

**Subverting the French Theatre Status Quo: An Exploration of the Influence
of Grand Guignol on Antonin Artaud**

In the late 1800's in Paris, France there was an area of entertainment known as Pigalle. During World War II, Allied soldiers nicknamed the area "Pig Alley." This was an area bustling with theatres such as the Divan du Monde and the ever popular Moulin Rouge. At the Moulin Rouge, there were often performers that would sing and dance, but there was one specific performer at this time that had a very special talent. This performer's name was Joseph Pujol and his stage name was La Petomane. He would perform by controlling sounds from the air that came from his anus. Yes, Joseph Pujol was a *Fartiste*. This type of performance drove the French audiences absolutely wild and he was at the time, one of the top paid performers of the French Cabaret circuit.

This type of performance might sound somewhat crass to the average theatre-goer, but just down the street from the Moulin Rouge was another theatre that was nightly filled with performances that featured acts of murder, mutilations, and the madness of mankind. At the Theatre du Grand Guignol, each of these things were brought to life before the audience, taking place mere feet from their seats. While the term Grand-Guignol is often used as a term meaning grotesque, macabre, or gruesome, this theatre was called the Theatre du Grand Guignol.

Meanwhile in the mid 1920's part way through the Theatre du Grand Guignol's existence, a young frenchman by the name of Antonin Artaud was bursting onto the film, theory, and theatre scene in Paris. Artaud, was a theatre owner himself for a period of 4 years, as he owned and operated the Alfred Jarry Theatre. It was in this theatre that

works by dramatists such as Roger Vitrac and August Strindberg were produced.

Artaud wanted to produce his own work in the theatre but it never happened. After his time as a theatre owner, Artaud continued to work on his own manifestos for theatre and in his book *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud published his manifestos for *The Theatre of Cruelty*. This was a style suggested by Artaud, that was necessary, if the theatre, as an art form, wanted to continue. *The Theatre of Cruelty* will be discussed more in-depth later.

In the following pages, this paper will look at the dark naturalism of the French theatre of horror that existed within the Grand-Guignol and also at the work of Antonin Artaud within his theatrical theory of the Theatre of Cruelty. These two styles have some different thoughts on how theatre should happen, but at their core, they are both interested in looking at the dark side of human behavior to get to the heart of humans. There is an interest in applying the idea that there is a Dark Naturalism in the works and theories presented by Antonin Artaud in his Theatre of Cruelty and in the works of the Theatre du Grand Guignol. There will be an in-depth look at the history of the Grand-Guignol and a close read of two works of Grand-Guignol. There will also be a close read of *Spurt of Blood* by Artaud. After each piece of this jigsaw puzzle has been put into place, the hope is to be able to tie the theories of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty to the works that were being performed at the Theatre du Grand Guignol and open up exploration of the idea that Artaud's ideas were perhaps partially influenced by the aesthetic of the Grand Guignol.

A History of the Grand Guignol

The actual theatre itself was once a church, the building was purchased by Oscar Metenier to be a theatre of naturalism. This would become the smallest theatre in Paris, having just under 300 seats, while the Moulin Rouge, was three times as big. The interior design of the building is worth mentioning, as few changes were made to the church aesthetic. In the theatre there were two wooden angels hanging above the stage, confessionals that were turned into box seats, and many of the original pews were left in place.

At its inception, the originator of the Theatre du Grand-Guignol was Oscar Metenier and he was coming off a period of time where he had been working with the Theatre Libre and Andre Antoine so Metenier adapted some of the styles and practices used in the Theatre Libre and applied them to his own new theatre, the Theatre du Grand Guignol. Using Naturalism as a key piece of the formula for the programming of the theatre, Metenier was just looking in a darker direction than the Theatre Libre and of course a much darker direction than the more popular theatres and cabarets of his time. The Theatre du Grand Guignol served as a space for Metenier to produce his own works and in his book *The Grand Guignol, Theatre of Fear and Terror* by Mel Gordon, discusses how Metenier divided his work into two categories. One of those categories were the plays of Parisian lowlife and the other category was the real life accounts taken from the newspaper and police blotters. One of the works written by Metenier was *Mademoiselle Fifi*. This was a controversial work that featured a prostitute on stage,

wearing revealing clothing, that ends up stabbing a German officer and would often have government officials shutting down the production. Stuck between the world of Naturalism and the world of Melodrama, Oscar Metenier was “torn between wanting to shock his audiences with or without spurts of stage blood” (Gordon 17). “Metenier clearly established the Grand-Guignol as a theatre that challenged moral orthodoxy and would continue the *succes de scandale* of naturalism.”(Hand and Wilson 4).

By profession Mr. Metenier was a playwright, but he was also a *chien de commissaire*, or a police secretary, and was often one of the last people to see a convict before they were executed. As a playwright, he wrote about events that he faced in his profession as a police secretary and this led to creating naturalistic pieces that favored the darker side of human behavior. As Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson authors of the book Grand-Guignol The French Theatre of Horror , state “Metenier, formerly a police secretary, provided Antoine with numerous comedie rosses (short dramatic pieces which looked at the lives and language of the Parisian underclass).” Within this darker side of naturalism, is where the roots of the Theatre du Grand Guignol lie, as Metenier was only the owner of the theatre for two years, the focus being on naturalism shifted more toward an emphasis on horror, psychological drama, and eventually turned to camp, depending on who owned the theatre at the time.

Immediately after Metenier’s time as the owner of the Theatre du Grand-Guignol a man by the name of Max Maurey took over and turned the theatre’s attention to horror. In the theatre’s 60 plus years of existence the Theatre du Grand Guignol had a variety of owners and the focus would always shift slightly but the majority of the plays

presented there were within a description of naturalism or what could be described as a dark naturalism.

As Oscar Metenier handed over his ownership of the Theatre du Grand-Guignol to Max Maurey, there are many questions that still exist as to why Oscar stepped down so early on in the development of the theatre. Experts on the subject of the Grand-Guignol, Michael Wilson and Russell J. Hand say the following with regard to Metenier "It appears that the Grand-Guignol proved a success from its opening and the reason why Oscar Metenier handed ownership of the Theatre du Grand-Guignol to Max Maurey after only two years at the helm is a matter that remains unclear." (Hand and Wilson, 4). Although, Maurey eventually took the theatre in the direction of horror, he did however see the need to continue the naturalism pieces, but Maurey was not as tied to the idea as Metenier was and Maurey's style changed the landscape of the Theatre du Grand-Guignol and was the reason that the theatre is mostly associated with horror today.

Over the next 45 years, the theatre saw a host of different owners and the styles changed dependant on the owners. There were some that focused more on the horror and the blood, and there were others that were focused on the psychological aspects. No matter what aspect the different owners and directors decided to focus on, the original idea was naturalism, and due to the subject matter of the pieces there was a darker sense of Naturalism.

Artaud, The Theatre of Cruelty and The Grand Guignol.

The Theatre of Cruelty was created by a Frenchman named Henry Becque and he wrote a few plays that employed the techniques of the "Theatre Cruel" and beyond that there was not much else done with the Theatre of Cruelty. Artaud was not responsible for the creation of the Theatre of Cruelty, but he was instrumental in additional developments to the genre, to which he gave notoriety and a specific style to the genre, and perhaps shaped it bit further than his predecessor Mr. Becque. Within Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty he has a few very pointed thoughts that could very seamlessly connect his work to that of the work being done by the Theatre du Grand Guignol. The first thought comes at the start of his chapter on Theatre and Cruelty, he says the following, "An idea of the theater has been lost. And as long as the theater limits itself to showing us intimate scenes from the lives of a few puppets, transforming the public into Peeping Toms, it is no wonder the elite abandon it and the great public looks to the movies, the music hall or the circus for violent satisfactions, whose intentions do not deceive them." (Artaud, 84) In this mentioning of the great public, searching for their violent satisfactions, elsewhere beyond the theatre, it is a wonder that Artaud never found his way into the Theatre du Grand Guignol. Artaud goes on to say "The theater must give us everything that is in crime, love, war, or madness, if it wants to recover its necessity." (Artaud, 85) The aesthetic of the Grand Guignol was to present a hot and cold shower effect or what is called "La douche ecossaise." This was achieved by presenting plays that were alternating from their trademark horror plays to a more fast-paced, bawdy, sex comedy. In this fashion, the theatre was certainly giving their

audiences everything that is in crime, love, war, and madness. Again, the artists at the Theatre du Grand Guignol were doing many of the things that Artaud was writing about in his thoughts on Theatre and Cruelty.

The Grand-Guignol Aesthetic

In the following section, the aesthetic of the Theatre du Grand-Guignol will be examined and given a further exploration. This aesthetic will be viewed and explored by an in-depth and close reading of two scripts that will allow for a clearer understanding of the work done by playwrights and artists of the Grand-Guignol during their existence. For additional comparison with the Theatre of Cruelty, the sole play that Artaud wrote will be presented and given further examination.

The Theatre du Grand Guignol certainly had a specific style in which the plays presented were performed. Even though the theatre had different owners which favored different styles, there were similarities throughout each period. Among those similarities were the following aesthetics within their style. The first being that within each piece the actors have declamatory acting style that was common in vaudevillian circles. Another element of the aesthetic was the distortion of time which helps keep the audience engaged. Another element is the introduction of a red herring, or a fake clue given to the audience to mislead them in figuring out what is coming.

Within the programming of each evening, one other classic Grand Guignol element was the “hot and cold shower” effect. This was typically an alternating of styles of shows. There would be a Horror play followed by a Sex/Comedy and then another Drama followed by a Bourgeois Farce and ending with a Horror. There were three

categories of plays: Horror Plays, Comedy/Farces, and Dramatic Plays. Each of these categories has a set of subsections and these subsections are worth providing. Mel Gordon lists these subsections in his book, *The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror*. Within the Horror Plays are “the following subsections: Helplessness, Infanticide, Insanity, Mutilation, Mysterious Death, Suffering of the Innocent, Suicide, Surgery, and Vengeance.” (Gordon 51) The comedy/farce subsections are “Bourgeois Morality, Cuckoldry, Sex Farce, and again Suffering of the Innocent.” (Gordon 51) Lastly the subsection of “the Dramatic plots are divided into three categories: “Crass” Manners, Guilt, and Injustice.” (Gordon 51) In addition to those sections there were six other themes that that appeared in the plays that didn’t necessarily fit into the other categories. Those are the following: “Exoticism, Hypnosis, Imprisonment, Parisian Lowlife, Play-Transforming-Into-Terror, and Prostitution.” (Gordon 51).

Comparing the Works

An interesting part of the Grand Guignol was that the pieces were usually only a short one act play. This was because the pieces are not as concerned with story as much as they are the base emotions of these heightened situations. Although the plays were short, there was still enough story to have some of the most awful situations brought to life. Of all these plays the first that will be examined is a short play which could be placed into a few of the categories above, but further examination may give a clearer category.

The play is entitled *Headlines from Paradise*; a grand guignol comedy of revenge for three players by Walter Grotjohann and written in 1935. This play as it says has

three characters, The Surgeon, The Nurse, and The Gangster. The play starts in the dark with a string of gunshots and screams, then sirens and cries are heard too. As soon as the lights come up, the audience is very clearly looking at an operating room. The surgeon has just finished plastic surgery on a patient that is not seen. The nurse helps with the patient and the surgeon informs the nurse that he is done and heading to see his family. The exchange goes as follows:

Surgeon: I'm going downtown to meet my wife now. We're having dinner together , and the youngster. Be back about nine.

Nurse: But, no, you . . .

Surgeon: What? (Grotyohann 4)

The Nurse is trying to discourage the Surgeon from going downtown to see his family. But why? As the scene continues the nurse has a bit of news for the surgeon.

Surgeon: What is it?

Nurse: Well sir, before, before, er . . . I don't know how to being to . . . (gulping). The police telephoned, and your wife and little girl are dead. I'm sorry--terribly, awfully sorry. I hope you're not angry for not telling you at once, but it was just as you began this operation. They said death was instant. And a half hour more or less doesn't make a great difference then. (Grotyohann 4)

After breaking the news, the nurse tells the surgeon to head to the morgue to identify the bodies of his wife and daughter. She steps out of the room and as the surgeon is alone with the thoughts of his family being killed, the gangster sneaks into the room. He is looking for a disguise and nervous that the police might find him to look too similar to

a wanted criminal. The surgeon agrees to help him and to give the gangster the surgery. The surgeon devises a plan with the nurse and proceeds to work on the gangster. After wrapping the gangster's head with a bandage, the surgeon grabs a knife and the next scene transpires.

Surgeon: No mercy for you. What quarter did you give my wife and child in the Paradise? Shot them down.

Gangster: The cop shot 'em. The cop shot 'em. Wait! Wait!

Surgeon: You killer.

Gangster: (screaming). They'll find yuh. Fill yuh with lead. (Hysterically.) Madre de Cristo nell sepulchro sangri. . .

Surgeon: (madly thrusting the blade). Sneak into heaven, would you? Say your prayers!

(The Gangster's cries die out with a labored, breathless, groan. After a moment , with a certain satisfaction the Surgeon puts down the knife and swiftly sets to winding bandages round the head. The Nurse enters down left.) (Grotyohann 13.)

As the nurse returns to the room she finds the surgeon finishing up the process of wrapping the bandages around the gangster's head. The nurse again urges the surgeon to head down to the morgue to identify the bodies. As the surgeon leaves, the nurse continues with the bandages around the gangsters head. As she is doing this the play ends with the following moment.

Nurse: Yes sir. (Glancing down at what she is doing she discovers the Gangster's head has come loose in her hands. With a sharp intake of breath she draws

away, leaving the head rest on the edge of the table. Crossing right, calling huskily.)

Doctor! (She goes out down right.) Doctor!

(The floodlight over center stage is switched off.)

Presently the curtain falls. (Grotyohann 13,14)

As the scene ends, there is certainly an argument for the category of surgery horror, and a revenge or vengeance horror. There is something incredibly shocking but strangely understandable about the surgeon's response. Having the immediacy of coming face-to-face with the individual that killed his family and having that individual give himself up to the surgeon's hands.

There are clear elements of horror and having an audience sit through a play that puts them through the quick intensity required in that scene does certainly call for a bit of relief in the next scene. The hot and cold shower effect is not only an effective means of planning their shows for the evening, but the effect must have come as a welcome from the audience as sitting through too many moments of raw intense moments can of course be exhausting in their own right. Although the Grand Guignol is mostly known as a theatre of horror, the comedies and farces were just as crucial to the success of the theatre as well. Without the reprieve from the violence, the purging of those emotions may not have been as successful.

The second play which will be given further examination is the play *The Lovers* by Octave Mirbeau written in 1901. This is another short play and this one is definitely not in the horror realm. This is another play with three characters, although the play is primarily a dialogue between only two of those characters. The three characters in the

play are Host, Man, and Woman. The character of Host serves to simply set the scene for the audience. That scene, as we are told, is set in a park and takes place in, on, and around the park bench. And any time the audience sees the park bench, they should then know for a fact that this a scene for lovers. This scene is no different. After the Host sets the scene and introduces the audience to the Man and Woman entering, the character leaves the stage to never be seen again throughout the duration of the play. The man and the woman enter into the scene. The stage directions tell us first that the woman is wearing lace and that the man is wearing a dinner jacket. The directions also tell us that the characters are sad.

As they arrive at the park bench, the man begins to count and recount all the wonderful things that this bench brings to his mind and all the beauty that he notices in the woman because of this location. The woman on the other hand seems disinterested and disconnected. The man continues in his manic ways about their relationship and he is continually professing his love for the woman and she is further showing her disdain for their relationship and rebutting with constant questioning of the man and his intentions. Throughout almost the entirety of the short play, the woman has next to no interest in the man's proclamation's of their love. She does not deny that they are together, but she also does not celebrate the relationship in the same manner as the man. It is not until the very end of the play when we see the woman even think of returning the gestures of love to the man. In the moment before the woman kisses the man, which is the last line in the play, the woman is still not one hundred percent on board with the man but she does eventually give in to the man and his kisses.

This play is essentially a one trick pony, so to speak, however, that would seem to be the purpose of such a piece after the audience had gone through seeing the surgeon cut off the gangster's head. This comedy goes to further show the importance of allowing the audience the chance to breathe at least for a few moments before encountering another heavy piece which more than likely will be blood-filled and barbaric in theme.

The last text to examine is the lone dramatic text written by Antonin Artaud, *The Jet of Blood*, or *the Spurt of Blood*, depending upon the translation. For the purposes of this paper, the translation used will be *The Spurt of Blood* and this has been translated by Ruby Cohn. This "play" by Artaud is an even shorter text than the plays of the Grand Guignol, as the text is about 2 full pages in length. The play has 11 characters, and there are a few times where all the characters are speaking. The play in structure looks something like the world in perfect order and then Artaud rather quickly, destroys the perfect order and just as quickly restores the order. There is not much substance in the dialogue but the action within the stage directions has often been cause for the stageability of the play. An excerpt of these stage directions are below:

"Silence. There is a noise as if an immense wheel were turning and moving the air. A hurricane separates them. At the same time, two Stars are seen colliding and from them fall a series of legs of living flesh with feet, hands, scalps, masks, colonnades, porticos, temples, alembics, falling more and more slowly, as if falling in a vacuum: then three scorpions one after another and finally a frog and a beetle which come to rest with desperate slowness, nauseating slowness" (Artaud.1)

These stage directions happen in the beginning of the play right after the young man and young woman declare their love for each other and make notice of how beautifully the world is built. After that moment, Artaud destroys the beauty and structure of the world through those stage directions. In the Grand Guignol plays there is not a big emphasis on establishing a long drawn out story, but instead a focus of zeroing in on a raw base emotion. Much like Grand Guignol, Jet of Blood is not concerned with telling a full drawn out story. Jet of Blood is getting at core emotions and finding ways to challenge the status quo, which is exactly what this little theatre in Pigalle was trying to do. Theatre du Grand Guignol was presenting stories that were ripped from the headlines and stories that were showing the Parisian lowlife onstage. There was not a concern with presenting the works of Chekov, or Strindberg or Ibsen, but instead, the works of Oscar Metenier, Andre de Lorde, and Rene Berton were the works being presented nightly.

Final Thoughts

Theatre is a collaborative activity and as theatre artists, much of what theatre artists do is that they work together to make sure the best possible end result is going to be coming out of the work. This is a part of theatre that has been happening since theatre first started. There are and have always been influential individuals and influential styles that almost every theatre artist, scholar, and theorist have to look to for their creations. The same can certainly be said for the work done by the many artists and directors of the Grand Guignol and the work of Antonin Artaud. During this period of

French theatre, there was an explosion of ideas and so many new styles, genres, and types of theatre were being created.

The Theatre du Grand Guignol was creating a new French theatre of Horror, and Antonin Artaud was creating his own theories on the Theatre of Cruelty and he was doing so during the heyday of Grand Guignol. The Grand Guignol and Antonin Artaud were each creating their own styles of theatre, however, the style that Artaud was looking to create was similar to that of Grand Guignol. In his book *The Theatre and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud leaves the reader with this thought about the Theatre of Cruelty.

“It is a matter of knowing whether now, in Paris, before the cataclysms which are at our door descend upon us, sufficient means of production, financial or otherwise, can be found to permit such a theater to be brought to life-it is bound to in any case, because it is the future. Or whether a little real blood will be needed, right away, in order to manifest this cruelty.” (Artaud 88)

While the Grand Guignol was not necessarily using real blood on stage, they were certainly depicting some bloody situations as real as they could. And even if Artaud never once stepped foot into the The Theatre du Grand Guignol, the thought of him doing so could have lead to some fantastic collaborations with some theatre artists that were already blood thirsty and wanting to subvert the status quo theatre norms, just like Artaud was wanting to do.

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