

Theatre Arts Extended Essay

Would Antonin Artaud Have Appreciated *Tropical* - An Analysis of
Artaudian Elements in Shunt's *Tropicana*

Word Count: 3998

1. Title Page
2. Contents Page
3. Abstract
4. Essay
5. Essay
6. Essay
7. Essay
8. Essay
9. Essay
10. Essay
11. Essay
12. Appendix
13. Appendix
14. Document tation

This essay considers whether Antonin Artaud would have appreciated Shunt's experimental new show *Tropicana*, through an analysis of those elements in the piece which could be considered Artaudian. Firstly it examines the experimental way in which the company deals with the audience and the theatrical space, the show is site specific and it challenges the audience's perception of the theatrical space. It connects it with the way in which Artaud wanted the theatrical action to move through and around the audience, totally involving them in the piece. It continues by looking at the way in which Shunt use light and sound as an individual character, which is also a very Artaudian element. It describes the costumes which are very ritualistic and have a sense of an age-old mystique that Artaud enjoyed. It also details much of the athletic movement in the piece which was very animalistic and symbolic. It relates this to Artaud's desire to dispose of the overuse of speech in theatre and encourage expressive movement. The essay explores the use of speech in the piece as almost poetic language; the repetition of various phrases and words led a string of thought through the piece. The essay then explores the dark humour, a combination of both violence and sexual connotations, which shocked but also amused the audience. The essay concludes that *Tropicana*, whether consciously or not, does have many individual Artaudian elements, and therefore Artaud would probably have appreciated the show. It develops the conclusion with the idea that much of Artaud's work was creating a theatrical freedom for experimentation, and that companies like Shunt, individual and different in their work, benefit from this theatrical freedom.

he Essay

Would Antonin Artaud have appreciated Shunt's new work, based in large underground vaults beneath London Bridge station? I have seen the show three times, and my experiences have led me to read various books on Artaud. I have picked up on various Artaudian elements in the piece; the importance of the audience's experience and the theatrical space, the frequent use of sound and light effects, the costumes of a ritualistic origin and the darkly comic content. But it is possibly naive to say that without Artaud's 'influence' this innovative theatre would not be happening. I interviewed Mischa Twitchin, a member of the Shunt creative team. He told me that making direct comparisons between Artaud's ideas and the creative process behind *Tropicana* would be a fruitless task (appendix 1). However whether or not the company were inspired by Artaud in the creation of *Tropicana* is beside the point*. The question remains -would Artaud himself have appreciated the show due to its many Artaudian elements?

The theatre company Shunt was formed in 1998 by a group of theatre makers who met as postgraduate students studying Advanced Theatre Practice at the Central School of Speech and Drama. The company's focus is on the audience and the theatrical space, and over the past few years they have put on various performances in undesignated theatrical spaces; ranging from a Bethnal Green railway arch to a flooded public library. Shunt's main aim in their creations is to work:

'...largely site specifically incorporating theatre, dance, visual art, sound, video & circus and the shows often have an experiential quality which is part of an ongoing examination of the role of an audience'

We can even see similarities between the above aims and the aims of Artaud in his 'Theatre of Cruelty'. The site-specific theatre, the dance, and the examination of the role of the audience are all elements of theatre that Artaud wanted to explore. In a Shunt show the performance is centred on the audience, how they are involved both emotionally and physically, and the theatrical space and how it can change our experience of theatre. Having moved into their latest space, the vaults underneath London Bridge station, they opened their first performance supported by the National Theatre; *Tropicana*.

Antonin Artaud was born in 1896 and died in 1948; he was a poet, an artist, an actor and a director. In his theatrical work in the 1920s and 30s he was involved in the Alfred Jarry Theatre, an experimental theatre group in Paris. His ideas on drama greatly influenced the evolution of theatre in the 1920s and people still follow his ideas today. One of his most influential writings was the 'Theatre Of Cruelty'. The 'Theatre Of Cruelty', which was written in two manifestos, suggested that the main aim of theatre should be to disturb the audience, by creating what he called a 'primal theatre' he could directly affect the audience's mind, rather than distorting the message of a play with speech and words. To create this non-verbal theatre he stressed the importance of relying on colour and movement, rhythm and dance, and he also said that violence should be used as a theatrical device. Artaud's ideas on theatre

¹ Quote from the Shunt website, www.shunt.co.uk

had a large influence on some of the great practitioners that we study today. For example Peter Brook put on three Artaudian style performances in London. Even so the ideas of Artaud are not widely considered as basic theatre principles today, and in school theatre classes they are often not taught. A piece does not necessarily have to have been directly influenced by the work of Artaud to be described as an Artaudian performance. Instead there are various elements that we can see in a performance and hence say that it is an Artaudian style production.

Having seen *Tropicana* for the first time, I started getting interested in this type of theatre, it totally refreshed my passion for going to the theatre and seeing new things. I wanted to find out more about where this style of theatre came from. I had read about practitioners like Stanislavski and Brecht, but neither had touched on in such detail the importance of the theatre space, that now seemed like an integral part of my experience as an audience member. It was suggested to me, by my Theatre Arts teacher, that the theatre I had seen 'sounded very Artaudian'. I decided that to go about exploring the connections between Artaud and *Tropicana* I should remember all of the little details that surprised and interested me in the show and then compare them to the various Artaudian elements I was discovering in his books, essays and letters.

It is difficult to describe what happens at a Shunt event and to capture the essence of what makes it so thrilling to watch. It is best instead to talk about the emotions involved, how my emotions changed throughout the performance. Artaud notes the importance of 'fundamental emotions' in theatre; one of those most apparent to me while watching *Tropicana* was fear. I was totally terrified but my terror made me want to see more. When I went back to see the show the second and third time I knew what was coming, the anticipation and fear was far less as was my enjoyment of the piece as a whole. Right at the start of the piece the audience were split into groups of about 15, before being led into a small room; which apparently led to nowhere. For about five minutes we stood as a group, with no idea what was going on, all that we could see around us was what looked like a small scuffy office of an industrial worker in on the underground. Due to the location, directly underneath London Bridge station, it was ironic to see the railway worker sitting in what I believed to be the first scene of the play. This accentuated the idea of the audience and play mixing with its surroundings. Eventually the audience started to speak to each other, making jokes about the situation; some even openly said 'I'm scared'. As Encore theatre magazine aptly put it:

*'The fear created bonded little communities'*²

Fear, one of the most fundamental of emotions, was a huge factor in the performance. At one point a little later a woman was so afraid she asked to leave the Vaults and had to be escorted out. The idea of an audience communion is also important to Shunt's work. It immediately eradicates the idea of an audience member sitting down in a theatre, trying their hardest to block the rest of the audience out of their view, so that they can become 'more involved with the action'. Instead they actually are involved with the action because they are moving about in it, talking in it, being part of it.

² Encore Theatre Magazine, Theatre Worker Monday, September 20, 2004, <http://encoretheatremagazine.blogspot.com/2004/09/shunts-Trop/cana-where-strangers-take.html>

Sometimes I found myself checking to try and figure out who was an actor and who was part of the audience. This is exactly what Artaud wanted more of in theatre; he once said that in an ideal theatre setting:

*'Tae spectator is placed at the very centre of the action, the performance moves around and through him'*³

This was even more apparent when a cupboard door in the corner of the room opened, and we were invited to walk through it into a long corridor. Already I felt like I had discovered a secret world, or place, unique to my visit. The decor of the corridor had an institutional feel to it; it reminded me of a tired old people home I had once visited. On a constant loop in the background was a low male voice chanting comments like 'tomorrow our staff might be reptiles'. The walls were lined with pictures of strange looking doctors in white jackets, who occasionally walked through the audience speaking quietly to each other. All the while the theatre was being created around the audience. Some adventurous audience members started exploring like children, peeking through the spy holes of locked doors that lined the corridor. The expectation when going to the theatre is that the audience might buy drinks before entering the auditorium and drink them in the foyer. In this production I was in a sense buying my drink on stage at the beginning of the first act. This is a clear sign of the merging of borders between the previously separate audience and stage. Artaud talked about the theatre space in which things happened, the theatre space he said was to contain actors, audience, light and scenery, with no visible barriers between them.

The audience were then herded into a lift, in groups of about 20 at a time. The small room, which was decorated as a lift, actually stayed still. The walls vibrated slightly to give the sensation of movement in a lift, and the lift operator said things like 'going down'. This disorientated me, and when the performance ended I was surprised that we were still on ground level. I felt my senses had been tricked, I had been fooled into thinking something was happening when it really was not. The lift operator took a photo of the audience, claiming it was his tradition using an instant photo camera; this reinstated the idea of the audience giving something to the actors and characters rather than just watching them. As the doors to the lift opened again we were unexpectedly greeted by the *Tropicana* creatures, a number of girls wearing carnival outfits who moved round the space in an animalistic manner.

For the next part of the show the audience sat down on benches between the arches. There are three identical spaces created by the arches, and in each space the same movements happen. So wherever you sit you see everything but from a slightly different angle. I sat at the back of one of the sections; my eyes strained so hard to see through the complete darkness. The use of mirrors on some walls also added to the visual chaos, and confuses the eye. The arches created a daunting almost gothic effect, dark and foreboding. Artaud suggested that theatre companies should

*'rent some sort of barn or hangar rebuilt along the lines culminating in the architecture of some churches, holy places, or certain Tibetan temples'*⁴

³ 'Artaud For Beginners', Gabriela Stoppelman, published 1998, Writers and Readers Ltd., pg 46

⁴ 'The Theatre and its Double', Antonin Artaud, edition first published 1993, Caider Publications Limited, pg 74

The endless tunnels and the dark arches of the vaults are like those of a church or crypt. Descending from the busy London streets into the vaults presents a complete contrast in setting from the bright lights and activity above, to the dark and damp vaults below. It felt like I had discovered an underground world, (appendix 2) This middle section of the piece is the descent into the world of *Tropicana*; the audience are seated to watch the display of movement, sound, music, light and disturbing images as they 'descend' further into the ground. To create this effect there are various images of movement that flash before the audience. At one point a lift travelled past, suspended from a wire. It moved horizontally and so the man standing in the lift had to be supported by a wire (appendix 3). It totally baffled me at first, my senses and spatial awareness were challenged. Were we moving up, or down, or sideways? Various other scenes of bizarre images flashed up before the audience, combined with dramatic lighting and sound. This is what Artaud thought of as the perfect way to involve the audience in the action:

'constantly immersing them in light, imagery, movements and sound'⁵

While I sat there light was thrown upon me and the sound of huge slamming doors came from behind me. I felt physically and emotionally involved in the performance. I felt real fear, Artaud's fundamental emotion, and my heart was beating quickly. This effect that the light and sound had on me was how Artaud wanted the audience to be affected. He wanted the lights and sound to become a separate character, with the ability to create certain emotions within the audience members. There was also a great sense of dischord, with the music and the light and the frantic action of the *Tropicana* creatures. It heightened the sense of panic and apprehension:

'These means, consisting of differing intensities of colour, light or sound, using vibrations and tremors, musical, rhythmic, repetition, or the repetition of spoken phrases... {will go to create} dischords'⁶

One phrase which was originally spoken by the lift operator, 'show me love', was repeated and distorted with the music. It took on a darker meaning, it was no longer just a string of words; it became a thought, an image. Every time it was said I was transported back to the lift scene; it almost had an incantatory effect on me.

This fusion of music, lights and movement creates an effect similar to the chaotic order of dream images. An image flashes to the next, not clearly linked in anyway; each image is a fresh idea and has a different meaning. In one section, one of the most memorable for me, we were plunged into complete darkness. Then suddenly, with the piercingly loud sound of a violin, a tight spotlight appeared, illuminating in the centre of the space, a pineapple. I then watched as one of the doctors approached the pineapple and tore it to pieces with his bare hands, ripping it and kicking it. I was disturbed and amused. I was disturbed by the sheer anger of the man as he tore at the pineapple, but also I was amused by the simple image of a pineapple sitting in the spotlight. This quite primitive action served not as a part of a story or understandable

⁵ 'The Theatre and its Double', Antonin Artaud, edition first published 1993, Calder Publications Limited, pg 84

⁶ *ij^gjhgatpe_anjj |s Double'*, Antonin Artaud, edition first published 1993, Calder Publications Limited, pg 84

action, but instead it stood alone as a symbolic gesture. Perhaps it symbolised the destruction of an egg or cocoon of one of the *Tropicana* animals. This is an image that returns later when two large chrysalises hang spinning from the ceiling of another vault. One of Artaud's aims was to disturb the audience; this image and many others had that effect on me. When Artaud first performed his piece 'The Theatre and The Plague' in 1933 he had a small crowd, Anais Nin, a famous French surrealist novelist, describes what happened:

*'He was in agony. He was screaming. He was delirious. He was enacting his own death, his own crucifixion. At first people gasped. But then they began to laugh. Everyone was laughing.'*⁷

This effect of horror and amusement was apparent in the autopsy scene later in the piece where a woman sucks on the eight nipples of the deceased man which although I was disturbed by I also couldn't help laughing at.

In Artaud's first manifesto of his 'Theatre Of Cruelty' he talked about costumes. Artaud said that performers should wear 'age-old costumes of ritual intent'. The *Tropicana* girls wear carnival outfits with colourful feather head dresses, high heels, and bikinis. The headdresses themselves are quite similar to ancient Inca headdresses, used in ritual sacrifices or religious ceremonies. But the costumes also exude the spirit of a carnival, where the outfits would be commonplace. This adds to the sense of a party or bar culture that *Tropicana* seems to be routed in. But there is also a dark side to the carnival, in many traditions it is related to death and the ridding of evil. This mirrors the dark humour and content of Shunt's show. Artaud saw the sense of magic and mystery in costumes of ritual intent saying that they:

*'...retain a revealing beauty and appearance because of their closeness to the traditions which gave rise to them.'*⁸

In this production I think the costumes added to the enigmatic characters of the *Tropicana* girls (appendix 4). Along with their almost animalistic movements and postures the headdresses transformed them into animals or creatures rather than humans. The costumes with their ritualistic and magical air could add another Artaudian element to the piece.

At the end of this part of the show a hearse was slowly pushed through the central section of the arches, the *Tropicana* girls had changed into black bikinis and pulled at chains connected to the full-sized hearse screaming mournfully. A man without a shirt walked in front of the hearse playing ear piercingly loud live rock music on a guitar. This image became a clear symbol of mourning and a funeral, the audience started to join the back of the procession and walk behind the hearse. We instantly became mourners following the coffin. When we arrived in another area of the vaults the hearse stopped and there was more heavy rock music while the *Tropicana* girls danced on the hearse. Artaud talked about the importance of music in theatre, he said

<http://members.aol.com/mindwebart2/page10.htm> The Theatre and The Plague described by Anais Nin

⁸ The Theatre and its Double', Antonin Artaud, edition first published 1993, Calder Publications Limited, pg 74

that instalments should be used as part of the set. Artaud said that the music made by the instruments should be able to:

'...produce an unbearably piercing sound or noise '

Artaud suggested that because of the lack of instalments that could make these noises either ancient or forgotten instruments should be used or new ones invented that can reach different octaves. I think that the sound produced by the electric guitar was as close to unbearably piercing as you can get. The use of music created an atmosphere similar to that of a rock concert; it sent shivers down the spine, and seeing it being played by this half naked character added to the overall chilling effect. As he moved through the crowd playing his guitar it felt as though he was flaunting his bestial capability to create these noises.

One of Artaud's comments was that in the theatre there should be;

'no let up, no vacuum in the audience 's mind or sensitivity'

In a standard theatre during the interval you expect to leave the auditorium and enter the foyer where you might buy a drink, look at your program or even eat an ice cream. Whatever you do there is a tendency to break away from the connection you may or may not have had with the action going on in front of you. Artaud didn't want to have a break in the audience's mind; he didn't want to ruin the emotional state in which the audience member should be in and their involvement in the performance. In *Tropicana* there is an interval but the audience stay in the vaults at the scene of the funeral, a crate of beer is dragged from the back of the hearse and handed out. Sandwiches are on offer on a slightly sad looking silver platter. With the inclusion of taste, all of your senses are taken over. While I stood around in the cold vaults eating a cucumber sandwich I watched this group of people around me who are meant to be the audience. I could only see them as funeral guests at a wake.

For the final part of the piece the audience sat on raked benches in another vault, in front of us were two lecterns and slide projectors, then in the centre was a table with a covered body lying upon it. We listened to a short, comic lecture which was accompanied by a slide show. The whole speech generated a lot of laughter in the audience. The speech involved jokes that connected directly to the themes of the piece, bestiality and animal rights were both key themes, and the exploration of death and sex. The talk also continued the idea of playing with conventions, even to the point of how we say a word. The lecturer started the speech with the word death; he said it three times; de-ath, d-e-a-th, and DEATH. The full autopsy scene followed, it was a strange feeling to be laughing at this morbid scene. The characters ignorance at the autopsy procedure allowed the audience to sympathise and therefore emotionally connect with them. One of the most poignant moments was when the doctors decided it would be correct to cry in honour of the dead body, they all try but they couldn't seem to understand how to mourn. In the end one of the actors brought out an accordion and played some overly dramatic music to which they all started crying. It

⁹'The Theatre and its Double', Antonio Artaud, edition first published 1993, Calder Publications Limited, pg 74

¹⁰'The Theatre and its Double', Antonin Artaud, edition first published 1993, Calder Publications Limited, pg 84

was really captivating watching these misfit characters trying to conform to social norms that they can't understand. The dark comedy presented by Shunt is the combination of comic and disturbing that Artaud enjoyed. He said that as well as more morbid and dark content that there should also be poetry and humour. At one point one of the *Tropicana* girls pounces onto the lectern and starts to speak to the audience, her words are magical and powerful through their sensuality and eroticism.

"think about the heat
and the sweat
your sweat
think about caprihina, cubalibre, mosquitos
bzzzz

think about the sea
the white sand
a gentle breeze
rubbing suntan lotion into each other's warm backs

think about my legs
and my shoes
my shoes stepping on your hands

my hands pushing on your shoulders
think about the heat and the sweat
think about my feathers sticking to your f a c e "¹¹

This on its own is poetic, and as she said it she climbed through the audience so that the words 'hands pushing on your shoulders' were said as she laid her hands on the audience members. Artaud discussed in his book, as I have already mentioned, that words should be not as important as movement. However he also said that when words are used they should be:

'...construed in an incantatory, truly magical sense, side by side with this logical sense — not only for their meaning, but for their forms, their sensual radiation'

So he was more interested in what the words sounded like and what effect they had on us, rather than their meaning or context. This idea was predominant in *Tropicana*, because at no point did I worry about the story or meaning of the images. I just enjoyed them for what they were, what they made me feel, and think.

From the above exploration of the show I can see that Shunt's *Tropicana* contains many Artaudian elements. Even though Shunt say that they were not directly inspired or influenced by Artaud (appendix 1), it is still feasible to say that because of the many Artaudian elements we can describe the show as Artaudian. I think the large number of connections between the ideas of Artaud and the way in which the audience views the show justifies this. In his writing Artaud was throwing ideas about, trying out new things; he was not dictating a strict method to which theatre makers should comply. He introduced a way of thinking about theatre, a freedom for experimentation, in this way he was more influential than the strict methodical system of Stanislavki. Shunt doesn't base its work on the every word of Artaud, but instead

¹¹ Text taken directly from Shunt's *Tropicana*

¹² .j^g y^gafpg_ancjjs Double', Antonin Artaud, edition first published 1993, Calder Publications Limited, pg 83

makes full use of this theatrical freedom, experimenting with new ideas. As an online article about Artaud in practice put it:

He generates excitement in those who seek to follow his ideas, acting as a catalyst, a liberator, and it is that which makes him both frightening and fascinating¹³

This fascination and excitement about the possibilities of theatrical experimentation is something which Shunt in itself is now passing on. My total fascination with the show, and the history of the company, has led me to think about how I look at theatre and how I will design theatre of my own. In a sense Artaud back in the **1920's** and 30's was opening the minds **of theatre** makers and performers, just as Shunt is of the modern day audience, to the possibilities of theatre. Just as Artaud was trying to escape the dull, norm that theatre had lulled itself into, Shunt has brought something totally innovative and different to the often monotonous London theatre market. They have certainly sparked an interest in an audience who may otherwise have been drawn towards the seemingly more accessible and exciting world of film and media.

Appendix

Appendix 1. (Email from about *Tropicana*)

From :
 Sent: 26 July 2005 21:09:27
 To :
 Subject: Re:

Dear -I'm glad you enjoyed Ether Frolics too!
 And I look forward to being able to read your essay -
 thank you. (I'd still be a bit cautious in the
 understanding of 'influence' ; i.e. as something
 possibly relevant to the critical context in the way
 that *Tropicana* was received, rather than imputing
 motives to those making it, imputations that could not
 be substantiated afterall.) However, Good Luck with
 the writing of it and all that you find interesting to
 explore in it - and, of course, for your own show! I
 will try to get a copy of the text you want this week.

All best wishes,

p.s. I'm sorry I'm quite forgetful of faces - please
 do come up and say hello when you're next in the
 arches!

Appendix 2 (The Shunt vault layout, and photo)

AUDIENCE	AUDIENCE	AUDIENCE
r¹	J	3
AUDIENCE	AUDIENCE	AUDIENCE

Appendix 3 (The lift operator, and diagram of horizontal lift)



Appendix 4 (The *Tropicana* girls in costume)

Documentation

Books

'Artaud For Beginners', Gabriela Stoppelman, published 1998, Writers and Readers Ltd

'The Theatre and its Double', Antonin Artaud, edition first published 1993, Calder Publications Limited

Websites

Quote from the Shunt website, www.shunt.co.uk

Encore Theatre Magazine, Theatre Worker Monday, September 20, 2004,
<http://encoretheatremagazine.biogspot.com/2004/09/shunts-tropica/ia-where-strangers-take.html>

http://members.aol.com/mindwebart2/page_10.htm The Theatre and The Plague described by Anais Nin

<http://www.dramaworks.co.uk/artaud.html>

Extracts From The Play

Text taken directly from Shunt's *Tropicana*
(sent to me by a member of the company)