

Artaud & the Concept of Drama in Theology¹

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Tucked away in a quiet corner of the five volumes of Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* is one reference to the French poet, dramatist and dramatic theorist Antonin Artaud.² Balthasar's remarks come in a small section on the role of the director in dramatic productions. He notes that Artaud's theatre gives a key role to the director, and that in Artaudian theatre the actor is denied 'any personal initiative' being encouraged to develop an 'athletic approach to the emotions.'³ After this Balthasar makes no more references to Artaud in the whole of the *Theo-Drama*. It is my contention that Balthasar has neglected a key dramatic theorist who can be of immense use to the theologian who wants to employ dramatic theory in his or her theology.

The aim of this paper, then, is twofold: first, to introduce the work of Antonin Artaud, and especially his highly influential concept of the 'Theatre of Cruelty'⁴, the key essays of which Artaud wrote in a short collection entitled *Le Theatre et son Double*, or, translated as *The Theatre and its Double*. The second follows from Balthasar's idea that the theatrical opens up a theological dimension. He writes that his task, in the *Theo-Drama*, is to draw 'a range of resources, from the drama of existence which can then be of service to a Christian theory of theo-drama in which the "natural" drama of existence [...] is consummated in the "supernatural" drama between the God of Jesus Christ and mankind.'⁵ I want to suggest that the work of

¹ Earlier versions of this article were given as papers at the Canterbury Ecclesiology Seminar (November 2000) and at the Research Institute for Systematic Theology, King's College London (December 2000). I am very grateful to Professor Gareth Jones and the late Professor Colin Gunton for their invitations. I am also very grateful to Professor Robert Hannaford for his continued encouragement of my work in this area.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Theological Dramatic Theory: Volume 1, Prolegomena*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 300, n.9. (Further references to the volumes of the *Theo-Drama* will be in the text in brackets as *TD I, II, III, IV and V*).

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Artaud's work, and perhaps especially this concept, has been influential in terms of theatre in the work of directors such as Peter Brook and Jerry Grotowski. As an intellectual figure, and it is also important to see that Artaud can be read as a literary and aesthetic theorist as well as a philosopher, he has had a profound effect on thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, Kristeva and Susan Sontag.

⁵ *TD I*, p. 130.

Artaud impinges on such a theological project in unique and interesting way.⁶

Who Was Artaud?

Artaud was born in Marseilles on 4th September 1896 and died at a clinic in Ivry on 4th March 1948. He is a complex and fascinating figure whose life was punctuated by failure. Almost all of his projects (literary, theatrical, artistic and filmic) were failures in his lifetime, and this was combined with periods of extreme mental illness. Artaud spent considerable amounts of time in mental hospitals having a variety of treatments including a primitive form of E.C.T. But, though he was a failure in his lifetime, his legacy in terms of his impact on the arts, his contribution as a thinker, and especially his work on theatre have been immense.

What is particularly interesting is that whenever you read a book or article about modern theatre, they inevitably begin by highlighting, as I have done, the immense impact Artaud's work has had. One reads how certain theatrical movements (such as the Theatre of the Absurd) could not have happened without his work and, more recently, through the work of thinkers such as Derrida and Sontag Artaud's importance as a thinker has been highlighted. And yet, (and here Balthasar is but one example) for someone whose influence on modern drama is seen to be foundational, he appears to be a somewhat neglected thinker in the material where one would expect to find him discussed. First, I think this neglect is partly due to the difficulty of reading Artaud. Much of his work is in the form of letters, and strange texts that are punctuated with his mental and physical suffering, which does not make them easy to engage with. Second, I suggest that the neglect is part of a more general and wider prejudice about dealing with people who are mentally ill. In life they can be difficult to engage with and understand, and sometime appear to make no sense; in death, such as with Artaud, these same difficulties are there with his texts. With these important, but general observations made, I want to move onto some detail about Artaud's work.

⁶ I have explored the contribution of Artaud to theology in a general way in 'Drama/Film & Postmodernity' in G. Jones (ed), *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), and in a more specific way (relating to biblical hermeneutics and Barth) in 'We Are Tied to These Texts: Scripture in the work of Karl Barth' in J. Court (ed), *Biblical Interpretation: the Meaning of Scripture – Past & Present* (London & New York: Continuum/T & T Clark imprint, 2003).

The 'Theatre of Cruelty': Origin and Development

For the purposes of this paper I wish to focus on Artaud's concept of the 'theatre of cruelty', but in doing so it is important to see that one can see the origins of this idea in his early work (on both theatre and in his poetry) as well as in his later theoretical and artistic work. Put simply, both before and after his involvement with the surrealist movement, Artaud was concerned to produce art that affected those who engaged with it - as readers, viewers or spectators. Artaud lived by the surrealist motto that art does not represent life, it is life, and much of Artaud's work can be seen as an attempt to move beyond representation whether that is in the words of a poem or the production of a play, to fulfil this surrealist motif.

In his early correspondence between 1923–24 with Jacques Rivière, the editor of the influential journal, *Nouvelle Revue Française*, in which Artaud was trying to get his poetry published we can see some of his early concerns. Although Rivière was interested in Artaud's work he didn't think it merited publication because it lacked poetic form and style. Artaud found such criticism very hard to deal with as for him these poems were not about neat literary forms that represent feelings; rather they were 'manifestations of [his] mental existence'⁷. They did not point to a lack of literary control or development but rather were attempts to give expression to, in Artaud's words, 'a focal collapse of my soul, and a kind of essential and fugitive erosion in thought' (*CW I*, p. 31). This was not the automatic writing of the surrealists, which necessarily lacked formal poetic form, but it was an attempt to write beyond mere representation. For Artaud, to try and put his poetry into the formal requirements being imposed on him as a condition of publication would be to turn his work into a lie. Artaud begins a letter to Rivière, on the 25th May 1924, thus:

Why lie, why try to put something which is life's very cry on a literary level? Why fictionalize something made from the soul's ineradicable essence, which is like the complaint of reality? (*CW I*, p. 39).⁸

⁷ Antonin Artaud, *Collected Works: Volume One*, trans. V. Corti (London: John Calder, 1968), p. 28. From here on all references to the *Collected Works of Artaud* (all translated by Corti and published by John Calder) will be referred to in the text by *CW1*, *CW2* and so forth.

⁸ These words of Artaud were actually made as a response to Rivière's request to publish the letters Artaud had been sending him, but I think they can also be seen to encapsulate something of Artaud's thought about writing and poetry in general. It is also the case that these early letters of Artaud are seen by many as some of the most important literary works of the early surrealism. In the end Artaud did agree to Rivière's request and the letters were published in the journal.

What is important here, in terms of Artaud's development of the theatre of cruelty, is that we begin to see the elaboration of the key ideas that art is life, and (if one reads the poetry) there is the idea of rebellion; not in an overtly political sense (he despised the way the surrealist movement, in the shape of Breton and his followers, aligned themselves with the Communist Party) but in a much wider sense of a rebellion to overcome or engage with suffering.⁹ There is perhaps also a sense in which Artaud sees the surrealists as a rather decadent group who were in art for the sake of entertaining themselves. Artaud writes that: 'The thing that sets me apart from the Surrealists is that they are as fond of life as I despise it. Revelling in every opportunity through every pore is the centre point of their obsessions' (*CW I*, p. 194). It is precisely the idea that art is decadent and entertaining that is part of the critique he has about the theatre and is one of the roots of the theatre of cruelty, and it is to this key element of Artaud's work that I now want to turn.

Artaud, then, was disillusioned with the theatre of his time. According to him society had 'lost the idea of theatre' all he saw happening in the contemporary drama of his time was what he described as a 'probing' of 'the intimacy of a few puppets, because all theatre does is represent the psychological and social conflicts of the characters it portrays, thereby transforming the audience into nothing more than Peeping Toms.'¹⁰ For Artaud, theatre consists of a passive audience who watch entertaining actions on a stage, and are thus only entertained. Artaud 'despised the view that the theatre was a mere place of entertainment.'¹¹ As Susan Sontag points out, in her brilliant essay on Artaud, one of the things Artaud wanted to do in his writing

⁹ Although Artaud was involved with Breton and the surrealist movement from 1923 until he was expelled in 1926, after the expulsion there was huge animosity between Artaud and the movement. Breton and his close companions published a pamphlet called *In the Open* which directly attacked and insulted Artaud describing him as the 'enemy of art'. Artaud responded with an equally intense attack on the surrealist movement, though Artaud did not attack any member personally. Artaud's response was called, *In the Dark or the Surrealist Bluff* (*CW I*, pp. 191–198) and is a powerful piece of writing which at times has almost Shakespearian qualities if seen as a dramatic monologue.

¹⁰ A. Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans V. Corti (London: Calder, 1999 edition), p. 64. The essays that comprise this key text of Artaud's can also be found in, Antonin Artaud, *Collected Works: Volume Four*, trans V. Corti (London: John Calder, 1974), pp. 1–110. This is a translation of, 'Le Theatre et son Double', in, Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres Completes: Tome IV* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1964), pp. 11–171. For the essay in this key text I have used Corti's single volume translation, which is considered to be very reliable, though I have occasionally translated phrases myself (or adapted Corti's) where the English translation appears to lack the power and vitality of Artaud's and seems to understate what is being said. This does not happen very often, and on the whole the translations are acknowledged as excellent. References to the single volume will be in the text as 'TAD'.

¹¹ M. Esslin, *Antonin Artaud: The Man & His Work* (London: John Calder, 1970), p. 76.

(perhaps especially his poetry) was to 'violate the self-protective distance between the reader and the text'¹² and it is exactly this type of violation he wanted to exact on the theatrical audience. Artaud wants to violate that very self-protective distance between the stage and the audience; indeed, he wanted to develop a new approach to theatre in which there would be 'no barriers between actors and audience.'¹³ In short, and in Artaud's own words, he wanted to develop a theatre, and theatrical production which does not entertain but which 'wake(s) us up heart and nerves.'¹⁴ (See footnote Re. translation). The theatre that Artaud developed he called the 'theatre of cruelty', and it was an approach that produced, a 'truly dangerous theatre which would threaten the security both of the word and the world.'¹⁵ to use a phrase of Stephen Barber's (probably the most informed, English speaking a writer on Artaud).

The 'Theatre of Cruelty'

Though one can see, in Artaud's early work, some of the elements that would become useful in his later, theatrical work, there are a variety of key elements which were highly influential for Artaud in his development of the theatre of cruelty. In terms of this paper I want to mention two in particular both of which happened in 1931.

First, in August, Artaud saw a group of Balinese dancers, and it was an experience that had profound effects on him. In essence, what

¹² S. Sontag, 'Approaching Artaud' in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 23-4 [whole essay on pp. 13-70]. This essay can also be found as the introduction to Sontag's edited collection of Artaud's writings, *Antonin Artaud: selected writings*, trans. H. Weaver (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988) pp. xvii-lix).

As Sontag point out, this is not a new ambition in modernism, but what she further argues is that it may be that Artaud is the author who comes closes to achieving it 'by the violent continuity of his discourse, by the extremity of his emotion, by the purity of his moral purpose, by the excruciating carnality of the account he gives of his mental life, by the genuineness and grandeur of the ordeal he endured in order to use language at all' (p.24). What is potentially interesting here is to see, albeit metaphorically, Artaud's writing in a similar way to some of the Patristic Fathers. In, say, the Cappadocian Fathers and Athanasius, there is definitely the sense of the purity of moral purpose needed to do theology at all as well as the sense in which these theologians are trying to push language to its limits to do more than merely represent. Like Artaud's, the texts of the Fathers are often highly polemical works which are not designed to represent the truths of the Christian faith, but to *present* them to cause a response.

¹³ Esslin, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹⁴ A. Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, p.64/ *Oeuvres Completes: Tome IV*, p. 101. Indeed, the French for 'to wake us up', 'qui nous reveille' could also be translated to revive us. In this sense, we have the idea that the type of theatre that merely entertains almost causes a 'death' in us from which we need to be revived. This is a stronger sense of just being woken up from sleep. For Artaud, the problem of his contemporary theatre runs far deeper than it merely sends us to sleep.

¹⁵ S. Barber, *Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 45.

Artaud saw in these dancers was the possibility of a type of theatre that consisted of physical signs and violent, or athletic gestures and was not, like most theatre, utterly dependent on script. By this Artaud meant that it was ‘not a revelation of a verbal but a physical idea of theatre where drama is encompassed within the limits of everything that can happen on stage, independently of a written script’ (*TAD*, p. 50/82)

Second, Artaud had come across a fifteenth-century painting in the Louvre called *The Daughters of Lot* by the artist Van Leyden. Artaud saw connections between the experience of seeing this painting and the one he had had seeing the Balinese dancers. Artaud ‘began to consider the painting as the result of a finely elaborated creative direction, like that governing a theatrical spectacle.’¹⁶ In short, the ‘mental drama’ that Artaud sees as being present in this painting has, for him, a ‘concrete effect’ on us (*TAD*, p. 26/44).¹⁷ The effect of the painting, like that of the dancers, causes Artaud to further conceive of a theatre where words will not dominate because ‘this supremely anarchic, material painting seeming to establish their futility’ (*TAD*, p. 26/44).¹⁸

Before we move on, it is important to make a brief mention of what Artaud meant by his use of the term ‘cruelty’. What he did not mean was that the stage should be an arena where unnecessarily cruel and bloody scenes are enacted (in this sense Artaud was not advocating a stage version of the modern ‘video nasty’) rather, Artaud meant by ‘cruelty’ that the theatre should become a spectacle of ‘**sensory** violence, rather than sensory enchantment.’¹⁹ Part of the nature of this cruelty is a conscious attempt that theatre should ‘overwhelm the spectator in such a way that he cannot be left intact.’²⁰ It is an approach to theatrical experience which makes the theatre, to use Artaud’s own, powerful phrase, ‘a believable reality inflicting [a] kind of [. . .] laceration’ (*TAD*, p. 65) thereby having the effect of shocking and transforming us. In order to do this, and this is where his key influences of the dancers and the painting come in, Artaud realised that he must develop a new language of the theatre.

For Artaud, this new language of the theatre means a breaking away from theatre’s subjugation to the text, or what Derrida terms in his

¹⁶ Barber, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹⁷ References to *The Theatre and its Double* will appear in the text in this way from now on. The first page number refers to the English translation (already noted) the second to the original French volume of the Complete Works (again, already noted).

¹⁸ The word “l’innutilité—” could also be translated as useless or unnecessary, thus, the sentence could also read: ‘this supremely anarchic, material painting seeming to establish their [i.e. words] uselessness/or that words are, at times, unnecessary.’

¹⁹ Sontag, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

²⁰ J. Gassner & E. Quinn, *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of World Drama* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970), p. 841.

writing on Artaud, 'the dictatorship of the text.'²¹ What is important here, and this is often where thinner commentaries on Artaud seem get it badly wrong, is to note that Artaud had no wish to ignore, destroy, or do without spoken language in the theatre. Rather, he wanted to put it in what he sees as its rightful place, and this will mean a lessening the position of absolute importance it did have.²² One of the major questions Artaud develops from the Balinese dancers, and from oriental theatre in general, is: 'How is it Western theatre cannot conceive of theatre under any other aspect than dialogue form?' (*TAD*, p. 27/45). What Artaud maintains is that 'the stage is a tangible, physical place that needs to be filled and it ought to be allowed to speak its own concrete language' (*ibid*).

Artaud sees that the problem of Western, dialogical, speech centred theatre is that it primarily addresses the mind, whereas he wants theatre to 'first of all to appeal to the senses' (*TAD*, p. 27/46). Again, it is important to note that all Artaud is asking for is a reversal of priorities, and not the abolition of one element in order that another can take over. Artaud does not want a theatre of **only** gesture and noise intended for the senses, but neither does he want a theatre of just words intended only for the mind. In suggesting such developments, Artaud wanted what he called a 'spatial poetry' to take place on the stage, rather than a merely spoken poetry of traditional drama. His ideas on what this spatial poetry consists of are rather detailed and need more development than I can give them here, but in essence it means using 'those expressive means usable on stage such as music, dance, plastic art, mimicry, mime, gesture, voice inflexion, architecture, lighting and decor' (*TAD*, p. 28/47). Of course, all of these elements can be, and are, used in stage productions but they are all subservient to speech; what Artaud wanted was a better balance between these elements. To conclude this section, as I must move on to suggest some of the theological implications of this, I need to make some closing remarks about Artaud's theatre of cruelty.

Artaud wanted to create an approach to theatre that restored it to what he saw as its true goal. In part this included seeing that the theatrical audience was not entirely composed of a few educated observers, but rather it should involve 'letting the masses share a supreme adventure which will bring into play the whole possible range of human and collective feelings' (*CW 2*, p. 151).²³ For Artaud myths and stories have a deep power that cloak what he calls 'pure

²¹ J. Derrida, *Writing & Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.190.

²² As Artaud says: 'There is no question of abolishing speech in theatre but of changing its intended purpose, especially to lessen its status, to view it as something other than a way of guiding human nature to external ends . . .' (*TAD*, p. 53/pp.86-7).

²³ Artaud is actually referring to his planned production of Seneca's *Atreus and Thyestes* which he is going to call *The Torment of Tantalus*. Although Artaud is referring to a

forces', and these pure forces (which are the messages of myths) are damaged or even ruined by 'scholars and literary men' (*ibid*) who comment on, and support, the type of theatre he was trying to abolish. This type of theatre reveals nothing; neither does it directly affect us. If we were to see this theologically we might want to use the language of truth or ontology, for I think there is something quite Barthian in what Artaud wants to do to theatre. Theology, like Artaudian theatre, should wrestle with the truths that are revealed to us and should not be reduced to an exploration of personal meaning or experience. For Artaud, the real goal of theatre was to put on productions that express the natural force of the myth on stage, and 'dominate the soul, achieving a new reality' (*ibid.*). This meant that, for Artaud:

Theatre will stop being a game and an entertaining way of passing an evening and will become a kind of useful act, restored to the status of therapy, to which the mob in ancient times used to flock to regain a taste for life and the strength to resist the blows of fate (*CW 2*, p. 151).²⁴

Artaud gave clear and detailed instructions of what productions of a 'theatre of cruelty' should entail, and what they should be like, the main elements of which (in a practical sense) are to be found in his First Manifesto on The Theatre of Cruelty in *The Theatre and its Double*. I have already highlighted some of the theoretical elements of this theatre in this paper, but as a practical production what this type of theatre is, in essence, are productions in which gesture is central and the reliance on text is subordinated. It would involve all the elements that go to make up the theatrical production, such as sound, light, music, cries, shouts, objects, being put together to produce a spectacle that would have a devastating impact on the audience, so that they move from being mere spectators to being an essential part of the production. A key principle for Artaud in all of this is that each production must be unique and unrepeatable, for if it could be repeated it would become another example of theatre as representation.

Although Artaud tried, he never really succeeded in staging a production that fully lived up to his expectations and demands, and,

particular production his sentiments echo much of what he explores in his theatre of cruelty.

²⁴ There are some clear resonances with Gadamer's use of the relationship of the ancient Greek to his/her myths in the development of his concept of 'understanding as play', in that the point of the myth was not the extent to which the story was believed, rather it was the role the myth had in shaping people and their understanding of the world. Moreover, there is a sense here in which Artaud is very close to a more Aristotelian view of tragedy and the cathartic effect it should have on those who see the play, through its evocation of pity and fear. Where Artaud would dramatically differ with Aristotle is that for the latter drama is always imitation, whereas for Artaud the theatre (as art) does not represent or imitate life, it is life, or it is the double of life itself.

many of those who saw them ridiculed his attempts. In the next part of this paper I want to explore the relevance of this apparent theatrical failure to theology. Given Artaud is not a well-known figure, I have spent some time giving an introduction to him and some key elements of his thought. This will mean that I am only going to give some more general suggestions for theology in order that you can see where my thinking is heading. We can obviously follow up the detail in the discussion that follows.

Artaud & the Concept of Drama in Theology

What Balthasar wants to achieve in his *Theo-Drama* is, through the use of the metaphor of drama, and techniques of dramatic theory, the 'bringing into centre stage the *drama intrinsic to divine salvation*.'²⁵ Balthasar explores his ideas through the relatively simple idea of the world being the 'stage' on which the drama of salvation is enacted. For Balthasar this analogy is not something picked out of thin air, and neither is it the simplistic identification of the world as a stage, rather, for Balthasar:

It is not the case of arbitrarily contrasting the stage and life, for the aesthetic illusion always *refers* to concrete reality and, by means of the performance, participates in it (*TD I*, pp. 267 -8).

In the *Theo-Drama*, Jesus Christ is both the principal actor and 'the very condition that renders the play possible' (*TD III*, p. 41); for in this drama (of salvation) the world is the stage on which God and humanity interact. It is the initiative of a free and loving God that opens up this 'acting area', and it is supremely in the Cross that we see 'the concrete way in which God has resolved to open up (and keep open) the acting area between himself and man' (*TD III*, p. 46).

If we remember, what Artaud wanted at a practical level on stage was a production in which the text, or speech, lost its position of supremacy and action and gesture took over, or at least gained ascendancy. Moreover, Artaud was also clear that stage productions in the theatre of cruelty must present spectacles that are not repeatable. At its simplest, what I want to suggest at this point is that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, if we follow Balthasar's model in the *Theo-Drama* of the world stage, can be seen as dramatic action, in Artaudian terms, as a production of a theatre of cruelty.

To view the Christian 'drama' in Artaudian terms means that gesture and action, and all the elements of this production (such as water, bread, wine, the cross, and the empty tomb, to name but a few)

²⁵ A. Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 23.

positively conspire to push this drama beyond speech, by which I mean that the significant elements that dominate this dramatic action in the end will always make speech subservient, or even useless. And, perhaps most essentially, it is an unrepeatable, unique dramatic action that will always defy and avoid representation [which is why (in the end) analogies will collapse]. To borrow Artaud's words, and use them in this context, the action at the centre of the drama of salvation, namely the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is a dramatic action in which we cannot 'resist the effects of physical surprise, the dynamism of cries and gestures [...] and a whole series of calculated [...] effects intended to act directly upon the physical sensibility of the spectator' (*CW 2*, p. 152). Artaud says that the theatre of cruelty was designed to 'restore an impassioned convulsive concept of life to the theatre' which means that, in terms of the productions, we must accept 'the cruelty on which this is based in the sense of drastic strictness, [and] the extreme concentration of stage elements' (*CW 4*, p. 94). Artaud also warns that productions of a theatre of cruelty may need to be 'bloody' and that one must not be 'afraid to pay the cost one must pay in life' (*ibid.*).

As the title of Aidan Nichols book on the *Theo-Drama* clearly points out, in terms of the drama of salvation Christians are not dealing with a 'bloodless myth', and it is a bloody story which, like Artaud's theatre of cruelty, is aimed at restoring an impassioned and redeemed concept of life to the world stage in which this drama takes place. More powerfully, for those who participate in this drama, there may well be a high 'cost' to pay in life – for as in the surrealist idea art is life, and for Artaud the theatre is the double of life, the drama that is Christian salvation is also life; indeed, new life.

There is a further point to the theatre of cruelty that we need to make more explicit at this point and that is the effect it should have on the spectators or audience. In short, for Artaud, the problems of theatre is that audiences are passive spectators, and that the true purpose of the theatrical experience should be to 'merge with real life to form a genuine event'²⁶ which would 'lacerate' us and awaken us; it would revive us. In order for theatre to achieve this Artaud argued for a deconstruction of stage and audience, in order that the spectator, as a member of the audience, would be drawn into the action and become part of the action.²⁷ Artaud, as we have seen, through denying

²⁶ Esslin, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

²⁷ In order to achieve this aim, Artaud describes, in the First Manifesto on the Theatre of Cruelty, how the theatrical event must be staged. He says that, 'we intend to do away with the stage and auditorium, replacing them by a kind of single, undivided locale without any partitions of any kind and this will become the very scene of action. Direct contact will be established between the audience and the show, between actors and audience, from the very fact that the audience is seated in the centre of the action, is encircled and furrowed by it' (*TAD*, p. 74/pp. 114–115).

the absolute difference between stage and spectator, is passionate that the theatre will have a concrete effect on people. What is problematic about Artaud is that he never really discusses exactly how this will all happen, neither does he discuss exactly what the role of the audience will actually be in a production of a theatre of cruelty. It is here that theology, initially at this stage in the shape of Balthasar, can be of help, for it is crucial if we are to explore this metaphor of theology as a theatre of cruelty, and the drama of salvation as a production of this type of theatre, that we explore what happens to the audience.

Balthasar sees that the impact of Jesus Christ on the world can be likened to the impact of a meteor hitting the earth. From whatever perspective, and for Balthasar even anti-Christian movements are 'understood as a parody of Christianity itself' (*TD III*, p. 25), Christ is at the centre of everything 'like a magnet', and it is 'primarily on the Cross, as the Exalted One, that he became this magnet' (*ibid.*, p. 27). In Balthasar's terms, Christ is a magnet who draws us to himself and demands a response. In perhaps more Barthian terms, through the mediation of Scripture, we are placed in a position of being witnesses to the Cross and Resurrection and, as witnesses to this world-changing event, we can either turn away or respond.

In Balthasar both Christology, and our inclusion in the drama is explored through the dramatic concept of role. The idea of role is, of course, central to drama and is normally discussed in terms of the role the actor takes on. As Aidan Nichols has further pointed out: 'On the stage, as in Christian existence, identity is invested in role.'²⁸ In Balthasar the idea of role (namely what one does) is connected to who one is (namely one's identity). In terms of Christology, Balthasar argues that the topic is too often divided up into discussions about the work of Christ (role) *or* the person of Christ (identity). For Balthasar the two are intimately linked, for who we are must be linked to what we do and vice versa. In terms of Christology, what links the person and work of Christ is, for Balthasar, the idea of **mission**, for it is in mission that we see the two coming together into a unity.

It is through the concept of mission, the mission of Jesus, that Balthasar develops his original approach to Christology. What Balthasar argues is that Jesus possessed a 'sense of mission that was eschatological and universal' and this mission was to be played out 'within the dimensions of his human existence' (*TD III*, p. 149). Here, as already mentioned, Balthasar sees an intimate connection between the person of Christ (or his nature) and his work because for Balthasar 'the question of his work implies the question of his person' (*ibid.*). For Balthasar the universal nature and scope of Jesus' mission testifies to who and what he is in that we see 'identity [as the

²⁸ Nichols, *op.cit.*, p. 39.

Son of God – my insertion] being given along with the mission' (*TD III*, p. 155). In terms of the drama of salvation, as it is played out in, and on, the world-stage, Jesus 'embodies the absolute drama in his own person', and it is here that we can begin to see the consequences for us in the drama that is the Christian life.

It is crucial for Balthasar that the 'magnet' that draws us to himself is not only divine, for, as he says, if the 'Christ principle were not also a human principle, roles would simply be allotted from above vertically' (*TD III*, p. 38) and this would compromise human freedom, for as humans we must always be able to choose to respond or not respond to that magnetic force. But, it is also because there is a divine side that Jesus has the authority 'to open up, for man, the divine sphere of freedom itself' (*ibid.*). That Jesus embodies in himself the 'absolute drama' does not mean that our response is to merely sit back and watch the drama unfold, rather it means that 'while the personal mission of Jesus is unique, it is also capable of "imitation" by those who are called, in him, to participate in his drama. The difference between Jesus and us is that 'we only receive our mission on the basis of our coming to faith, whereas Jesus always has and is his mission' (*TD III*, p. 171).

Through Balthasar's Trinitarian analogy of author, director and actor, the Actor in the drama, namely Jesus Christ, calls us to move from our seats in the auditorium to become part of the drama. Indeed it is now the case, because of our inclusion in the drama, that the distinction between stage and spectator has been annulled in the sense that we are now called to participate in the drama. As in Artaud's theatre of cruelty, the drama of salvation, as the only true, unrepeatable 'production' of a theatre of cruelty, 'wakes us up heart and nerve' and lacerates us, having the effect of shocking us into becoming part of the dramatic action, and we will be part of the dramatic action whether we respond positively, negatively or not at all. And, just as with Artaud's theatre, one of the key roles in all of this, both with our role (or mission) and with Jesus' role (or mission) is that of the director, which in Balthasar's dramatic analogy refers, of course, to the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who 'testifies and convinces' us who Jesus really is, and it is because of the exit of Jesus from the finite part of the theo-drama which heralds the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, that the drama is opened up for Jesus' fellow actors namely, those who follow him.²⁹

²⁹ I would suggest that to use drama in this way is a way of understanding the whole question of the relationship between time and eternity in Christology. This dramatic analogy is a way of understanding Christology as a 'place where an attempt is made to conceive eternity and time in a positive relation, the one losing its fallenness through the saving presence of the other' (Colin Gunton, *Yesterday & Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983, p. 120).

Some Concluding Remarks

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as the central element of the drama of salvation, is an event, or, to use Artaud's word, 'spectacle', that satisfies the criteria of Artaudian theatre of cruelty. The Church does not try to represent this drama but is part of the dramatic action because this drama remains unfinished – it is a drama with eschatological dimensions.

What I hope I have shown in this article, providing you allow for the idea of a theo-drama in the first place, is that the dramatic theories of Artaud can be of much use to a theology of this sort. It is, of course, the theological use of a non-theological source, but then so is much, if not all of theology. It is crucial to note that I acknowledge that this is what I am doing but in doing so, I am not arguing that Artaud is doing the same as theology or, even worse, that Artaud is a theologian. That Balthasar, being one of the most significant theologians of the twentieth century, sees that dramatic theory can be of use to theology, and that this was one of his most unique and rich insights, means that, for those of us who follow in his powerful wake, can have the luxury of spending time exploring other elements of dramatic theory in more detail. It is important to note that in the approach I am suggesting it is dramatic theory that serves theology and not the other way round, for as with Balthasar what begins by looking like a theology from below is, in the end, clearly a theology from above for the drama is inaugurated by and will be consummated by God and not us.

Artaud was passionate that the theatre of cruelty would 'rediscover a religious, mystical meaning [that] theatre has forgotten' (*TAD*, p35/56). It is my hope that a theology that borrows from dramatic theory in general, and Artaud in particular, will be able to explore and bring into centre stage the 'drama intrinsic to divine salvation'. For though this drama that is not of our own making, it is a drama, like the theatre of cruelty, that should lacerate us and not leave us intact, and one in which we cannot just sit by and watch as spectators, for the call is to be involved with the truth that is revealed by the unique drama of God's saving relationship with His creation.

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