

ARTAUD AND FABRE

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Abstract

On many occasions, Jan Fabre expressed his indebtedness to the life and work of Antonin Artaud. One of his most clearly Artaud-influenced works is his theatre play 'A Tribe Is What I Am' (2004), which draws inspiration from Artaud's collection of surrealist texts, 'L'Ombilic des Limbes' (1925). This essay attempts to map the deeper layer in the nexus connecting Fabre and Artaud.

Introduction

Drawing the line from Antonin Artaud and ritualism to Jan Fabre is not very difficult. It is almost self-evident. There are several reasons for this. In the first place Artaud himself, and his mythical status in theatrical discourse and reflection. At its most general and basic level, theatrical discourse has its roots in the codex of tragedy that Aristotle lay down in his *Poetics*. It is known that the Greek philosopher did not look favorably on the theatrical spectacles of his own time and wanted to return to the primal force of tragedy as he found it in the older tragedians, such as Aeschylus and Sophocles (both of whom lived half a century before him).

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.¹

For Aristotle, language and action were the constituent elements of tragedy that, properly dosed, could effect a purification of the audience (*catharsis*). The idea of theatre as a linguistic event and as a representation of life and reality had a thorough and lasting influence on the history of theatre during the following centuries. Even Brecht, who presented himself as the Einstein of the stage, did not escape Aristotle.² Although he designated as 'anti-Aristotelian' his transformation of action into fable and of narrative causality into abrupt and a-linear montage, still he adheres to language and action as the constitutive elements of theatre. In

his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann has written some passages on this topic which are worthy of consideration.³

Yet in contrast to the theatre of language and action, there has always existed a different definition of theatricality. It is not different in the sense of radically strange or diametrically opposed to the former. The other definition is not the negative of the dramatic positive. Amongst the origins of tragedy itself, there is a genetic strain to be found that goes back to the Dionysiac cults, centered around rituals of a markedly physical and ecstatic nature that were originally reserved for women.

The unknown nature of these rituals, and the potential for intoxication they contained, have always held up a mirror to the theatre of speech and action. It was as a ghost that survived in and through tragedy. In that ghost, the second definition of theatre was fixated with all characteristics that usually typify the Other in a phantasmatic way: fuller, deeper, more authentic, more satisfying, and so on. Often, it also fulfilled an antithetical function: physical instead of linguistic, irrational rather than rational, associative instead of logical.

In the twentieth century Artaud revealed himself as the spokesman of that ghost in theatre history. His writings on the Theatre of Cruelty, in which he expelled the linguistic action from the core of theatre, and designated the vacant space to images and to screams, had a significant shock effect – not on the contemporaries of Artaud but mainly on theatre as it was to develop in the decades after Artaud.

At first, during the fifties, only a few theatre artists had heard of Artaud. His influence slowly grew. In Flanders, for example, dramatist-directors such as Hugo Claus and Tone Brulin were strongly influenced by Artaud. But from the sixties onwards the impact of Artaud became massive. Artaud was seen as a messiah of modern theatre who would save it from the stranglehold of language. Anyone who produced experimental theatre worshipped Artaud. His name became the call sign as well as the provider of credentials for any alternative or fringe theatre project. Artaud became a fig leaf that had to cover all kinds of ritualistic, physical, visual, associative, irrational, or environmental theatre.

However, his name was quickly transformed into a giant, stretched and worn-out fig leaf for everything presenting itself as an alternative to the theatre of language and action. In that sense, considering the work of Fabre as a continuation of Artaud is not so difficult. The post-Artaud era has itself become an equally

rhizomatic as elusive construct on which the name of Artaud has to bestow the legitimacy of something that is beyond tragedy's law. One could consider Artaud therefore as the legitimization of the ghost in tragedy.

The Topos of Pain

The relationship between Artaud and Fabre is situated on a deeper level. In what follows I will try to sketch the lines connecting the two oeuvres.

A first meeting point is obviously the topos of pain. Pain is central to Fabre's oeuvre, but the meaning and function of pain in his work shift. It was already the case in the period of his first performances, when he produced (and performed) extremely long works that required great endurance. In his early theatre works pain radiates through all pores of the productions. *It Is Theatre As to Be Expected and Foreseen* (1982) introduces endless repetition as the main instrument of pain. For example, it featured a scene in which two actors tried to pull each other up by their hair, or another in which a dancer incessantly falls to the floor, again and again, in an endless loop. In *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984), too, the pain of repetition has the role of introducing physical reality into the context of theatrical fiction. In the *Pietà* scene, four knights perform a last salute to their fallen loved one. They then repeat the action again and again, until their muscles begin to shake and they break a sweat. The carefully composed picture starts to crack. Actual time attacks the theatrical fiction. Not coincidentally, the keywords of the performance read: 'Real pain. Real action.'

In recent work, pain is present in a different way. Fabre intends to sketch the condition of man and the causes of his existential pain through productions such as *As Long As the World Needs a Warrior's Soul* (2000), *Je suis sang* (2001), and *L'Histoire des Larmes* (2005). Fabre views life as an organic cycle of birth and death where the pain of being born and dying has a natural place. But there is also something one could call the cultural-historical pain. It is strongly associated with the alienation of the body that affects us through a double tradition: the Judeo-Christian denial of the body, and the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment.

In *Je suis sang*, images of torture dominate the stage. A human figure is hung upside down and set about with a knife. Bodies are treated as hunks of meat, deported in trays. Castrations are frequent. Swords thirst for blood, no longer under control, and will-less knights find themselves glued to the hilts. There is an abundance of wounds. The brides show their wounds, their bodies mutilated. Martyrs show their

wounds, Sebastian has countless arrows in his body. The performers also wound themselves, all the veins are cut, vein after vein, each one is named and described, just as in an anatomy lesson. But there are also massive stigmata of the past. Old wounds, such as the Catholic scars, that have defined our culture and have alienated us from the blood, from the mystery of fertility, from death. All these wounds are opened up in *Je suis sang*. It is a fountain of blood. Until death unites us again.

In *L'Histoire des Larmes* the dominant images show the world as a desert, and life as a long journey into arid land. They symbolize the litany of despair that marks life. The primary material in this piece is glass, a hard and numb substance. As happens frequently in fairy tales, the production shows tears being transformed into solidified matter. They are the traces of sorrow, to be carried around as in a funeral procession. Fabre portrays life as a pilgrimage of tears. Man is born and he cries. He was baptized and he cries. With his first breath he blows tears. And in those tears he will dress himself. As in a fairy tale, the tears always take another shape, each one of which illustrates a phase of the long journey to death. At the heart of that journey is despair. In a key scene, we see figures that metamorphose into pearls of grief on a bed of sorrows. They form an impressive tableau into which all suffering from (art) history has been condensed.

In his work, Fabre employs pain as a central metaphor to discuss the human condition. Moreover, pain is also used as an instrument to push the boundaries of his performers' bodies and so to demonstrate the freedom that lies beyond pain. Pain thus acquires a positive value, when it is aimed at 'pushing back my own physical and mental boundaries'.

Destruction then becomes a way to reach a state of being where I can do without the safety net of experience and knowledge so that I don't feel any physical pain anymore and go into a kind of mental intoxication that takes away my awareness of time.⁴

In the life and work of Artaud, pain occupies the center of the stage. It is known that Artaud was tormented by intense physical and psychological pain (the consequences, probably, of the meningitis he survived at the age of five) and addicted to narcotics, to which he was introduced as an adolescent precisely to treat his condition. After his trips to Mexico and Ireland and two detoxification programs he was confined to various asylums, first in Dublin, then in Le Havre, Rouen, and finally Paris, where he was moved to a different institution for three times. The first internment report states: 'attacks of mental disorders in the form of delusions with neurotic characteristics; claims that he is served poisoned food, and is administered poison gas; subject to hallucinations; dangerous to himself

and his environment.' In the hospital of Saint-Anne the initial diagnosis details 'delusions of being chased by his mother, by the police, and by Vishnu-adherents. Toxicomania since the age of five (heroin, cocaine, laudanum). Literary pretensions might be permitted to the extent that his madness serves to inspire him.' After those seven years of imprisonment, of which three in isolation, he furiously and incessantly curses psychiatry in his writings.

The Theatre of Cruelty

In Artaud's life, pain was not a life-threatening element, but rather a formative element. Famous is his statement that: 'J'ai été malade toute ma vie et je ne demande qu'à continuer.'⁵ For Artaud, man creates the form of his own life, which he may recreate according to his own and strictly individual understanding. That is the only way to acquire freedom. He must therefore detach himself from creation as well as from society, and create his own revolution. Not in a socio-political sense, as Artaud believed any social-political system is essentially repressive. It is rather a re-creation at the physical level: the liberation of the bodies and finding one's own face. That road to salvation and freedom can only be associated with pain and rage. Artaud wants to foster the commitment to a new body:

Who am I
 where do I come from
 I am Antonin Artaud
 and I say it
 as only I know how to
 and you will see my real body
 bursting into fragments
 collected
 under 10,000 notorious looks
 as a new body
 which you'll never be able to forget
 for it's me
 the Man
 who will be judge
 in the final reckoning
 it's to me
 that all the elements
 of body and things
 will come to be referred
 it's the state of my
 body will shape
 the Last Judgement...⁶

This new body is a body purified from organs and from sexuality. Everything is functional: 'I will be chaste and pure, pristine, untouched, untouchable.'⁷ The body has reached a kind of transcendence, but not in the Christian sense. The body is not renounced, or tamed, or constricted, or eradicated through asceticism. The idea is to find the original body. Artaud calls this the 'tree-body,' or the 'old warrior'. A key aspect of this body image is that it is subject to very different forces. It is torn by conflicting impulses, it is a field of energies on which each of them impose their will. Artaud's concept of a pure body is actually the opposite of a purified body, not the body that gets rid of its physicality and so becomes pure 'spirit', but rather the body in its most pure and material form. As Minne Buwalda, the editor and translator of a Dutch Artaud anthology, puts it:

The only thing he possesses is this one body that covers everything there is in his existence. It is a force field of contradictions, and man must exploit this potential on the level of willpower and self-determination, a level that is already immanently present in the body itself.⁸

This purely physical body can only be achieved through pain and suffering, a process of disintegration and disruption, in order to re-build oneself in a form of total wholeness. This process of tearing oneself apart is a very active process. Man must undertake his own descent into the body's hell; he must yield to his own pain, and actively search for it in order to arrive at liberty and at a pure body.

This process requires a high degree of personal cruelty. In theatre Artaud detected the possibility of making that individual process into a public event. Theatre was the place for Artaud to shape the tension between that pure body and the cosmic menace. I personally favor Artaud's statement that 'We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. And above all else, theatre is made to teach us this.'⁹ It introduces the utopian aspect under which he strove to place theatre, not as a place for entertainment, but for understanding and confrontation. That way he wanted to restore theatre's former religious function. Artaud writes quite confusedly about how that religious context is to be understood. He often refers to various occult disciplines such as alchemy and the Kabbalah; he repeatedly and vehemently renounces Christianity and yet it remains an important point of reference in his writings; and during his visit to the tribe of the Tarahumaras in Mexico he will witness of his encounter with the god Ciguri after consuming peyote (a cactus containing psychoactive substances such as mescaline). The sky that could fall on our heads is thus populated with diverse metaphysical powers, but more important is the personal battle, the quest of the human individual in a world of chaos, mass, and matter.

Affective Athleticism

The theatre is able to show something of that chaos, that cruelty, and that magic. Artaud devised a fairly elaborate theory expressing this insight in his two manifestos on the Theatre of Cruelty (but also in many other texts). I would like to quote from the second manifesto:

By eliminating the stage, shows made up and constructed in this manner will extend over the whole auditorium and will scale the walls from the ground up along slender catwalks, physically enveloping the audience, constantly immersing them in light, imagery, movements and sound. The set will consist of the characters themselves, grown as tall as gigantic puppets, landscapes of moving lights playing on objects, or continually shifting masks.¹⁰

More important than these visions, especially in comparison to Fabre, is Artaud's belief in the importance of a sign language. One of his deeply held convictions was the belief that an alternative language existed, i.e., a language of iconic characters and ancient symbols, originating from the numerological or kabbalistic systems he studied continuously. In his travelogue of the Tarahumaras there are descriptions of the symbols that he discovered in the landscape and rock formations, in groups of trees, in positions of stones and how they marked the position of the sun. There he also refers to insights of Jewish mysticism, Rosicrucianism, and various other doctrines.

He believed to have stumbled upon a universal language, a secret alphabet that speaks with a fullness and a magical force to anyone who is open to it. A language infinitely more powerful than those produced by the glottis. It was the same magical effect he found in the Balinese dancers, whose coded body language he connected to an archetypal symbolism. According to Artaud, this sign language has a direct effect on the body. He therefore attached great importance to the actor. The actor he called an athlete of the affections, someone who is able to express the vibrations of the soul and the vibrations of the passions very precisely and powerfully. What it definitely should not be is the sentimentality that was all too present on the French stage of his day. Artaud instead aims to produce the material form of the affective vibrations:

To arrive at the emotions through their powers instead of regarding them as pure extraction, confers a mastery on an actor equal to a true healer's.¹¹

To Make Myself

Let us return to Fabre and see how these basic concepts of Artaud influenced his work. Many of the analogies with Artaud may be found in the text entitled 'A Tribe Is What I Am,' written at the invitation of Muziektheater Transparant for the production *Men in Tribulation* of 2004 (dedicated to Artaud, and directed by Eric Sleichim). Fabre was mainly inspired by the texts of Artaud's collection *L'Ombilic des Limbes (Umbilical Limbo)*. In these texts, a series of images of the body is frequently re-worked: the image of a fatally tired man plagued by delirious fears; the image of a body in pain ('Description of a Physical State'); the argument for the free use of drugs ('Letter to the Legislator of the Drug Act'); the peeling of the soul as a central motif.

More important, however, than Fabre's literal echoes of Artaud, is the movement of his text: a plea for the benefits of pain and disease, a plea for the re-creation of man, a quest for freedom, for the liberation of God in the divine, and finally the desire 'to explore other sources / and to enter in contact with / a new reality / To allow / meetings of a more subtle and rare nature.'¹² It is the same desire for wholeness, for physical and mental re-creation which permeated the work of Artaud: 'I now only have one task, to make myself.'¹³ Fabre's 'A Tribe Is What I Am' ends with the famous statement of Artaud in his letter to André Breton, 'La vraie révolution sera mentale ou ne sera pas.'¹⁴ This is also clearly connected to the citation from Fabre (cf. supra) on the mental intoxication that is generated beyond the pain.

The images that Fabre evokes in his many performances are always focused on the search for violence, lust, and cruelty in the Artaudian sense. He mainly strives to loosen man from his already formed and safe structure, and make him confront the chaos, the unformed, the material, in order to allow him to transform himself. Fabre evokes the ideal of the angel, an in-between creature in which all differences are eliminated (*Angel of Death*, 1996). There is also the wish to disappear into another body at the point where the ego dissolves into a state of being-no-longer, into the anonymity of androgyny (*Quando l'uomo principale è una donna*, 2004). There is the search for the future body as a beam of intensities, a body without organs that transgresses the borders of its own territory and doesn't let itself be restrained by its own skeleton or accidental flesh, as in the piece *Etant donnés* (2004), in which the main character at the end appears to have exploded, just as in Artaud's poem (see above). Always the power of metamorphosis takes the center of the stage, as in *As Long As the World Needs a Warrior's Soul*, where the human figures are subject to continuous change: between man and animal, human and

object, gender or form. By re-creating themselves, they constantly transgress their physical boundaries.

Fabre evokes insights about acting and sign language that lie close to Artaud: his actors are the warriors of beauty who need to search for an affective athleticism:

What I'm really trying to achieve with my actors and dancers, is to teach them how to use their freedom to discover their own personal cruelty. It's all about opening up a new spectrum of emotional boundaries and daring to extend them. Having the nerve to enter into the darkest rooms of your own mind and using them.¹⁵

Fabre often uses the image of alchemy: an ignited body in a state of ecstasy that demonstrates what Artaud has called a 'pure body.' The chaos that Fabre evokes is, however, staged very strictly. He examines the explosiveness of body and image by translating it into a coded sign language. Fabre employs a symbolic language of his own (including items such as dinner plates, medieval armor, swords) but mainly works with the kinetics of the body. Fabre is probably one of the directors in Flanders who goes furthest in disciplining the body. Above all, Fabre has an eye for the qualities and the individuality of each body. It is just that which he will dig up: minor details such as the shape of a spine, the pigment of the skin, the length of one limb. Those details he will knead, deform, and massage until the correct kinetics is formed. Such careful precision is related to how Artaud imagined the language of the body.

Learning through Suffering

The power of the voice, its rhythm, its modulations, its cries have already been intensely explored by Fabre. And certainly the possibility of the scream to penetrate the body immediately. Fabre often works with the irritation that the voice can bring about, for example, during the opening scene of *L'Histoire des Larmes*. But the most vocal experiments related to Artaud were tested by Fabre in a staging of *Prometheus Landschaft* (1988). The language was completely emaciated, the choirs were reduced to stuttering sounds 'as if each word was a wound.' Speaking thus became a physical action; speech was a form of vomiting. Like Artaud, Fabre was here searching for the efficacy of language beyond comprehension.

Artaud and Fabre consider themselves as a kind of shaman, and the theatre as an instrument of healing. Fabre thereby returns to the ancient theory of catharsis,

which he further elaborates through his experiences with performance art. He wants his actors and the audience to learn through suffering. And so we have at last returned to Aristotle.

(Translated by T. Crombez)

Notes

- 1 ARISTOTLE, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, transl. S.H. Butcher (orig. 1894, St. Martin's Press), introd. J. Gassner. Dover, New York, 1951, p. 29/ch. VI, 1450b19.
- 2 LEHMANN, Hans-Thies, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Verlag der Autoren, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, p. 47.
- 3 LEHMANN, idem, p. 47-48.
- 4 Jan Fabre quoted in VAN DEN DRIES, Luk, *Corpus Jan Fabre: Observations of a creative process*, Imschoot, Gent, 2006, p. 324.
- 5 ARTAUD, Antonin, 'Les Malades et les médecins', in: *Cahiers du retour à Paris (26 mai-juillet 1946)*, *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976-, vol. XXII, p. 67.
- 6 ARTAUD, Antonin, *A Second Artaud Anthology*, transl. Jack Hirschman, in: *Invisible City*, nr. 6, San Francisco, 1972.
- 7 ARTAUD, Antonin, 'Je hais et abjecte en lâche' (1947), in: 84, nr. 8-9, 1949, p. 283.
- 8 ARTAUD, Antonin, *Dans om de anatomie*, transl. Minne Buwalda, Perdu, Amsterdam, 1989, p. 67.
- 9 ARTAUD, Antonin, *Collected Works*, transl. Victor Corti, Calder & Boyars, London, 1968-1974, vol. IV, p. 60. Henceforth cited as CW.
- 10 CW, vol. IV, p. 97.
- 11 ARTAUD, 'An Affective Athleticism', in: CW, vol. IV, p. 102.
- 12 FABRE, Jan, *Ik ben een fout: Theaterscripts en theaterteksten (1975-2004)*, Meulenhoff/Manteau, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 2004, p. 663. (Translation: LVdD)
- 13 ARTAUD, *Nerve-Scales*, in: CW, vol. I, p. 74.
- 14 Artaud quoted in FABRE, *ibid.*
- 15 VAN DEN DRIES, *idem*, p. 327.



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *As Long as the World Needs a Warrior's Soul* (2000).
Performers (in the middle): Cedric Charron & Saskia Hoffmann.
Photo by Marc Ginot**



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *As Long as the World Needs a Warrior's Soul* (2000).
Performer: Erna Omarsdottir. Photo by Ilke Christiaens**



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *As Long as the World Needs a Warrior's Soul* (2000).
Performer: Cedric Charron. Photo by Malou Swinnen**



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *Je suis sang (conte de fées médiéval)* (2001).
Performers: Geert Vaes (front), Heike Langsdorf, Cedric Charron,
Ivana Jozic. Photo by Wonge Bergmann**