oeuvre, and which may be clearly recognizable as belonging to a common domain of heretical logic'.⁷⁵ We might attribute this erudite fervour for the occult and the 'primitive' as of a piece with Artaud's seeming belief in and research for a unity connecting ancient cultures through various forms of esotericism, the shamanistic access to 'magic' via ritual that has been lost to the disease of 'civilisation': 'There are illnesses of life, a kind of scurvy attached to our taste for living, and I would go as far as to say, like the flames of a huge auto-da-fé, to our capacity to live our lives and be consumed by them'.⁷⁶ In a rare critical intervention in her endnotes to the *Œuvres Complètes*, Paule Thévenin emphasizes how appreciating Artaud's research into 'Oriental, Greek and Indian cultures' is 'essential for reading Artaud's texts'.⁷⁷ Across all his research into ancient or 'primitive' cultures, Artaud was pursuing what Jay Murphy summarizes as the 'search for or prizing of a sometimes hidden, always-in-motion cosmological hieroglyphic matrix that can be created or triggered'.⁷⁸ References to alchemy, tarot, acupuncture, homeopathy, heretical

and Manichaeistic texts, astrology, the Kabbalah, neo-platonic thought, the concepts of the Manas and the Egyptian Ka, all flow like interconnected strands through *The Theatre and Its Double*, underscoring the lamented absence of a culture that is lost to us, and the immense power available within theatrical representation, by resurrecting totemistic ritual, to bring forth a recognition of, indeed the very experience of the inherent cruelty of being: 'We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre was made to teach us this above all else.'⁷⁹

If Artaud was going to get any form of his Cruelty project operational, it became clear that it would in the first instance be in the form of an isolated production, rather than a full programme of works. In a letter to Paulhan in August 1933, he declared that he had an 'option' to produce Büchner's *Woyzeck* at the Studio Raspail theatre, the play he had previously stated would be the first production of the Theatre of Cruelty.⁸⁰ This ambition did not come to fruition, no doubt for want of funding, and no further mention was made of it. In August 1934 he planned an adaptation of Seneca's *Atrée et Thyeste* (*Thyestes*), which he entitled *Le Supplice de Tantale* (*The Torment of Tantalus*), and appealed to Dullin to programme it at the Atelier, without success. He followed up with contacts in Marseille with the hope of mounting the production in a factory there, and talked with André Jolivet about producing incidental music using the early electronic keyboard instrument, the ondes Martinot, but this project also fell.⁸¹ On 6 January 1934, at a soirée arranged for him in their apartment by Lise and Paul Deharme, Artaud gave a reading of *Richard II*, accompanied by a recorded soundscape, and of his scenario *La Conquête de Mexique* (*The Conquest of Mexico*),⁸² all as a prelude to explaining his plans for a Theatre of Cruelty in front of a small group of potential backers and interested parties. He persisted in the intellectual work that fuelled his ambitions, investing his time in research and writing. In May 1934 he wrote to Paulhan to hold back the *Nouvelle Revue Française* publication of 'The Theatre and the Plague' indicating that he had come across material in Saint Augustine's *The City of God* that solidly reinforced the connection he was making between plague and theatre.⁸³ The augmented text of his lecture would be published in October that year, and with it the core conceptual material of what would become *The Theatre and Its Double* was complete.

In a letter to Gaston Gallimard dated 2 December 1934, Artaud announced his intention to collect together his recent articles, lectures and letters on the theatre and publish them under the provisional title of *Le Théâtre et la peste*.⁸⁴ In a letter to Jean Paulhan dated 22 February 1935, Artaud indicated that he had submitted a manuscript of what would become *Le Théâtre et son Double* to Gallimard.⁸⁵ Earlier that month he completed a script of *Les Cenci* which he had adapted from Percy Shelley, with some recourse to Stendhal.⁸⁶ It was an appalling tale of rape, torture and parricide centred around the sadistic exploits of a sixteenth-century Italian count, and Artaud sought to apply ‘the utmost violence’ to his version of it.⁸⁷ At last, credible backing was found. In addition to investment from the publisher Robert Denoël, Lady Iya Abdy offered to fund a production of the text, on condition that she could play the key role of Beatrice Cenci, opposite Artaud himself in the lead as the abhorrent Count Cenci.⁸⁸ Though he thought her too old for the part, Artaud assented, and rehearsals commenced in the spring for what would be the first and only stage production of the Theatre of Cruelty, in May 1935. Artaud knew that the production could only represent a limited first step towards his ultimate goal, and numerous compromises, not least in the shape of the only available theatre – the music-hall and operetta venue the Folies-Wagram – restrictively framed the venture: ‘The difference between The Theatre of Cruelty and *The Cenci* is the same as the difference between the roar of a waterfall or the outbreak of a natural storm and whatever might remain of their violence in their captured image’.⁸⁹ Despite mixed reviews, which caused the run of the play to be curtailed after seventeen shows, Artaud felt that the work adequately vindicated his approach. In a personal note looking back on the year in December 1935, he scribbled ‘a year of disappointments and failure. Utter success of *The Cenci*’.⁹⁰ Artaud’s text of *Les Cenci*, and interviews and correspondence related to the production, merit in themselves a whole other volume of translations and commentary.

The following month, June 1935, Artaud was to witness a more modestly produced play that would heartily reinforce his hope for a progressive rejuvenation of theatre practice: Jean-Louis Barrault’s debut production of *Autour d’une Mère*, adapted from William Faulkner’s 1930 novel *As I Lay Dying*.⁹¹ Barrault, trained at Dullin’s Atelier and in contemporary physical mime with Étienne Decroux, constructed the kind of innovative, devised physical theatre piece

that sat squarely at the heart of Artaud's aesthetic ambitions, at least in terms of the physical representative capacities of the actor: 'it restores a sort of superior dignity and the most intense significance to everyday human gestures'.⁹² His enthusiastic review of the show for the *Nouvelle Revue Française* was published in July, and would later be added to *The Theatre and Its Double*. Barrault suggested that he and Artaud collaborate on a production, and it is tantalizing to imagine what work could have been produced from Artaud's vigour and vision combined with Barrault's pragmatic practical skills, had the suggestion not been rejected.⁹³

Theatre, the Double of Life

Artaud was invited to speak at the international conference Le Congrès des écrivains pour la défense de la culture (Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture) held in Paris in June 1935. The issue of the engaged intellectual, and the position of the writer and cultural production when faced with an emergent right-wing across Europe, was central to the debates that were organized at the congress. But Artaud recognized his take on culture was at utter odds with the thrust of the conference, and explained that 'fascism [...] could not reach my culture, nor any other, by burning the books in which that hybrid mixture which I blame for our abasement gleams [...] True culture has no homeland, it is not human but spiritual'.⁹⁴ In October 1935 he published an article in *La Bête noire*, an arts and literature journal for a cohort of surrealist writers and their peers which had dedicated its July edition to responses to the congress. The article 'Theatre and Culture' was positioned as a contribution to that dialogue over that fascist threat to French culture. He would later decide to repurpose it as the preface to *The Theatre and Its Double*. The essay represented the crystallization of his emerging thoughts over the relationship between 'culture' and 'life'. He recognized a disparity between these as they were experienced, and the need for a recovery and restoration of a binding, vital relationship between the two. His conception of this crucial paradigm was forged in his research that summer into Aztec culture, ahead of his planned voyage to Mexico in 1936, and informed the arguments he would subsequently make in his series

of lectures and public talks in Mexico City. He acknowledged the concerns ‘that people are hungry’,⁹⁵ but shifted the focus to the gap that had grown between the life that people led and culture that was no longer a feature of that life, culture as a means of knowing and embracing one’s place in the world, but which had instead become a civilizing veneer, a set of codes to which one is expected to subscribe (‘our abasement’). Barrault recalled how Artaud felt ‘our culture is as good as discontinued, and the theatre along with it’.⁹⁶ When Artaud wrote of culture, and, as the depression took hold in France, of people’s concerns about feeding their families, he expressed such things as symptoms of a way of life coming to an end. The theatre, though, offered an opportunity for broad cultural renewal and could be a powerful and revelatory tool of mass impact. In this, he was true to his earlier surrealist ambitions for a cultural revolution. His model was a highly singular notion of how experience of ritual could serve to bind a population, and, taking the cue from his research into ancient Mexican cultures, he sought to argue for ‘an idea of culture in action, something which becomes like another organ inside of us, a kind of second respiratory system’.⁹⁷ This point is crucial to understanding his arguments around representation and, in its place, the theatre as a double of life: ‘Art is not the imitation of life’, he contested, ‘but life is the imitation of a transcendent principle that art puts us back in touch with’.⁹⁸ This is where the title to his collection – which he was yet to hit upon – makes the clearest and most compelling sense. If the plague and alchemy operated as doubles of a theatre that was as yet absent, then that theatre itself, once achieved and executed, would operate as the double of a life that was wretchedly absent too, but could be willed through creative energies, through the experience of and exposure to cruelty, and achieved as part of an ambition of cultural renewal, of the vital reconfiguration of the relationship between life and culture. When he finally came up with the title for his collection in January 1936, he outlined:

if the theatre doubles life, then life doubles the true theatre [...] The reservoir of energies that constitute Myths, that are no longer incarnated by people, are incarnated by theatre. By this double I mean that great, magical power of which the theatre in the forms it adopts is only the representation, in waiting for it to become the transfiguration of that power.⁹⁹

A true understanding of 'culture', he would have it, is the proper human envelopment in knowledge of and engagement with the primal forces and 'transcendent principles' that determine and steer existence. He argued that authentic art, and the theatre especially, functions to re-connect us with these 'transcendent principles', and art that therefore only imitates external reality fails in its purpose, because it is engaging only in reproducing elements of a fake paradigm, rather than exposing and challenging that diseased structure, which is the function of all true art. As Ros Murray outlines '[w]hat Artaud criticises as modern theatre stages this reality rather than seeking to put the audience in contact with higher forces'.¹⁰⁰ The imitative theatre of stage realism and psychological profiles was self-evidently anathema in his schema.

In the wake of the disappointment of *Les Cenci*, Artaud initiated a new period of research to seek out what might remain of ancient shamanistic cultures. 'The theatre (Cenci) has left me materially and socially worn out', he explained to Paulhan, 'I have an opportunity to discover my social usefulness'.¹⁰¹ He left for Mexico in January 1936. He was funded initially to give lectures and public talks on contemporary French theatre in the capital city, but he later sought to extend his stay to travel deep into the country's interior to seek out the Rarámuri (Tarahumara) people and witness and participate in their peyote rituals. Shortly before leaving France, he wrote to Paulhan to outline the order in which the chapters of *The Theatre and Its Double* should be arranged.¹⁰² Clearly, since first submitting a manuscript almost a year earlier, he had drafted additional material (or re-drafted older fragments) to seam together more fully the conceptual premises in the volume. The first ever references to 'Theatre in the East and Theatre in the West', 'An Affective Athleticism' and 'Seraphim's Theatre' appear in a letter in December 1935,¹⁰³ and the first references to the chapters 'No More masterpieces' and 'Theatre and Cruelty' appear in a letter in January 1936.¹⁰⁴ The two sister pieces 'An Affective Athleticism' and 'Seraphim's Theatre' were, in effect, templates for actor training for the Theatre of Cruelty, with an emphasis on breathing informed by his recent readings of the Kabbalah.

Artaud signed a contract for the publication of *The Theatre and Its Double* after his return from Mexico.¹⁰⁵ The book, though, would still not be published before his next planned excursion, this time to the west coast of Ireland and thence to Dublin in August

and September 1937. Equipped with insufficient funds and even less English, he set off to seek out the descendants of the ancient Celtic druids and further evidence of the early interconnected nature of life and culture via ritual. This last trip turned out to be an utter disaster. His correspondence from Ireland to friends and family manifested an increasingly precarious state of mental health and, after what seem to have been a series of public psychotic episodes, he was arrested in Dublin for disturbing the peace and hostile behaviour, imprisoned and deported back to France in a straitjacket. He would soon thereafter be sectioned and begin what would become a period of nine years of internment in a series of psychiatric hospitals.

The Theatre and Its Double was finally published in February 1938 during his first months of confinement. Artaud remained under psychiatric scrutiny throughout the Second World War, ultimately ending up at a hospital in Rodez in the south of France until his return to Paris in 1946. A late radio project, entitled *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu* (*To Have Done with God's Judgement*) involved a return to some of the principles of the Theatre of Cruelty, and when its broadcast was cancelled at the eleventh hour on grounds of its obscene language and overt blasphemy,¹⁰⁶ this represented a final indignity that hit at the same time as a diagnosis of cancer taking hold in his intestines. In a letter to Paule Thévenin, who had performed in the radio play, he declared his continuing adherence to the pursuit of cruelty:

from now on I will dedicate myself
exclusively
to the theatre
as I conceive it,
a theatre of blood,
a theatre which with every performance will offer
corporally
something
for those who act as much as for those who come to watch the
acting,
and yet
we do not act,
we enact.¹⁰⁷