

(2769 words)

*Theatre theory in practice**Student B (HL only)*

Contents

Page 1: The theorist, the theory and the context

Page 2: Practical explorations and development of the solo theatre piece

Page 4: Analysis and evaluation of the solo theatre piece

(2769 words)

Artaud

THEATRE THEORY IN PRACTICE

The theorist, the theory and the context

What attracted me to Artaud? It is the idea that the true intention of the theatre can be expressed in more than words, the entire sentiment of the writer/director/ actor will not be lost in only badly chosen or stumbling words. Instead the meaning is spread out between all these different elements of mise en scene and gesture that make this theatre so unique and theoretically impossible to decipher. What heartily attracted me the most to this type of theatre was the idea that the main significant factor of an Artaud performance is not situated in only the speech. It is this theory that I wish to explore within my solo theatre piece, specifically the *use of mise en scene as a translated language of classical text*.

In his comments on Lucas van den Leyden's painting 'Loth and his Daughters,' Artaud gives us a description that conveys the theatricality. The idea of simultaneous presence and the involvement of the various senses can be appreciated in the following statement:

“One might, in the crackling of fireworks, see through the nightly explosion of stars, rockets and solar bombs, a sudden visual revelation, in the hallucinatory light, of the details appearing in relief from the nocturnal landscape. The light and image of trees, tower, mountains, houses remain forever linked in our spirit with the idea of this ripping sound. The submission of the diverse aspects of the landscape to the presence of fire in the sky can be best explained by saying that, while possessing their own light they remain yet connected to it, as a kind of slow echo, as live points of reference born from it and placed there to allow it to exert its full destructive power.” (Artaud, 1978: 33,34)

The description above indicates a relationship between the sight of the fireworks, the totality of the landscape, and the different senses. A simultaneous presence of these elements forms relations of meaning that are purely theatrical.

I want to explore the idea of Artaud's use of mise en scene, the amalgamation of the bombarding of all the senses, to bring over a sentiment that is barely there. Artaud wanted the audience to give everything to that which is non-existent and intangible, and give nothing to that which is real and touchable. Basically, he wanted every classical text to be translated and rebooted into a version of theatre that was almost entirely expressed in various sequences of gestures, noises, lights, music, objects and words. From this a kind of theatrical symbolism was given to these various elements and used to portray the sentiment. His aim was, not to express a sentiment, which he felt was non-existent if expressed, however express the ideas of the metaphysical (magic, dreams, thoughts, notions) to be manifested into the true sentiment in the minds of the audience members.

It is the combination of these two factors that I plan on utilising for my solo theatre piece, using the combination of mise en scene to indicate levels of relationship between gestures, objects, music, sounds, lights and words in order to express the metaphysical ideas that echos in the mind of the audience.

(2769 words)

Practical explorations and development of the solo theatre piece

I chose the very last scene from 'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett as the material I wanted to transform using Artaud's influence for my solo theatre piece. I felt it combined a good variety of elements- especially when it came to the metaphysical content of the piece. The general theme and concept that many have agreed on when reading Waiting for Godot is this theme of existentialism in the way that there are two figures, that are continuously waiting for a figure, Godot, that never shows up, only sending them vague messages of his return to their lives.

During our experimentation process I decided that the best way to go ahead with this performance process was first to thoroughly understand and analyze the scene that I was planning to perform. The final scene in the text includes various examples of the use of objects that I would be able to utilize in the context of performing an Artaud-style theatre piece, and also the fact that the play has many comedic elements that I felt would cause an interesting juxtaposition in the way that I would be able to contrast the comedic elements with an eerie and almost hysterical atmosphere. I read the last scene several times and then went online to watch a few different renditions of 'waiting for godot' by different theatre companies, and saw how the last scene was cinematically choreographed within movie renditions of the play.

These were:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k82Pz_kHuPk

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMz1-Kgz_DI

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evTE18YoISY>

(all the websites accessed 01/2014)

What I decided I would focus on, when it came to relating the last scene with Artaud's theories about mise-en-scene, language and the expression of the metaphysical elements; was the use of objects as a kind of language with which to be able to express the complex ideas of the text. Although Artaud's ideas contend to the fact that all elements of mise en scene-including the use of light, liminal time, sound, gesture and noise, I decided that to accentuate certain areas of the theatre piece I would mainly focus on two of these elements that are easier to control and work with, with what I had available.

When I had decided on this, I began to experiment with movement and objects as a combination to get things running. Relating to the theory of Artaud, I tried to eliminate any unnecessary use of language and dialogue within the piece. In fact, I began to play with the movement and ideology of the piece without any language whatsoever. I thought about the objects that were described and have been used within the last scene, and found that possibly the most profound was the use of the tree, the belt, and the hat. Using these three objects I began to play around with the movement.

At first the movement didn't feel like a correct representation of the theory, because it seemed more like a piece of mime, which is not in keeping with Artaud's ideas. The idea was to express an un-manifested metaphysical power over the audience, to be able to strip them from the confines of real life and make them feel uncomfortable as an audience member. I set this as an aim. I began to move, not as a representation of what was imaginarily happening around me, but as the ideas would move me in certain ways. The tree, which was represented by a music stand with metal segments, became the main point of interest in the piece.

The tree was then used as a symbol of life and every other object used in the theatre piece was almost measured against it. The use of the hat being put on the 'tree' was, I felt, very effective as the hat encompassed so many of the associations and elements of the ideas of home and protection. After experimenting with the tree the decision was made that I would stamp, almost ritualistically,

(2769 words)

around the tree; and really get up close and personal with it in a way that would show a certain intimacy with it. I then went right up to an audience member to put the hat on them and then compare the way the hat would look on a human and the tree; obviously deciding that the hat was better on the tree. I did this because I felt that it encompassed the idea of the tree, the thought process behind the figure. This related back to the theory of Artaud very well I thought, because I found that what became most important within the theatre piece was not the movement or the communicative dialogue, but the idea laid forth by use of the 'tree' and the movement associated with the tree. I tried to move as slowly as possible, for the audience to be able to understand the importance of the tree as a thought and an idea.

Whilst playing with the object of the belt, and relating this to the final scene of 'Waiting for Godot' where in the figures attempt to commit suicide but find that the belt was not strong enough, I found that what would truly encompass the ideas of the theory would be to lie down after trying to commit suicide and stay very still with a blank look just staring at the audience, and then start to laugh hysterically and uncomfortably. I found that through this I would be able to gain a certain reaction from the audience, a feeling of discomfort that would echo on later as an incredibly eerie idea. I felt that this related well with Artaud's ideas, seeing as the audience discomfort was an important idea within the theory, and I found that this combined well with my aim to the piece.

Later, after talking to my mentor, I got some really good advice about becoming even more intimate with the 'tree', such as kicking off a shoe and caressing it with a foot, or comparing measurements from the audiences forearms to the measurements of the tree, the message encompassing life itself, also perhaps sticking an apple on to the tongs of the music stand, to show an eerie depiction of the tree itself, and to be able to lick the apple on the tree for a more uncomfortable experience for the audience.

When I had managed to use the advice and added in the element of the apple and kicking off the shoe, I noticed that it looked aesthetically well-choreographed with the addition of kicking off the shoe, where as the licking of the apple conducted a massive amount of echoing eeriness that had an amazing effect. It added a dimension of being incredibly disturbing to the piece which I found incredibly effective. What I also thought was quite effective was the aftermath effect of kicking off the shoe, wherein it added an extra layer of almost comical amusement and awkwardness to the steps taken by the figure, it also denoted a certain awkwardness that I thought worked very well in relation to the idea and the figures shown in the original text. I decided that I would put a certain accentuation on to the awkward walk to try and show a deeper meaning behind it-the unbalance of the object and life itself.

Lighting has always been an important factor within the theories of Artaud and so I tried to also utilize the idea of shadow-play within the piece. Through experimenting with the music stand, I used my hands above the actual metal segments of the music stand, which, through use of the light coming from behind it, drew shadows into the ground. As an element of mise-en-scene I felt it was a compelling part of the piece, both an imitation of the 'tree' and encompassing movement and the object as well. I felt that it was this interesting amalgamation of the elements really properly related back to Artaud's theory of the combination of mise en scene to try and depict a metaphysical thought or idea.

The choreography of the solo theatre piece goes as thus:

- I walk in, and sit down under the 'tree'.
- I begin to notice the tree, not as something surprising, more as a realization that the tree has always been there
- I kick off my shoe and touch the tree with a bare foot.

(2769 words)

- I slowly begin to play with and touch the tree, I try to become intimate with the 'tree'
- I try to hang myself using my belt
- After failing to do this, I fall to the ground and laugh hysterically, very suddenly, whilst making eye contact with an audience member
- I notice one of the audience members in particular
- I put my hat on the audience member and then compare the way it looks on the audience member and the 'tree'
- I decide I am afraid of the audience member and I return the hat to the tree
- use the metal of the 'tree' to make a very eerie and echoing noise, and do this ritualistically for about a minute.
- I turn and begin to walk away, still only wearing a singular shoe
- I remember my belt, still hanging on the tree, and return back, take it, fling it over my shoulder, and limp away.

I feel that specifically, what is important to the piece, is the fact that the objects in themselves symbolize such a wide array of emotions, notions, theories, philosophies and pure thoughts. I want the piece to truly represent a deep love and amazement at the tree, which roots itself in the original line of the text which is 'The tree is the only thing left alive'. The tree became a symbol of the thought and un-manifested motif of life. The apple became a surreal and eery representation of the tree, which I felt was important because Artaud's work is categorically known as quite surrealist in itself and its aesthetic composition. The hat became a form of trust and protection. The fact that I decided on the tree is both reflective of the text and of its own theory. After waiting for 'Godot' for so long, the tree becomes the true and consistent companion, whereas real life-denoted by the audience member, is rejected, although considered. The curiosity and comedic factors of Beckett's play are injected into the solo theatre piece through the use of the kicked off boot and the failed and hysterical suicide attempt. The fact that at the end, I go back for the belt, but not the hat, shows a kind of final commitment to the 'tree', to that element of surrealist life.

Analysis and evaluation of the solo theatre piece

After having performed the piece, I feel that, in the most part, the aim of the piece was reached in the sense that the audience ended up feeling a modicum of discomfort whilst watching the solo theatre piece, and that I was able to put a certain accentuation on the meaning and symbolism behind the use of objects and other aspects of the mise en scene. I feel that I was able to communicate this so called 'language' made up of the motifs and symbols that were the objects, the lighting, the gesture and the overall resemblance of the ideology behind the scene, which I personally felt was important to the solo theatre piece.

I believe that the way in which space was used creatively involving the audience was incredibly important to the outcome of the theatre piece. Instead of performing the piece on stage, where a veritable amount of space would be implied between actor and audience, both emotional and physical. I wanted to remove all of that space so that the audience would be forced into a situation where they would not be able to distance themselves from the content of the piece, or from the physical or mental connection with it. The space that I chose, as aforementioned, was the small hallway where in I set up the singular spot light to be able to cast shadows over the floor and walls. I felt that this worked incredibly well apart from the fact that it was more difficult to be able to have constant access to the audience, especially the section where in I use an audience member to compare to the 'tree'.

I would state that one of the perhaps weaker aspects of my theatre piece was the planned shadow-play, and I feel that because of this I wasn't able to tie together as well the different elements of the mise en scene to show a specific relationship between them. If I were to redo this theatre piece this would be the pinnacle of my emphasis as the idea of Artaud's translation of classical text into the

(2769 words)

language of mise en scene means that the relationships and connections between each element of mise en scene has to be clearly identified and correlated.

I feel that content-wise, the ideals behind the original text were well expressed to the audience. After performing the piece many said that they, without being told, would correlate the piece directly to Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', not only because of the use of hat, belt, and tree, but because the feelings that were extracted from the theatre piece were ones that they would correlate with feelings felt when reading the original text or watching a rendition of the original text 'Waiting for Godot'. I believe that the use of Artaud's theory of representation of metaphysics through mise en scene was a useful tool in the way in which I was able to perform the piece.