

## HL Commentary – Audience Impact and Resonance

*Behind the wallpaper* is an original piece that aims to convey “*entrapment as a result of the inability to control or escape the external forces denying complete freedom.*” The aim to impact the audience into leaving with a new perspective on individual choice and freedom, calls for particular theatre styles that effectively convey this. From initial brainstorming the piece portrays to be heavily influenced by Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and Grotowski’s Poor theatre. These anti-theatre practices are explored through two different acts, both demonstrating elements explored in *The Theatre and Its Double* by Antonin Artaud, *Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty* by Albert Bermel and Jerzy Grotowski’ *Towards a Poor Theatre*.

*Behind the Wallpaper’s* message initially derived from stimulus brainstorming however reading Artaud’s quote “*We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all*”<sup>1</sup> and Grotowski’s philosophy that “*recurring themes of suffering by individuals for causes of debatable worth, such as Christianity, is meant to make each member of the audience think more deeply about what is life’s purpose*”<sup>2</sup> allows me to detail and support my message. The idea of external forces and lack of freedom can clearly be depicted, thus when examining the quotes, my message was defined to look at how the audience must think more deeply about the meaning of their personal decisions, exploring if they truly make decisions freely or if they’re already established by ‘something greater.’

In order to convey message *Behind the Wallpaper* is separated in two acts, where act one is build around Artaud’s theatre of cruelty. Cruelty does not demonstrate a physical act of violence but rather “*a violent, austere, physical determination to shatter the false reality that he wrote lies like a shroud over our perceptions.*”<sup>3</sup>. Theatre of cruelty is unique due to its specific focus on technical elements, audience interaction and movement and tone of voice replacing language. When Artaud wrote his *First Manifesto* he exposed new fundamentals of Cruelty, and produced a document that “*rejected the treatment of theatre as an evasion method*”<sup>4</sup> and instead transformed his “*spectacle*”<sup>5</sup> into confrontation therapy. These vital elements to Cruelty required that:

“Every spectacle will contain a physical and objective element, perceptible to all. Cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatricalities of all kinds, magic beauty of costumes taken from certain ritual models; ...rare notes of music, colors of objects, ...masks, effigies yards high, sudden changes of light.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Artaud, Antonin. *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings*. Ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976. Print. p. 256

<sup>2</sup> Ausland, Philip. “Holy Theatre and Catharsis.” *Theatre Research International*, 1984. Print. p. 25

<sup>3</sup> [http://web.me.com/corourke/General\\_Topics/Artaud\\_Theatre\\_of\\_Cruelty.html](http://web.me.com/corourke/General_Topics/Artaud_Theatre_of_Cruelty.html)

<sup>4</sup> “Theatre of Cruelty.” *MURAL - Student Homepages at University of Valencia*. Web. 01 Feb. 2012. <<http://mural.uv.es/ilanbe/paper3.htm>>.

<sup>5</sup> Different word choice for “Play” or “Performance.”

<sup>6</sup> Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and Its Double*. New York: Grove, 1958. Print. p. 93

Besides the elements explored, Theatre of Cruelty aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Artaud aimed to depict a violent representation of reality.<sup>8</sup> This idea of shock results in audience's realization that they, just like the protagonist, are victims of external forces. Simultaneously, the illustration of a violent representation of reality will be explored through insanity defense and entrapment.

The shock is brought the stage through the use of lighting, where "*Lighting, sound equipment and other technical means no longer sub serve the text; they would partially replace it.*"<sup>9</sup> This in combination with the research of 'sudden changes in light' from before establishes the lighting of the original performance. In order to respect cruelty lighting it must include flashing, bright gels or even 'crueler' lights such as strobe lights. This is evidently used in scene one of *Behind the Wallpaper* when each individual is receiving death row. However, as lighting replaces language, there is no speaking involved, and instead the lighting portrays the death row. An example is with the first character receiving electrical chair, thus strobe lighting is used. Therefore, by having lighting replace language, the audience is more aware of the cruel representation and it alarms them into recognizing the internal struggle of denied freedom and additionally 'brings them face to face with the harsh facts of human situation.'

As lights partially replace text, Artaud additionally explores Cruelty to be "*fortified by a range of human noises- screams, grunts, moans, sighs, yelps*"<sup>10</sup> This development of characterization can be utilized in the performance in order to clearly depict the internal struggle with entrapment as a result of being denied complete freedom. Audience shock is further developed through the use of vocal tones as seen in the characterization of the antagonist – the external forces. This character constantly utilizes screams throughout as an indication of felt significance and power over the lives of other individuals. The antagonist has the ability to make individuals feels entrapment and thus screams are utilized in order to present this. The demons, death row inmates and protagonist employ similar tones as throughout they also use whispers and moans to indicate their significance in the message or their felt mood.

While language is established through Cruelty lighting and vocal tone, blocking is explored through Cruelty movements such as animalistic and absurdist blocking where significant. This is due Artaud believing "*Body language was very important because he wanted his actors to transmit feelings or ideas in a metaphoric way; almost without speaking.*"<sup>11</sup> These movements are conveyed through the use of demonic characters in scene 3. In this scene the characters

<sup>7</sup> Esslin, Martin. *Absurd Drama*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Artaud, Antonin. *Collected Works: Volume Two*. London: Calder & Boyars, 1971. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Bermel, Albert. *Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty*. London: Methuen, 2001. Print. p. 6

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 7

<sup>11</sup> "Theatre of Cruelty." *MURAL - Student Homepages at University of Valencia*. Web. 01 Feb. 2012. <<http://mural.uv.es/ilanbe/paper3.htm>>.

employ absurd blocking to portray their cruel nature as a metaphoric representation of internal struggle of entrapment. The elements unique to Theatre of Cruelty, such as lighting, audience shock, vocal tones and blocking are utilized in act one as a tool through which to demonstrate the internal struggle versus the external forces.

Employing a secondary practice, Poor Theatre, allows for a clearer depiction of entrapment. Grotowski stated, "*Consequently, I propose poverty in theatre. We have resigned from the stage-and-auditorium plant: for each production, a new space is designed for the actors and spectators.*"<sup>12</sup> This minimalistic set with emphasis on audience interaction is a great secondary stimulus for audience resonance. As all parts of the message have already been demonstrated through cruelty, entrapment is conveyed through interaction. Grotowski invented that "*the actors may build structures among the spectators and thus include them in the architecture of action, subjecting them to a sense of the pressure and congestion and limitation of space.*"<sup>13</sup> Through this unique element, I am able to convey entrapment to the audience, by allowing them to experience it. Act two of *Behind The Wallpaper* experiences a set has change and the audience is situated onstage. It starts with a monologue, however as the protagonist makes her exit, the audience is left alone. Through the use of falsified mirrors, the audience's exits are blocked and thus they are unable to 'escape'. This technique of audience interaction is vital to the performance as it forces the audience to experience entrapment.

The external forces in the shapes of trapped mirror reflections further develop entrapment. In Poor theatre, Grotowski "*forsook lighting effects, and this revealed a wide range of possibilities for the actor's use of stationary light-sources by deliberate work with shadows, bright spots, etc.*"<sup>14</sup> Therefore, lighting and shadowing create the 'mirrors' and function both as a symbol for the external forces, as they trap the audience, but also further indicate entrapment as the reflections are stuck in their mirrors.

Therefore, in conclusion, the message "*entrapment as a result of the inability to control or escape the external forces denying complete freedom*" is clearly conveyed and even experienced by the audience through the use of lighting, characterization and language in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and audience interaction and shadows in Grotowski's Poor Theatre.

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<sup>12</sup> Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968. Print.

p. 19

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 20

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 20

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