ANTONIN ARTAUD: HIS LIFE, MEXICO AND BALI EXPERIENCES

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Ι

Antoine-Marie-Joseph Artaud was born on September 4, 1896, at 8 a.m. in Marseilles. He was the first of numerous children, most of whom died in infancy. His mother, Euphrasie Nalpas, had come from Smyrna and was of Greek origin. His father, of French Provencal stock, was well-to-do, whose family had been in the ship-fitting business for over 150 years. As a child, Artaud could speak Greek and Italian. He had a very special attachment for his Greek grandmother; with her he experienced a closeness, calmness, and an inner joy perhaps he never enjoyed again. His relationship with his mother was emotional and stormy. At the age of five he suffered an attack on meningitis; his mother who had just lost a three-day-old baby, turned all her attention to Artaud. She gave him no freedom to develop and created in him a sense of dependency and guilt at having caused her so much suffering. Though he felt extreme tenderness for her, as he grew older he began to rebel at this situation and would hurt his mother deeply with his angry outbursts which ended with Artaud knocking frantically on his mother's door, begging for forgiveness.

His father was determined that his son take over the ship-fitting business and make a success of it. Perhaps it was this determination that caused the animosity Artaud felt for his father. Years later he was to confess that "until 1 was 27 l lived with an obscure hatred of fathers, of my owen father-until the day I saw him die. Then, this inhuman severity which I felt he had always exerted against me gave way. Another being came out of this body. And, for the first time in my life, this father held out his arms to me." 1

¹ Naomi Green, Antonin Artaud, Poet Without Words (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1970) p16.

Though never medically proven, it is assumed that Artaud's early illness was the cause of his nervous disorders, and the intense pains he suffered led him to the use of drugs. Even as a child, Artaud was desperately aware of the complexity of his physical and psychological problems: "Ever since my earliest childhood (6–8 years old) have noticed these periods of stuttering and horrible physical contraction of my facial nerves and tongue which came ofter periods of calm and perfect ease. All of this was complicated by corresponding psychic problems that only appeared quite openly when I was about 19."2

Artaud studied at the College du Sacre Cceur in Marseilles from 1906 to 1914 and was a good student. He was very interested in the works of Baudelaire, Rollinat and Poe, and began writing his own poems. In 1910 he founded a small literary magazine for which he signed his works "Louis des Attides." This magazine lasted three or four years. During this period also a bent for the dramatic became noticeable. One afternoon Artaud created a stage set in his room which was so grotesque that it frightened a cousin who had come to visit. In 1915 an attack of neurasthenia resulted in his tearing up all his poems and stories and giving all his books away. His worried parent's decided to send him to the first of what was to be a long series of nursing homes. Some months later his health was improved and he was returned to his family.

In 1916 he was drafted and left for Digne to join the 3rd Infantry Regiment. In nine months, however, his influential father obtained his release and he was dischared for "sleepwalking" as he humorously told his friends.³

After his release from the Army, Artaud went through a severe mystical crisis; he would spend days fingering his rosary beads or in prayer. By 1917 the intense pains and headaches created an imcomprehensible Artaud with stormy moods. His health deteriorated so much that a male nurse had to be with him constantly. Finally his family decided to send him to a rest home in Switzerland, headed by Dr. Dardel who encouraged Artaud to draw and write during his two years of treatment. When he was ready to leave Dr. Dardel suggested that the young man go to Paris where he could imrove

² İbid, p 16.

³ Ibid, p 17.

his talents and not return to Marseilles, since the family atmosphere he believed could only have a deleterious effect upon him. He also advised that Artaud stay with Dr. Eduoard Toluouse and Mme. Toulouse.

Artaud arrived in Paris in 1920. He was twenty-four years old, intense, handsome, slim, with a straight nose, fine lips and piercing eyes. His talents still undeveloped, his ideas not yet coalesced nor his magnetic personality tested, Artaud stood at the threshold of his way: his search.⁴

His relationship with Dr. Toulouse apart from providing Artaud with a profound and lasting friendship, developed his literary efforts. He became his secretary and wrote for the magazine Dr. Toulouse edited, *Demain*. He also prefaced Toulouse's anthology *In the Course of Prejudice* (1923). He also began to write articles and poems which reflected the influence of Poe and Baudelaire. Soon he found himself fascinated by the stage and decided to try the acting career both for financial reasons and because it offered excitement and experimentation.

He met Lugne Poe and was offered his first role in Henri de Regnier's play Sganarelles' Scruples (Feb. 17, 1921). Early in 1922 Firmin Gernier, an actor and director, impressed by Artaud, recommended him to Charles Dullin who, impressed by Artaud's haunted face and intensity, accepted him as a student and later as a member of his troupe. Under Dullin's direction Artaud played in Calderon's Life is a Dream, Pirandello's The Pleasure of Honesty, Moliere's The Miser, and Cocteau's adaptation of Sophocles' Antigone, all produced in 1922.

Dullin, speaking of his own interest in the oriental theatre, remembers that Artaud "went much farther in this direction than I. From a practical viewpoint, that sometimes became dangerous; for example, in Pirandello's The Pleasure of Honesty, in which he played a businessman, he came on stage with make-up inspired by the little masks used by Chinese actors-a symbolic make-up which is slightly out of place in a modern comedy." Another anecdote is that during one of the rehearsals of Arnoux's Huon de Bordeaux in which Artaud was playing Charlemagne, Artaud approached the throne on all fours. Thinking this interpretation too highly sympbolized, Dullin gently tried to persuade the actor that the role would be better played

⁴ Bettina Knapp, Antonin Artaud, Man of Vision (New York, David Lewis, 1969) p 6.

conventionally. At this, Artaud rose from the floor and replied with great disdain, "Oh, if you're concerned with truth! Alors!"5

Another important consequence of Artaud's association with Dullin is that through Dullin he met a fellow troupe member named Genica Athanasiou, a beautiful young woman of Greek extraction. She soon became Artaud's constant companion till they broke apart in 1927. She is perhaps the only woman who succeeded in sharing Artaud's life.

When differences in interpretation led to a break with Dullin, though they remained friends, Artaud started working under Gearges Pitoeff. He played minor roles in Molnar's Liliam, Alexauder Blok's The Little Hut, Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of An Author, and Andreev's He Who Gets Slapped.

Artaud was also interested in the cinema and was active as an octor and scenarist from 1922 to 1935. His uncle, Louis Nalpas, director of Nalpas Productions in Paris, put his nephaw into contact with the movie greats of his time-Abel Gance, Cari Dreyer, Rene Clair, Claude Autant-Lara. He acted in some twenty films; his most memorable roles were Marat in Napoleon (Abel Gance, 1926) and the confessor-monk Massieu in The Passion of Joan of Arc (Carl Dreyer, 1928). Of his scenarios, The Shell and the Clergyman, written in 1927, was the only one produced and was shown on February 7, 1628 at the Ursulines.

In 1923, Artaud sent a collection of poems entitled Backgammon of the Heavens to Jacques Riviere, the editor of the Nouvelle Revue Française. Though Riviere rejected the poems, they began a correspondence which resulted in the publication of the letters written during this period, titled Correspondence with Jacques Riviere (1927).

In 1924 Artaud's father died and his mother came to Paris to live with him. (She remained with him until 1937) It was the same year that Artaud met Andre Breton, Robert Desnos and Roger Vitrac. Breton, leader of the Surrealists, could not really accept Artaud's rejection of love and life, neither could Artaud accept their love for life. Political ifferences soon deepened thdis cleavage. The acceptance of Marxist doctrines by some of the Surrealists horrified Artaud. No political doctrine, he asserted, could resolve the spiritaul prob-

⁵ Greene, Poet Without Words, pp 19-20.

lems destroying man; politics could only distract men from confronting fundamental dilemmas. Things came to a head in 1926 when Artaud, along with Philippe Soupault and Roger Vitrac, was excommunicated from the group. In 1927, Artaud was violently attacked in a brochure entitled "In Broad Daylight", signed by Louis Aragon, Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Peret, and Pierre Unik, all of whom at the same time declared their allegiance to the Communist party. They accused Artaud of being concerned with the isolated pursuit of literature rather than with the welfare of man and society Artaud countered these accusations in a brochure of his own, "In the Dark of the Night: or, The Surrealist Bluff"; declaring that political revolution alone was worthless because it could not effect a transformation of man's deepest nature. Though Breton published several articles by Artaud in 1928 in *The Surrealist Revolution*, it was not until 1936 that their friendship was resumed.⁶

Late in 1926 Artaud founded the Theatre Alfred Jarry with Roger Vitrac, Robert Aron and the financial support of Dr. Rene Allendy and his wife. The first manifesto for the theater appeared in the Nowember 1, 1926 issue of the Nouvelle Revue Française. Between 1926 aud 1929, however, only eight performances were staged; a program of Artaud's Acid Stomach or the Mad Mother, Vitrac's The Mysteries of Love, Aron's Gigogne (two performances) in June 1927; one act of Claudel's The Noon Divide together with a screening of Vsevolod Pudovkin's film Mother (one matinee) in January 1926; Strindberg's A Dream Play (two matiness) June 1628; Vitrac's Victor or The Children Take Over (three performances), December 1928 and January 1929. During a performance of A Dream Play on June 2, 1928, members of the surrealist group staged a protest in the theater, provoking a disturbance which had to be quelled by the police. They resented Artaud's preoccupation with the stage because they considered the theater decadent and bourgoise. They clamed that Artaud accepted aid from a politically corrupt government (Sweden) to produce the play.

The publicity resulting from this event, and the brochure Artaud and Vitrac published about the Theatre Alfred Jarry appealing for participation and support, were not sufficient and the plight of the theatre became worse and finally collapsed. Shortly afterward, he

⁶ Ibid., pp 22-25.

wrote to Louis Jouvet, asking for a job as an assistant. Jouvet took him on, but working in the more or less stylized French tradition, he couldn't cope with Artaud's radical theories and the collaboration ended.

Meanwhile, Artaud had been acting in films and established his own film company which never produced any films. During this period he met Dr. Allendy with whom he shared a fascination for magic and astrology. Artaud's interest in esotericism grew stronger until, in 1937, he became a full-fledged believer in this occult. Through Dr. Allzndy, Artaud also met Anais Nin. She worn Artaud's admiration and confidence. She was drawn to Artaud yet resisted an attea hment, she believed the unreality of his life made human love impossible, "Such an immense pity I have for Artaud because he is always suffering. It is the darkness, the bitterness in Artaud want to heal. Physically I could notctouch him, but the flame and genius in him I love." Their friendship was brief but intense.

During the 1920's, as a result of his pains, Artaud had grown to depend upon drugs which continued throughout his life, despite the few attempts he made to rid himself of the habit. His poems published in 1929 under the title of Art and Death, describe the hallucinatory visions experienced under drugs. He also translated Matthew Gregory Lewis' The Monk, published in 1171, and Ludwig Lewisohn's Crime Passional, both revealing Artaud's interest in the occult as well as in sexuality and violence.

In 1931 Artaud attended a Balinese dance performance at the Colonial exposition in Paris. This event molded his dramatic doctrine, and from that day forth he began to outline his Theatre of Cruelty in a series of essays collected in 1939 under the title The Theatre and Its Double.

Artaud, meanwhile, continued his efforts to establish a theater company which would realize his dramatic concepts and in 1933 he established "The Theater of Cruelty." Despite his enthusiasm, Artaud could neither raise sufficient financial support nor arouse public interest. Only one play, *The Cenci*, written by Artaud was produced in 1935, in which he played the role of Cenci himself. The play ran for two and a half weeks, collected unappreciative notices, after which The Theatre of Cruelty was dissolved.

⁷ Ibid., p 34.

This failure created a bitterness and disppointment in Artaud; he attributed his failure to European decadence and sterility and began to dream of a land uncorrupted by Western culture. So in January 1936 Artaud sailed for Mexico, where he hoped to fird a primitive culture whose people preserved the mystical relationship between life and art. Due to financial difficulties he had to write to his friends in Paris for help, and gave a few lectures at the University of Mexico and wrote some articles. Then with the aid of the University went to the interiors of Mexico, where he sought out the Tarahumara tribe and participated in their rituals.

In 1937 he returned to Europe and became engaged to Cecile Schrumme, a young middle-class Belgian. He even submitted to cures for drug addiction, but none were successful. The engagement was broken off in May 1937 by Cecile's father when, during a lecture in Brussels on his Mexican adventure, Artaud lost control and insulted the audience. (According to one version, Artaud appeared in front of the audience and announced, "Since I've lost my notes, I am going to speak about the effect of masturbation on the Jesuit father." 8)

In the following months his alienation was heightened and his nervous disorder intensified. His obsession with the occult increased and he began signing his letters with the symbol, " $\Delta Q \Delta$ ".

In August 1937 he went to Ireland to seek the "last descendants of the Druids ... who know that ... humanity must disappear by water and fire." But the journey only aggravated his nervous condition which is reflected in his letters from Irelad.

In Dublin, at the end of September, after several public incidents he was arrested by the Irish police, but was released on condition that he promptly return to France. He boarded the Washington on September 29, was confined in a straitjacket after an incident on board and, upon arrival at le Havre, sent to a mental institution.

Artaud spent the next nine years (1938–1946) in several institions. Though he wrote letters to his friends and appealed for their help, the war and the German occupation made it difficult for his friends and his mother to assist him. In 1943 Robert Desnos and several other friends succeeded in transferring Artaud from Ville

⁸ İbid, p 41.

⁹ Albert Bermel, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (New York, Taplinger Publishing co., 1977) p 118.

Evrard, where the conditious were ghastly, to an institution at Rodes under the care of Dr. Gastou Ferdiere who administered Artaud's much-discussed electric shock treatments.

Artaud was fully aware of what was happening and complained bitterly, even rebelled, against these shock teratments. He feared a permanent loss of memory. The suffering he was now forced to endure was not only severe, increasing as time went by, but, he declared, virtually inhuman. He complained with great anguisth: "I died at Rodez under electric shock. I say dead. Legally and medically dead." Deeply bitter, in his later poems he condemns doctors and psychiatry. Whether the treatment helped him or whether he made some spontaneous recovery, Artaud took up writing and drawing again at Rodes.

With the end of World War II friends visited Artaud regularly and organized a committee to secure his release from Rodez, against the wishes of his mother and sister. A benefit reading of his poetry by big-name actors, and a sale of drawings and papers, raised money for his upkeep. He went to a rest home in lvry in 1946 on the outskirts of Paris and lived there in a two-room pavillion. His health was completely ruined; his face was ravaged and white, his cheeks sunken, and all his teeth had been lost as a result of the shock treatment.

During the following two years Artaud continued writing poems, many of them which were dictated to Paula Thevenin, Artaud's constant and devoted companion for the rest of his life.

On January 13, 1947 Artaud gave a lecture at the Vieux Colombier Theatre entitled "Tete a tete, par Antonin Artaud." The same year he won the Sainte-Beuve literary prize for his essay "Van Gogh, The Man Suicided by Society."

In July he was asked to write a radio script to be broadcast by by the French Broadcasting Company. The script, To Put an End to God's Judgement, recorded for a select audience, was denied a public broadcast because of its obscenity. Protest by Artaud and members of the private audience were futile.

Early in 1948 Artaud's health was totally deteriorated. Complaining of constant intestinal pains., he was consuming alarming

¹⁰ Knapp, Man of Vision p 163.

¹¹ Greene, Poet Without Words p 47.

quantities of chloral and laudanum. He did not know that he was suffering from an inoperable rectal cancer. In the early morning of March 4, 1948, the gardener, bringing Artaud his breakfast, found him seated at the foot of his bed-dead.

ŤΤ

The two greatest influences on Artaud's dramatic theories were ancient Mexican culture and the oriental theater. The oriental theater is generally thought to be the keystone in the structure of Artaud's theoretical writing, but the interest in and research on Mexican culture may date back to as early as 1932–33, one or two years after he witnessed the 1931 Balinese dance performance.

Artaud took a ship to Mexico by way of Cuba in 1936. He first arrived nin Vera Cruz, then Mexico. In Mexico he was horrified to discover that the Indians living in and around Mexico City were considered savages by the inhabitants of that city, and that the most popular movement was to civilize. As he saw the similarities between Mexico and Europe which he had rejected so much, his anger grew. But he was relieved to learn that there were still certain tribes unreached, possessing ancient secrets of healing with plants, occult sciences. Though he was anxious to begin his journey to this mystical world he had financial problems to attend. He contributed articles to the government–sponsored newspaper "Nacional Revolunionario" and gave lectures at the University of Mexico on February 26, 27 and 29, 1936, entitled: "Surrealism and Revolution", "Man Against Destiny," and "The Theatre and The Gods."

In August 1936, Artaud set out for the mountains where the Tarahumara Indians lived, a race of 40,000 pure red Indians. He was strong, and stimulated by the thought that after immersing himself in the ancient rituals of the Tarahumaras he would be cured and he would wash away his fears and snxieties. He even decided to give up heroin and threw away his last dose.

The region's topography, natural land and rock formations astounded him and strengthened his belief that he was approaching a fantastic revelation.

The Tarahumaras believed they were dropped from heaven to earth and were directed to think like "man." They worshipped the

heavenly fire and the God was the Sun. The adoration of the Sun's strength meant worshipping the regenerative force of Nature. Creation and regeneration were celebrated through the Cingui, or peyote rite. Ciguri was a man-god who inhabited the peyote plant. Whoever took the right amount of peyote could not lose his rational self, he gained sight into the infinite or into Tutuguri, the Sun. To swallow the white powder derived from the "divine" peyote plant meant for the Tarahumaras Indian, Artaud explained, to partake in the flesh and blood of their god Ciguri. 12

Artaud joined the Indians in attaining, through peyote, moments of mystical ecstasy. The essay, "The Peyote Rite," describes the Indian belief that peyote enables man's soul to re-enter into its original communion with the divine, the user loses all consciousness of his personality, renounces all control over mind and body. Under the influence of peyote a man perceives what ideas he must accept to achieve a state of harmony, to feel himself free and unconstained. His mind intuitively will know "the thoughts and feeling that it can profitably welcome without danger, and those which could harm the exercise of his liberty." Equating liberty with the inability to govern himself, Artaud praised the drug as provoking mystical experience in which all individuality is annihilated and insisted that the extinction of individual consciousness should form the bacse of a new culture and civilization.¹³

The ritual continued with the dancers heaving, swirling, screaming, spitting, using bells, crosses, mirrors and holes and ended with the water ritual—an act of sprinkling water on the participant. The real world now became visible to the baptised, the one no ordinary man could see.

They had laid me on the ground at the foot of that enormous beam on which the three sorcerers were sitting during the dances.

On the ground, so that the rite would fall on me, so that the fire, the chants, the cries, the dance and the night self, like a living, human vault, would turn over me. There was this rolling vault, this physical arrangement of cries, tones, steps, chants. But above everything, beyond everyth-

¹² Knapp, Man of Vision p. 145.

^{· 13} Greene, Poet Without Words pp 142-143.

ing, the impression that kept recurring that behind all this, greater than all this and beyond it, there was concealed something else: "the Principal."¹⁴

Artaud was extremely concerned with the exploitation of the full stage space in which the rhythms, gestures and objects would swirl and writhe in action, the play being made up of motions, hieratic gestures and postures, pauses, shouts, barks, sonorous effect,s lighting effects and so forth. The Theatre of Cruelty spectacle Artaud had witnessed was no longer just a series of abstract notions he had committed to paper, but rather, a glaring, vital and living force. It had been felt so intensely by him as to cause "a giant emptying out" and "replenishing" of emotions. This tremendous energy which had derived from an original experience, activated Artaud's sensibilities, his powers, his strength. He had a glimpse of the "void" when he underwent the ritual. Renewed now, he was certain that the universal forces with which he had come into contact during his Mexican venture, inhabited him now and in some magic way protected him against all evil. 16

It was in November 1936 that Artaud, in good spirits, was homeward bound.

III

Artaud had always been fascinated by oriental theatre even during those early days when he was an apprentice actor in Charles Dullin's company, long before he saw the performance of the Balinese Theater in 1931.

He was impressed by the fact that oriental theater was not psychologically oriented; that a production was looked upon as a sacred ceremony, where spectators could undergo a metaphysical experience; that there was no dividing line between comedy and tragedy; that the test of a play was merely a "poetic framework" from which the rest of the production emanated; that drama, tension, conflict, climax, suspense, analysis of character was not present, or

¹⁴ Antonin Artaud, "The Peyote Dance", in Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings, edited by Susan Sontag, (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976) p 391.

¹⁵ Eric Sellin, The Dramatic Concepts of Antonin Artaud, (Chicago, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968j) p 21.

¹⁶ Knapp, Man of Vision, pp 151-52.

else emerged as a result of certain standardized situations. Great importance was accorded to gesture and facial expressions and the relatively unimportant role delegated to the spoken word.¹⁷

Watching dancing is not for the Balinese a matter of such concentrated attention as with us. It is almost a state of being, a feeling rather than an action . . . Dancing in Bali is not there to be looked at, nor music to be listened to, but both only to be seen or heard like trees and streams in a wood. The story, which so much interests us, does not trouble the Balinese in the least. He does not mind at what point it is taken up, nor at what point it is left. The success of a play never depends on the story. 18

Artaud described the impact of the visible action on stage and its effect upon man's unconscious; the emergence of the latter not only by means of the spoken "word," but also by means of a kind of "hieroglyphic" or "symbol." Gestures would thus act as transforming agents; communicating the mysterious and unrevealed contents of the author's, director's and actor's unconsicious and conscious intentions, making them visible on stage in the form of an elevated arm, a lowered finger, etc. Now Artaud was absolutely convinced that words are incapable of expressing attitudes and feeling: 19

All true feeling is in reality untranslatable. To express it is to betray it. But to translate it is "to dissimulate it." True expression hides what it makes manifest.²⁰

So the impact of the elements in oriental theatre (objects, music, changing, costumes and words) on the viewer is tremendous compared to the words used alone. And Artaud continues by reasoning that all these elements leave no space unutilized, which unifies the actor, the stage and the audience.

... the actor does not lose his identity as an actor. The audience does not regard him as a "real" person but as an actor acting. His make-up, costume, movement and speech emphasize the difference between the actor and

¹⁷ Ibid., p 84.

^{18.} Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spies, "Dance and Drama in Bali," *Traditional Balinese Culture*, edited by Jane Belo (New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 1970) p. 264.

¹⁹ Knapp, Man of Vision, p 85.

²⁰ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double (New York, Grove Press, 1958) p. 71.

the concept of a "real" person that exists in the mind of the audience. The stage is a platform for acting, not a disguised area. The stage is distinguished from the rest of the theatre building, but it is not conceived to be spatially discontinuous from it. The actor, the audience and the performance exist within the same psychologically undifferendiated world. The actor is therefore permitted to communicate with his audience directly, for both occupy the same world of aesthetic actuality.²¹

Another aspect Artaud pointed out regarding the Balinese theatrical spectacle was the metaphysical terror it implanted in the spectator:

A kind of terror seizes us at the thought of these mechanized beings, whose joys and griefs seem not their own but at the service of age—old rites, as if they were dictated by superior intelligences.²²

His observation was quite accurate because in Bali the dancer is possessed by his role. "He lets the dance 'dance'; and functions only as a vehicle of the dance, and the measure of his success as a dancer is no doubt the degree to which he ispossessed."²³

Artaud admired the Balinese for their ability to reach a state of ectasy, trance and to drive their audiences into this same mood. They achieve this result by having created a language that is "pure theatre," a "language without meaning except in the circumstances of the stage."²⁴

But it should be pointed out that Artaud rever sought to bring the oriental mystique intact onto the Western stage. He realized that if the occidental theater was to be renewed, it had to find again it own archetypes upon which it would construct a primal dramatic language. It was necessary to dig deep into one's own tradition, not cut across the surface to purloin the tradition of another culture.²⁵

²¹ Earle Ernst, The Kabuki Theatre (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1956) p 18.

²² Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p 58.

²³ Belo, Balinese Culture, p 268.

²⁴ Artaud, Theater and its Double, p 61.

²⁵ Sellin, Dramatic Concepts, p 53.

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