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Clinton, Trump and the Theater of Cruelty

By *Terry Simons*

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It is rumored that both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump will give short televised statements prior to Monday night's first presidential debate at Hofstra University, expressing their innermost sorrow about the wrecked marriage of Brad and Angelina and acknowledge the dark times we are living through.

This will happen before the candidates move on to less significant matters.

I joke about Brad and Angie, but the presidential candidates will definitely, with the help of big TV, dodge important subjects while attempting to impress upon the audience the profundity of their concern for _____ (fill in the blank).

Election 2016! (I keep hearing echoes of G.W. Bush saying, "They hate our freedom." Or, "You're either with us or against us." This is terribly invasive, like hearing a snake rattle before it strikes you, or Robert Reich telling me Hillary will be a "fine president.")

I know some people are looking forward to the "entertainment value" of the Clinton vs. Trump debates, and to a degree I get it. The candidates are hilariously inept, hilariously vague, hilariously rich and hilariously hideous.

Such is the dilemma of imperialists everywhere, and bottom line—that's show biz.

Neither is “presidential” in the old-fashioned sense, or remotely likable. Neither wants to discuss the real problems facing the US, though I did see a tweet from HC the other day saying something really needs be done about the latest spate of police violence unleashed on Black Americans.

It’s true something need be done, but we won’t see it happen until neoliberal pols like Clinton and imbeciles like Trump are run out of the room.

But that’s your problem America. I’m here to talk about the French playwright Antonin Artaud, and what became known as the *Theater of Cruelty*.

For surely that is what awaits us in Monday’s first debate; a bit of theater, a touch of cruelty.

Widely recognized as one of the greatest theater artists to ever live, Antonin Artaud is today a neglected man, particularly in the US because...well, because Americans prefer musicals.

But like any artist worth his hill-of-beans art installation in a fancy gallery, Artaud in his time (1896-1948) had plenty to say about the world as he knew it.

Today, in a US that can’t get enough mainstream in its bloodstream, he is completely unknown, except by other theater artists and historians. This is but one reason why much of the rest of the world has a skeptical view of the US and its abiding stupidity and will to cultural arrogance, which is so frequently and stupendously wrong-headed.

(Hillary places *her* “deplorables” neatly in a basket and somehow miraculously avoids the same fate! Not in my book, sister.)

In a nation whose leaders, circa 2002, began disparaging Euro (freedom fries, the old Europe, etc.) influences during the tick-tock of its war machine’s coo-coo clock hour; in a nation of profound ignorance reveling in its moronic worldview; in a nation rigged against the influence of intellectual advancement that is not attached in some meaningful way to capital; in this nation of half-wits and shoddy politicians who have joined together to debase and destroy culture, only to replace it with doll houses (“ticky-tacky boxes”) filled with painted figurines and all manner of gizmos that serve to enslave the majority—it is in this nation that the hicks have conspired to take over—and they have ignored Artaud.

Artaud is rolling around in his grave, cursing the gods and saying, “I told you so!”

Unhinged from an early age, like Donald Trump, Antonin Artaud invented the *Theater of Cruelty*, describing it as an expression in open space which should envelope the audience in an incomprehensible reality; theatrical expression becomes cruel in that its focus and intent is to remind the audience that it is already dead. Theater becomes the heart and blood of the living, and provokes either physical illness or discomfort.

Theater becomes a social polemic by making the audience uncomfortable with living, or rather by recognition of the uncomfortable that seizes humanity in our darkest suffering. Surrealists, of

whom Artaud was an early organizer, argued passive life is smug—complacency and deadness are indistinguishable.

Theater should then be shock therapy in a sense, hinted Artaud, which happens to be one of the treatments the artist finally succumbed to in his battle with schizophrenia.

If theater fails to make one feel dizzy with angst and trepidation, if one does not feel his senses exploding, myth deflating, anger regenerating, the play has failed on some primeval level, suggested Artaud.

Artaud was, again like Trump, mad, which in art may have some value, but which in politics can lead to worldwide calamity.

Oh, but how the playwright suffered for his genius and hallucinations! He wrote his major theoretical and philosophical works between stays in various psychiatric wards.

Over the course of his life his dependency on opiates drove him deeper and deeper into a hallucinated reality. His friends stuck by him through the madness, but he did die alone in a hospital, of stomach cancer, in 1948.

At one of his last public performances, he made his friends, some of the leading figures of France's intellectual hierarchy, so uncomfortable that they fell into a pin-drop silence of wonderment. Mad and drug-addled for years, Artaud read his discombobulated lecture aloud, repeatedly losing his place, his thoughts tangential and fragmented, until he began to speak in a gibberish tongue only he understood.

Finally, he dropped his papers, then his glasses, and fell to the floor groping as the audience gasped and fell silent, embarrassed that it had come to this.

Artaud was hopeless!

But was he? Andre Gide waited, waited, watching Artaud from the front row as lecturer frantically tried to gather his papers, find his glasses, and continue with his presentation.

Gide applauded and raced up to the stage, embraced Artaud with both arms, raised him off the floor and led him away.

It was not a cruel trick, but rather a cruel reality. Artaud had proved his point by making everyone feel miserable.

And so shall Hillary and Donald Monday night as they spew their sickening gibberish from the stage before being pulled from harm's way by their Gide-like handlers.