

Spring 5-10-2020

# What is the function of theoretical theatre ideas, given the content presented in Modern Theatre?

James Carson Jester

Coastal Carolina University, [jcjester@coastal.edu](mailto:jcjester@coastal.edu)

Robert Earnest

[searnest@coastal.edu](mailto:searnest@coastal.edu)

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**What is the function of theoretical theatre ideas, given the content presented  
in Modern Theatre?**

By

James Jester

Theatre

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
In the HTC Honors College at  
Coastal Carolina University

Spring 2019

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Louis E. Keiner  
Director of Honors  
HTC Honors College

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Dr. Steve Earnest  
[Title]  
[Theatre]  
[Edwards]

i. ABSTRACT

In this work, I will look at the implications and history of theatre theory, then lay the ground work for what works will be used in this examination. Then, I look at the definition of form and content in theatrical terms and introduce the issue of this work, what is the function of Theoretical Theatre ideas, given the content presented in modern theatre?

Then, I will talk about the work of Aristotle, giving brief biographical information and some of his theory on creating theatrical work, citing his work known as *The Poetics*. I will then look at the implications of this work on the modern play structures created based off of his ideals.

After Aristotle, I will look ahead to Emile Zola, and discuss his work on the ideal genre of naturalism. After giving a full description of naturalism in his mind and biographical information, I will use *Woyzeck* by George Büchner as an exemplar to better explain what naturalism is, in practice. Then, I will look at the implications of naturalism on modern realism, which is what is normally used in the modern theatre.

Next, I will look to the work of Bertolt Brecht, first giving a biographical outline, then quickly going into his theory. I will use his play *Mother Courage and Her Children* to outline how his theory would look in practice. Lastly for him, I will look at the implications of his work on how we modernly conceptualize theatre in terms of form and content.

Lastly, I will look at the work of Antonin Artaud, with a biographical exploration, then an exploration into his theoretical work *The Theatre and Its Double*. After this, as there isn't a good exemplar of his work that is well-known, I will dive into the impact of his work on modern theatre directly. I will then conclude the essay with a refined glance at the work of each theorist and how each has shaped the modern theatre.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of time, theatre has somehow always been involved in the evolution of mankind. Sure, there weren't productions of *Wicked* being sold out every night to cavemen, but theatre was vital to man since he first learned to communicate. So how do we know that this was the case, exactly? Well, for one, there is evidence based on cave drawings that ceremonies were performed in order for blessings to be bestowed upon groups of people. This is what we now know as ritualism, the earliest theatre practice in the minds of theatre historians. Beyond the drawings, another way we find these ideals is through theorization. As defined by Merriam-Webster, theorization is to form a theory or to speculate. Not to be confused with history, theory is meant to be speculation based upon observation and work, specifically within the field of theatre in the given context. Theory is something that anyone can have, as speculation is human nature. However, in the context of this paper, I will be using written and revered theoretical works about the theatre.

So what does it take to be considered revered, one might ask. To put it simply, the work must be published and studied frequently by the common undergrad student and even in high school theatre classes (those of an advanced nature, not the throw away theatre classes you take to get your art elective out of the way). Classic examples include, but are not limited to, the work of Aristotle, Zeami Motokiyo, Emile Zola, Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. These theorists, along with others, have given us many forms of theatre thanks to their theory and effected the content presented in the time the theory was first born. For example, the work of Zeami Motokiyo in his book *On The Art of Nō Drama*, Zeami discussed the metaphor of the actor as a flower and created guidelines for the actors within the work of Noh theatre

practices. His work allowed an understanding of how technical one must be in taking any Noh role, and today allows us to understand the Noh work that still goes on (Motokiyo 98).

However, this is only one theory that still guides us in today's work, and shouldn't be seen as out of the ordinary, as in traditional theatre, all work is passed generationally. Is it possible for theoretical work that doesn't serve traditional purpose to still effect the work we do today?

To understand that question, one must first break down what exactly is the theatrical work that we do today. In theatre, all the work you will ever see has some relationship between the form it is presented to you in, and the content that it hopes to discuss. While this may seem like an obvious statement, the nature of the relationship between these two has always been different, in any time period theatre has thrived or even declined in. In looking first at content, a clearer definition would aid us in understanding exactly what we mean when using this term. Merriam-Webster defines content as something contained, the topics or matter in a written work and the principal substance offered by something. Content essentially is subject matter we deal with in a show, the message contained within a show. It is meant to offer us insight on what the playwright wanted us to learn from their work. Form can also be defined by Merriam-Webster, as the shape and structure of something as distinguished from its material, and in an archaic sense, it means beauty. As stated earlier, Form is what we style we use to present content/a show. The archaic meaning puts an interesting twist on what form is, as form is what will capture the eye of an audience or potential audience member. Form is like the outer most layer of an onion, with countless layers of rings. By showing the audience what they might desire with the purple color of the first layer, then you can get them to eat the rest of the metaphorical onion, they learn about the center rings (though I would not personally advice eating an onion in the first place). However, using form in this way has also been heavily criticized.

The co-existence of form and content can be seen in ritualism, mentioned earlier, where the form of dancing was used to inform the content of praying to the Gods for a bountiful harvest. The point of this was more of a survival tactic, but the nature of this relationship has changed over the years. It can be a relationship like the relationship in the production of *Our Town* at Coastal Carolina University in Fall of 2018. This relationship was that of an almost completely plot driven story in which nothing seems to happen, with the content being that life is essentially a thing we take for granted and let go by too quickly. This relationship varies, but it has always been a part of any show created, even if the shows purpose was to try to be form/content-less. Essentially, any play in existence can and will strive to allow us to learn how we can advance in terms of humanity and society in general. However, what we take from a work as content might not always be what the playwright intended. Instead, it is simply what we as an individual take from it. While playwrights are allowed to their own messages in a work, the truth is that we as an audience are the only ones who truly derive anything from it. As the viewers effected by it first-hand, without a script or idea of what it means at first, we end up being the ones to shape what it means. While form is more direct, as it is what is put before us. We can still derive it differently from the intention placed on it by a director or a playwright. One can look at how content has been used in theatre and how form has been used in turn, their relationship and how we can see this relationship developing, even in a world today that some might argue is post-modern.

In modern theatre, there has been an interesting idea that in theatre everything has already been done, that there are no new ways to create theatre and that we are stuck trying to simply recreate classic ideas. There's also more competition than ever for theatre, with the growth of digital technology and streaming companies, which both seem to come at a cheaper price for

better quality of skill, given the current prices for tickets on Broadway. To combat this, it is believed that we need to shift our ideas on form and content to re-invite the world to the theatre, along with lowering prices. The relationship between form and content in the theatre will always be an absolute and critical to its natural evolution and potential downfall. Content will always be important, as anyone who puts pen to pad (or finger to keys) always will have content to put out. So long as this occurs, there will also be an audience that takes this content and does whatever it pleases with it. However, to jump back into the point of this capstone, is the modern theatre we see today still effected by the theoretical work of the past?

Most theory that is commonly studied today comes from at least fifty or more years in the past, in terms of its origin, and as we know, society has changed on a large scale since this point. In the United states, we have been through several wars, presidents and cultural phases that some of us would like to simply forget about or discard. However, these events have shaped us as a society and have also changed the type of theatre works we produce. With this shift of the theatre to commercialized recreations of popular films and a nod toward trying to keep ourselves rooted in theatre tradition, what is the function of classical theatre theory, other than to educate young theatre students of the past? In my opinion, theory is and will always be the root of all theatre and is still impactful on what we create in today's theatrical works. Theoretical theatre ideas have had a lasting impact on the modern theatre, whether it is indirect or direct; this can be seen through the work of the following theorists: Aristotle, Emile Zola, Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud.

## II. ARISTOTLE

Aristotle is one of the earliest recorded theatre theorists, with only Aristophanes and Plato as pre-cursors. It is often believed that Western theatre theory begins with his work, *The Poetics*,

as it is the general model we use when creating and shaping theatre in the West modernly. In his time, Poetry was the same as what we view as theatre/art, hence why the book is named as such. Within this work, the most popular concept pulled out is the six elements he introduces that are vital to the theatre: Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Song, Spectacle (Aristotle 43). These elements, in this order, define what is important in creating theatrical works that are meaningful and useful for an audience. Without these elements in this order, work often tends to suffer from lack of structure and lack of traction among its viewers. Another point we can take from this theoretical work is that Aristotle further defines the means by which a story is portrayed and the interest it will draw from a crowd. Aristotle says that the poet (artist) should aim for probable impossibilities when telling a story, rather than improbable possibilities. What this essentially means is that one should strive to tell a story that is impossible in nature, but probable in that it feels like something that would happen in real life if it were to happen. For example, in a superhero movie like *Black Panther*, while the nation of Wakanda and Vibranium do not exist in real life, if they did, the movie deals with them as they would be dealt with if they were an African country with the world's most valuable resource overflowing from them, that resource being oil. By dealing with this realistically, the audience is drawn into this film and able to see parallels to real life. The latter part of the previous statement, improbable possibilities, refers to stories that actually happen in real life, but don't seem like they should. An exemplar for this may be the show *I Didn't Know I Was Pregnant*, which deals with women who suddenly give birth despite remaining their normal size and feeling no symptoms of the pregnancy. While these shows have an initial sting, there is nothing that continues to draw the audience, as the lack of reality and relatability shuns them from these type of events.

As I gave modern exemplars, one can begin to see the value of Aristotelian theory on modern theatre. The work of Aristotle still gives us the basic outline and structure of the work we do today, both in theatre and film. By following his six elements, a work is guaranteed to resonate with an audience, due to their familiarity with the plot driven structure. Along with guidelines of how to structure a play, Aristotle gives us his theory on the stories we should tell as artists, or poets in his time. In theatre, his rule of showing probable impossibilities is commonly used, though there are exceptions to this rule, such as *The Elephant Man*, which rides a lot on telling the shockingly true story of the Elephant man's life with his deformity. However, for the most part, the theatre follows this rule, as it works better onstage to show the fantastical and fictional, rather than the gritty and real shockers. Aristotle is the first of many theorists to have a lasting impact on the theatre to this day. While there are many theorists in between Aristotle and the next theorist being introduced in this work, the work of the next artist has essentially created the genre of theatre we all recognize as modern realism, which is a large majority of what mainstream theatre is. Without further ado, the next theorist being looked at in this work is Emile Zola.

### III. EMILE ZOLA

Emile Zola was the founder of the Naturalist movement in 19th-century literature. In approaching theatricality, he goes into scrupulous description of the lives of ordinary people. He did this through the contemporary theory of hereditary determinism, which he used to demonstrate how genetic and environmental factors influence human behavior (Berg). His most notable novels, "*L'assommoir*" (1877), "*Nana*" (1880) and "*Germinal*" (1885), displayed Zola's concerns of both scientific and artistic nature, as well as his stances on social reform. In looking at his naturalism, we are meant to take in theatre the same way we perceive our daily lives.

Further, we are meant to be concerned and sympathetic for the characters we are seeing onstage, more so than the events unfolding in a condensed plot (Zola 361). In this modern age of theatre, it may seem that we employ both plot and character equally in the theatre, making the purpose of naturalism to be uber-observant a bit redundant. However, keep in mind that when naturalism was instated, the style of acting was essentially actors standing in grandiose fashion projecting lines in place to tell a story. The ideals of naturalism were like a remedy to a bad stylistic choice that had happened and would eventually evolve into what we know today as modern realism. By using naturalism, even in our “realistic” modern plays, we seek to look at the truth in daily life, rather than imagination and fantasy. This usage is still a commonality, despite the difference in nomenclature. While this theory seems wordy, the best way to show how it works is to use an exemplar of the time period it was first instated in to demonstrate Zola’s naturalism.

*Woyzeck* is a stage play written by Georg Büchner, which exemplifies the theoretical usage of Zola’s naturalism. Büchner left the work incomplete at his death, but it has been posthumously "finished" by a variety of authors, editors and translators. *Woyzeck* has become one of the most performed and influential plays in the German theatre. It remained in a fragmentary state at the time of his early death in 1837. *Woyzeck* is often seen as 'working class' tragedy, though it can also be viewed as portraying the tragedy of human jealousy. Woyzeck, a lonely soldier, is living with Marie, the mother of his child who is not blessed by the church, as the child was born out of wedlock. Woyzeck earns extra money for his family by agreeing to take part in medical experiments conducted by the Doctor. At one of these experiments, the Doctor tells Woyzeck that he must eat nothing but peas. Woyzeck is breaking down and he begins to experience a series of visions. Meanwhile, Marie grows tired of Woyzeck and a handsome drum major sleeps with her. With his suspicions growing, Woyzeck confronts the

drum major, who beats Woyzeck up and humiliates him. Finally, Woyzeck stabs Marie to death by a pond. Büchner ends it with Woyzeck disposing of the knife in the pond while trying to clean himself of the blood. This course of events falls into place over the span of a day, without modification or pruning. The goal of the form of realism used in *Woyzeck*-naturalism- is to “return to nature and to man-direct observation, exact anatomy, the acceptance and depiction of what is”. In this work, character is first and foremost, as we focus on who Woyzeck is and his circumstance, then plot comes as a secondary ideal in the play. Further, the language used in *Woyzeck* was of the common man of this time, though seemingly mouthy for modern language, this work sought to be in touch with the common man of the era, what was spoken everyday. We see that through *Woyzeck* and naturalism, we are meant to perceive theatre the way we perceive our daily lives. Further, we are meant to understand and worry about the characters we are seeing onstage, more so than the events unfolding in a condensed plot.

While today, it seems we employ both plot and character equally in the theatre, keep in mind that when naturalism was instated, the style of acting was essentially actors standing in grandiose fashion projecting lines in place to tell a story. The creation of naturalism in turn has created modern theatre and realistic acting as we know it today, rather than the almost farcical style of acting that was classical acting. Classical acting involved essentially standing in place and reciting lines at the top of your lungs, with a powerful booming voice that was supposed to capture the audience, rather than the story. The ideals of naturalism were like a remedy to a bad stylistic choice that had happened and would eventually evolve into what we know today as modern realism. To continue with looking at realism as a whole, we seek to look at the truth in daily life, rather than imagination and fantasy. By employing these ideas, it can be thought that realism is the modern and most useful form of theatre. Looking further toward the modern

theatre, one can turn to the work of Bertolt Brecht, a German theatre theorist, creator, dramaturg, director and essential jack of all trades.

#### IV. BRECHT

Bertolt Brecht was a German poet, playwright, and theatrical reformer whose epic theatre departed from the conventions of theatrical illusion and developed the drama as a social and ideological forum for leftist causes. He worked in Berlin, where his work and self transformed into that of a Marxist. For this he would be sent to exile in Scandinavia and eventually flee to the US to create theatre. Due to the era of McCarthyism, he would flee less than 6 years into his stay in 1947 (Britannica). However during his time in the United States, he would write some of his most important and cherished works, including *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (1939; *Mother Courage and Her Children*); *Leben des Galilei* (1943; *The Life of Galileo*); *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (1943; *The Good Woman of Setzuan*); *Der Aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui* (1957; *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*); (1948; *Herr Puntila and His Man Matti*; and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (first produced in English, 1948; *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, 1949). When he returned to Berlin, he was able to create the Berliner Ensemble, a company in which his own works were the focus of all of his time.

In looking at his theoretical work, Brecht strove to create epic theatre, which sought to be propaganda and to “estrangle and elicit awareness, to stir reflection” on the work being presented. To do this, he created a form in which song and dance were used to break the audience from becoming attached to the characters, along with projections and instead look at what they were saying and the true meaning behind their words. Just as a scene is getting to a point where the audience can begin to sympathize with a protagonist, the music and song are played to take away from the moment. In order to do this, he messed with the common form of the time period,

which dealt mostly in heavy realism and used this change to highlight the content he was presenting. For an exemplar, one can look at his play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. This play was written in 1939, in the years leading up to World War 2, and is considered to be both an anti-war play and a play with a message against capitalism, displaying its detriments to its followers through the story of Mother Courage and her children's subsequent deaths. In this play, form is used to sculpt the audience into a way of thinking, or at minimum attempt to do so, as it often failed to estrange audiences who got connected to the emotional storyline. As stated before, art is only material for ideology, both in content and form. Regardless of the ideals that were created and found, the relationship of content and form is an unbreakable bond, as they must co-exist in this and any work. Without the form of sudden song and dance, *Mother Courage and Her Children* is a sad play about a mother who thinks business is all life is and ever will be. Without content, we're left with a random playlist of songs that we can't derive meaning from as we don't have a story to even pull ideas from. This relationship of form, content and his own theory is clearly defined in this play and is a strong one, which leads one to wonder what the relationship looks like today, nearly 80 years later.

While not exact to the Brechtian method, today's modern theatre conceptualizes it's work in a similar method. Being the one of the biggest names to break the realistic model into the idealistic, he is often cited any time a modern play breaks from the norm. Brecht's idea of conceptualization is now common place among German theatre practitioners and directors specifically, creating what is know as Regitheatre or the Director's theatre. The usage of concept driven work, projections, song and dance are common place in this theatre field, using rock bands and anti-America/Westernization images. Further, the exploitation of form and content in theatrical work has come from Brecht almost directly, as he worked during one of the first

largely philosophical turn points in recent history, World War 2, which shifted art more toward an intellectual side and forced art to accommodate the issues that came with and followed the war. By tinkering with form, Brecht opened the door to all artists to bring their vision to the world, without being stuck in a cookie cutter format that was already forming through commercialization of theatre in America. Jumping not far ahead in time, the last theorist in this work dealt with creating theatre that truly attacked and resonated with the audience, his name was Antonin Artaud.

## V. ARTAUD

Before delving into his theory, it is important to understand the background of Artaud to begin to appreciate his work and the reasons why he came to his theories. Antonin Artaud was born on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1896 in Marseilles, France, where he lived with his parents, his father being a wealthy ship fitter and his mother born of a Greek background. His childhood was marked with illness and accidents, which would lead to eventual long term pain and nervous depression, haunting him for the rest of his life. Briefly in the army before being discharged, Artaud would eventually go to Paris under medical supervision to study under actor/director Charles Dullin and began to become fascinated with the Surrealist movement headed by Andre Breton (Lewis). Artaud would later begin work in the Short-lived *Théâtre Alfred Jarry*. where he would work with Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron. This theatre experienced little success, and is often cited as a downfall of Artaud's career in theatre. Later on in his life, Artaud had developed addictions to hallucinogens like opium, which would repeatedly cause him to be admitted to hospitals and sanitariums. Declared insane, Artaud sent to a rest home where he would later die of cancer in during the year 1948. Despite much hard work and deliberation his part, most of his

work ultimately failed, even his Adaptation of *The Cenci*, made based upon his Theatre of Cruelty (Lewis). It was the ideal and theory used in *The Cenci*, that actually brought him the most recognition, and of his critics much admiration. Although his ideal theatre did not come to fruition at this time or any during his lifetime, it is his idea known as the theatre of Cruelty, from *The Theatre and It's Double*, which makes him a notable and influential theorist in the eyes of many theatre participants and audiences.

The Theatre of Cruelty is a method used and created by Artaud, in order to make a desensitized audience aware of the darkest aspects of their being, through an attack on their senses. It is assumed that by cruelty, it is meant that there will be bloodshed, screaming and hysteria, with nothing else. However, according to Artaud “It is a mistake to give the word 'cruelty' a meaning of merciless bloodshed and disinterested, gratuitous pursuit of physical suffering” (Artaud 46). Cruelty is meant more in a mental perspective of fear, being formed by using instability that is normally kept deep within the human mind. It does not exist without consciousness, but rather more of an awareness of sensory factors. Through this work, he forces an audience to show their true fear and attention. Cruelty is not only written into his works, but in all aspects and spectacles of the theatre and as stated by Artaud,” Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration, it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds.” (Artaud 48). Furthermore, the actor was meant to be persuasive rather than use personal acting skill, as they were simply a “sob” meant to force the audience to open up to the cruelty they face. The main goal of the actor and the hypothetical play was achieved “...by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a

level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior...” (Artaud 47). While this was not ideal for the actor, this allowed for the usage of cruelty to be optimal and for the show to truly resonate within the audience, “organically re-involving man, his ideas about reality, and his poetic place in reality” (Artaud 55). As there is not an exemplar well known enough to be used which uses this work of his, let’s instead look to how this work effects the modern theatre in a more direct fashion.

These usages of his methodology still resonate within our modern theatre practices, though not directly linked. The usage of spectacle in modern shows is a good exemplar of this, along with audience participation shows that make the audience the actors in a piece (like a murder mystery dinner). Artaud sought to directly affect an audience with the work being shown, and attacking their senses through his work, which is what he refers to as cruelty. While cruelty is no longer a word we should use to describe theatre in the world we live in, the term is still used symbolically in our work. In modern theatre, there is a movement for more interactive theatre that forces the audience to not sit idly by, but rather become part of the sensory unit actually playing the show. While this sounds cult-like, it is a method to be different and further branch out theatre as a unique art form, and truly make the audience think, as was the goal of Artaud. Further, the modern actor is effected by the work of Artaud, in terms of how it has changed the perception of what an actor’s role truly is. As stated earlier, they are a “sob” meant to force the audience to open up to the cruelty they are facing in the theatre. Rather than being skilled actors, which to a point is important, the actor is meant to make life happen and make the audience see what that life is, acting as an emotional faucet, filling up the empty cup which is the audience to what is truly being shown. In looking at the work of Artaud and all the other aforementioned

theorists, one can begin to see the value of theatre theory in the modern theatre more clearly than ever before.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Theoretical work is often believed to only be useful in its contemporary state, as it speaks to immediate issues facing the theatre and solutions with the same immediacy. However, in looking at the work of Aristotle, Zola, Brecht and Artaud, the works of many different eras of the theatre, we can begin to see that some theories outlive their creator and remain relevant to the modern theatre, despite recognition. The idea of structuring shows based on the six elements of plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle has created modern storytelling in general, along with the theatrical version of it. Further, Aristotle's ideas on the usage of probable impossibility provide us with fictional stories which we can not only see ourselves and truth in, but also find enjoyment in that work. Then, speaking on the work of Zola, theatre theory further broadens its grasp on the modern theatre. Zola goes further beyond the actor, and includes theorization on the usage of genre, giving us naturalism. Though sounding extreme in his writing, almost like a science experiment, this work is what we do in creating our modern form of realism. Brecht teaches us about the usage of the Epic theatre and conceptualization on the whole, which aid in giving us a variety of ways to approach shows and genre in theatre. The work of Artaud lastly talks about the re-involvement of man in the theatre, through the usage of his theatre of cruelty. The idea of an attack on the senses resonates in modern terms of our large scale spectacle and more contemporary approach to the theatre. In conclusion, though theoretical works may not be directly called an inspiration to modern works, their longevity and effect can still be seen throughout the modern theatre.

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