

## Alfred Jarry

OF THE FUTILITY OF THE  
'THEATRICAL' IN THEATER

I THINK THE QUESTION of whether the theater should adapt itself to the public, or the public to the theater, has been settled once and for all. The public only understood, or looked as if they understood, the tragedies and comedies of ancient Greece because they were based on universally known fables which, anyway, were explained over and over again in every play and, as often as not, hinted at by a character in the prologue. Just as nowadays they go to hear the plays of Molière and Racine at the Comédie Française because they are always being played, even though they certainly don't really understand them. The theater has not yet won the freedom to eject forcibly any member of the audience who doesn't understand, or to comb out the potential hecklers and hooligans from the auditorium during each interval. But we can content ourselves with the established truth that if people do fight in the theater it will be a work of popularization they are fighting over, one that is not in the least original and is therefore more readily accessible than the original. An original work will, at least on the first night, be greeted by a public that remains bemused and, consequently, dumb.

But first nights are attended by those capable of understanding!

If we want to lower ourselves to the level of the public there are two things we can do for them – and which *are* done for them. The first is to give them characters who think as they do (a Siamese or Chinese ambassador seeing *The Miser* would bet anything that the miser would be outwitted and his money box stolen), and whom they understand perfectly. When this is the case they receive two impressions; firstly they think that they must themselves be very witty, as they laugh at what they take to be witty writing – and this never fails to happen to Monsieur Donnay's audiences. Secondly they get the impression that they are participating in the creation of the play, which relieves them of the effort of anticipating what is going to happen. The other thing we can do for them is give

them a commonplace sort of plot – write about things that happen all the time to the common man, because the fact is that Shakespeare, Michelangelo, or Leonardo da Vinci are somewhat bulky; their diameter is a bit difficult to traverse because genius, intelligence, and even talent are larger than life and so inaccessible to most people.

If, in the whole universe, there are five hundred people who, compared with infinite mediocrity, have a touch of Shakespeare and Leonardo in them, is it not only fair to grant these five hundred healthy minds the same thing that is lavished on Monsieur Donnay's audiences – the relief of not seeing on the stage what they don't understand; the *active* pleasure of participating in the creation of the play and of anticipation?

What follows is a list of a few things which are particularly horrifying and incomprehensible to the five hundred, and which clutter up the stage to no purpose; first and foremost, the *decor* and the *actors*.

Decor is a hybrid, neither natural nor artificial. If it were exactly like nature it would be a superfluous duplication. . . . (We shall consider the use of nature as decor later.) It is not artificial, in the sense that it is not, for the five hundred, the embodiment of the outside world as the playwright has seen and re-created it.

And in any case it would be dangerous for the poet to impose on a public of artists the decor that he himself would conceive. In any written work there is a hidden meaning, and anyone who knows how to read sees that aspect of it that makes sense for him. He recognizes the eternal and invisible river and calls it *Anna Perenna*.<sup>1</sup> But there is hardly anyone for whom a painted backdrop has two meanings, as it is far more arduous to extract the quality from a quality than the quality from a quantity. Every spectator has a right to see a play in a decor which does not clash with his own view of it. For the general public, on the other hand, any 'artistic' decor will do, as the masses do not understand anything by themselves, but wait to be told how to see things.

There are two sorts of decor: indoor and outdoor. Both are supposed to represent either rooms or the countryside. We shall not revert to the question, which has been settled once and for all, of the stupidity of *trompe l'œil*. Let us state that the said *trompe l'œil* is aimed at people who only see things roughly, that is to say, who do not see at all: it scandalizes those who see nature in an intelligent and selective way, as it presents them with a caricature of it by someone who lacks all understanding. Zeuxis is supposed to have deceived some birds with his stone grapes, and Titian's virtuosity hoodwinked an innkeeper.

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Decor by someone who cannot paint is nearer to abstract decor, as it gives only essentials. In the same way simplified decor picks out only relevant aspects.

We tried *heraldic* decors, where a single shade is used to represent a whole scene or act, with the characters poised harmonically *passant* against the heraldic field. This is a bit puerile, as the said color can only establish itself against a colorless background (but it is also more accurate, since we have to take into account the prevailing red-green color blindness, as well as other idiosyncrasies of perception). A colorless background can be achieved simply, and in a way which is symbolically accurate, by an unpainted backdrop or the reverse side of a set. Each spectator can then conjure up for himself the background he requires, or, better still, if the author knew what he was about, the spectator can imagine, by a process of exosmosis, that what he sees on the stage is the real decor. The placard brought in to mark each change in scene saves the onlooker from being regularly reminded of base 'reality' through a constant substitution of conventional sets which he really only sees properly at the moment the scene is being shifted.

In the conditions we are advocating, each piece of scenery needed for a special purpose — a window to be opened, for instance, or a door to be broken down — becomes a prop and can be brought in like a table or a torch.

The actor adapts his face to that of the character. He should adapt his whole body in the same way. The play of his features, his expressions, etc., are caused by various contractions and extensions of the muscles of his face. No one has realized that the muscles remain the same under the make-believe, made-up face, and that Mounet and Hamlet do not have the same *zygomatics*, even though in anatomical terms we think that they are the same man. Or else people say that the difference is negligible. The actor should use a mask to envelop his head, thus replacing it by the effigy of the CHARACTER. His mask should not follow the masks in the Greek theater to indicate simply tears or laughter, but should indicate the nature of the character: the Miser, the Waverer, the Covetous Man accumulating crimes. . . .

And if the eternal nature of the character is embodied in the mask, we can learn from the kaleidoscope, and particularly the gyroscope, a simple means of *illuminating*, one by one or several at a time, the critical moments.

With the old-style actor, masked only in a thinly applied make-up, each facial expression is raised to a power by color and particularly by relief, and then to cubes and higher powers by LIGHTING.

What we are about to describe was impossible in the Greek theater because the light was vertical, or at least never sufficiently horizontal, and therefore produced a shadow under every protuberance in the mask; it was a blurred shadow, though, because the light was diffused.

Contrary to the deductions of rudimentary and imperfect logic, there is no clear shadow in those sunny countries; and in Egypt, below the tropic of Cancer, there is hardly a trace of shadow left on the face. The light was reflected vertically

as if by the face of the moon, and diffused by both the sand on the ground and the sand suspended in the air.

The *footlights* illumine the actor along the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle, the actor's body forming one of the sides of the right angle. And as the footlights are a series of luminous points, that is to say a line which, in relation to the narrowness of the front view of the actor, extends indefinitely to right and left of its intersection with the actor's plane, these footlights should be considered as a single point of light situated at an indefinite distance, as if it were *behind* the audience.

It is true that the footlights are less than an infinite distance away, so that one cannot really regard all the rays reflected by the actor (or facial expressions) as traveling along parallel lines. But in practice each spectator sees the character's mask *equally*, with the differences which are certainly negligible compared to the idiosyncrasies and different perceptive attitudes of the individual spectator. These differences cannot be attenuated, though they cancel each other out in the audience *qua* herd, which is what an audience is.

By slow nodding and lateral movements of his head the actor can displace the shadows over the whole surface of his mask. And experience has shown that the six main positions (and the same number in profile, though these are less clear) suffice for every expression. We shall not cite any examples, as they vary according to the nature of the mask, and because everyone who knows how to watch a puppet show will have been able to observe this for himself.

They are simple expressions, and therefore universal. Present-day mime makes the great mistake of using conventional mime language, which is tiring and incomprehensible. An example of this convention is the hand describing a vertical ellipse around the face, and a kiss being implanted on this hand to suggest a beautiful woman — and love. An example of universal gesture is the marionette displaying its bewilderment by starting back violently and hitting its head against a flat.

Behind all these accidentals there remains the essential expression, and the finest thing in many scenes is the impassivity of the mask, which remains the same whether the words it emits are grave or gay. This can only be compared with the solid structure of the skeleton, deep down under its surrounding animal flesh; its tragicomic qualities have always been acknowledged.

It goes without saying that the actor must have a special *voice*, the voice that is appropriate to the part, as if the cavity forming the mouth of the mask were incapable of uttering anything other than what the mask would say, if the muscles of its lips could move. And it is better for them not to move, and that the whole play should be spoken in a monotone.

And we have also said that the actor must take on the body appropriate to the part.

Transvestism has been forbidden by the Church and by art. Witness Beaumarchais, who in one of his prefaces wrote: 'The young man does not exist who is sufficiently developed to . . . ' And since women are beardless and their

voices shrill all their lives, a boy of fourteen is traditionally played on the Paris stage by a twenty-year-old woman who, being six years older, has much more experience. This is small compensation for her ridiculous profile and unesthetic walk, or for the way the outline of all her muscles is vitiated by adipose tissue, which is odious because it has a function – it produces *milk*.

Given the difference in their brains, a boy of fifteen, if you pick an intelligent one, will play his part adequately (most women are vulgar and nearly all boys are stupid, with some outstanding exceptions). The young actor Baron, in Molière's company, is an example, and there is also the whole period in the English theater (and the whole history of the Greek theater) when no one would have dreamed of trusting a part to a woman.

A few words on natural decors, which exist without duplication if one tries to stage a play in the open air, on the slope of a hill, near a river, which is excellent for carrying the voice, especially when there is no awning, even though the sound may be weakened. Hills are all that is necessary, with a few trees for shade. At the moment *Le Diable Marchand de Goutte* is being played out of doors, as it was a year ago, and the production was discussed some time ago in the *Mercure* by Alfred Vallette. Three or four years ago Monsieur Lugné-Poe and some friends staged *La Gardienne* at Presles, on the edge of the Isle-Adam forest. In these days of universal cycling it would not be absurd to make use of summer Sundays in the countryside to stage a few very short performances (say from two to five o'clock in the afternoon) of literature which is not too abstract – *King Lear* would be a good example; we do not understand the idea of a people's theater. The performances should be in places not too far distant, and arrangements should be made for people who come by train, without previous planning. The places in the sun should be free (Monsieur Barrucand was writing quite recently about the free theater), and as for the props, the bare necessities could be transported in one or several automobiles.

#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> Dido's sister, who came to Rome and drowned in a river, of which she became the nymph. *Amne perenne latens, Anna Perenna vocor.*  
(Ovid, *Fasti*, Book III, l. 654.) [Translator's note.]



#### Source

- Jarry, A. (1896, 1985) 'Of the Futility of the "Theatrical" in the Theater', *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, trans. B. Wright (eds) R. Shattuck and S. Watson Taylor, London: Methuen: 69–75.

#### Alfred Jarry (1873–1907)

The first performance of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* on 10 December 1896 in many ways marks the beginning of the modernist play. A wild parody of Shakespeare, it was originally written for marionettes, and its performance by actors with masks and sets by Pierre Bonnard, Toulouse-Lautrec and others, directed by Lugné-Poe at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, provoked scenes of violence and pandemonium in the audience. Jarry's work, in plays, essays, and fiction, was perceived as a direct attack on the fundamental concepts of Western civilisation. He promoted a biting satiric denigration of bourgeois values via parodies of existing nineteenth-century theatrical styles. *Ubu*, and the writings surrounding it – *Ubu Cocu*, *Ubu's Almanac* (1901), *Days and Nights* (1897), and *César Antéchrist* – are the key works in which Jarry questions all forms of rational thought and structure. *Père Ubu* was seen as a monstrous symbol of modern bourgeois society, which thus stands condemned by its own actions. Jarry eventually completely identified with *Ubu*, taking on the persona of *Ubu* himself, and invented the science of 'pataphysics',<sup>1</sup> which he defined as 'the science of imaginary solutions' and 'the science of the laws governing exceptions'.

Jarry's essay proposes to do away with realistic decor, to create a physical acting style that can utilise masks, and vocal skills that can produce emblematic performances that eschew all naturalistic devices. In other words the curse of theatre is its bogus theatricality, and the public needs more immediacy and less artifice, as society needs, in similar manner, to shed its bourgeois pretensions.

#### Compare this article with writings by the following authors in this reader

- Artaud – who wished for a theatre, which would stir audiences from their apathy  
Beck – a later revolutionary view of change through theatre  
Copeau – a French parallel  
Richter – for the origins of Dada, which owed much to Jarry's absurdist ideas  
Marinetti – for another view of the necessity of change

#### Further reading

- Esslin, M. (1961) *The Theatre of the Absurd*, London: Anchor Books.  
Shattuck, R. (1958) *The Banquet Years*, London: Harcourt Brace.

#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> This introduction to Jarry has been approved by the Collège de 'Pataphysique.

creates a performance where he has become the author of the total artefact, often illuminating where others merely interpret.

In this interview with Richard Eyre, then director of the Royal National Theatre, Lepage talks about his disillusion with modern theatre writing, leading to the devising of his own work. He also stresses the element of 'play' in theatre, which creates the eclecticism of his performances.

Compare this interview with writings by the following authors in this reader

Appia – an earlier visual approach to theatre

Bausch – a comparable approach to staging dance theatre

Beck – an oppositional view of the function of performance

Beckett – an earlier total theatre writer

LeCompte – a similarly eclectic approach to material

Wilson and Anderson – similar concerns with visual theatre

#### Further reading

Charest, R. (1997) *Robert Lepage, Connecting Flights: In Conversation with Remy*. Charest, London: Methuen.

Lavender, A. (2001) *Hamlet in Pieces – Shakespeare Reworked: Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson*, London: Nick Hern Books.

## F.T. Marinetti

### THE FOUNDING AND MANIFESTO OF FUTURISM

WE HAD STAYED UP ALL NIGHT, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the prisoned radiance of electric hearts. For hours we had trampled our atavistic ennui into rich oriental rugs, arguing up to the last confines of logic and blackening many reams of paper with our frenzied scribbling.

An immense pride was buoying us up, because we felt ourselves alone at that hour, alone, awake, and on our feet, like proud beacons or forward sentries against an army of hostile stars glaring down at us from their celestial encampments. Alone with stokers feeding the hellish fires of great ships, alone with the black spectres who grope in the red-hot bellies of locomotives launched down their crazy courses, alone with drunkards reeling like wounded birds along the city walls.

Suddenly we jumped, hearing the mighty noise of the huge double-decker trams that rumbled by outside, ablaze with coloured lights, like villages on holiday suddenly struck and uprooted by the flooding Po and dragged over falls and through gorges to the sea.

Then the silence deepened. But, as we listened to the old canal muttering its feeble prayers and the creaking bones of sickly palaces above their damp green beards, under the windows we suddenly heard the famished roar of automobiles.

'Let's go!' I said. 'Friends, away! Let's go! Mythology and the Mystic Ideal are defeated at last. We're about to see the Centaur's birth and, soon after, the first flight of Angels! . . . We must shake the gates of life, test the bolts and hinges. Let's go! Look there, on