

Theater performance  
theory overview  
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Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski are two famous artists who presented two different views of humanity within theater. Even though they conceived productions that were religious experiences for the audience and the actors, the nature of the experiences for each artist was different (Albert 73). This is because one of the artists sees man as moral while the other sees man as immoral. Artaud saw performance in theater to be surrounded by cruelty, the meaning of cruelty to him was that; there was evil; the act of will was goodness, an effort; to live a good life one was required an act of will, with great effort to offset the inherent evil in the world; hence, it is cruel to live without evil (Bermel 40).

Their performances therefore, ended up being similar in several aspects, such as style, artistic goals, and religious experience of theater. In their theatrical style, their performances frequently had the aspect of violence as a major theme. They thought that the performer should not be separate from their audience during the performance. In the end, both artists had their audiences around and in the action (Chambers 4). Such was seen where they staged their plays in factories, hospitals, schools, airplanes and any real environment. Looking at the aesthetic concept, Artaud and Grotowski both agree that what makes theater to be theater is the relationship between audience and performer (Croyden 20). They also believe that theater performance involves the performer presenting the full psychological and emotional essence.

According to (Brockett 20) their artistic goals were directed towards the creation of theatrical work that would benefit the whole society. We find that Grotowski theatrical performances were surrounded by the themes of

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martyrdom, persecution, and suffering of individuals who had debatable worth like that of Christianity. Such themes required and made the audience to think more deeply about their purpose, life and meaning. Conversely, Artaud's theatrical performance was based on the function of civilian outlet for the performer and the audience of the destructive and negative impulses that are found in every individual (Hayman 13).

Jerzy Grotowski is from Poland and was an internationally acclaimed director whose work is mostly found from the Laboratory Theater from 1959-1976, which revolutionised modern theater (Hodge 13). On the other hand, Antonin Artaud was from France, and experimented with various theories within the theater scene in the 30s. His work did influence contemporary artists. This paper shall discuss the theater performance theory as it was influenced by Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski, who were the chief influencers of theater since World War II.

Artaud experience in theater saw him go through his profession as an actor, director, avant-gardists, and playwright. He was able to exert posthumous influence on contemporary theater through his work which was mostly in writing (Oscar & Robert 748). We find that he proclaimed theater to be the 'theater of cruelty' that is based on the development of sensory and gesture actor's responses on an extreme level. He required the actors to present an aggressive nature during the development of each stage performance. The purpose of this aggressive development in the actor was to produce the desired audience, through communication on a psychological level through the selected words. This therefore means that Grotowski made use the psychological effect that selected words have in order to realize the desired

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audience for each playwright he staged (Theodore 81). Therefore his performance theory for theater is based on the use of gesture to produce a psychological effect in the audience. His work and ideals only achieved international recognition in the 60s when the production of Royal Shakespeare and Peter Brook Company show cased. These were mostly seen in productions like ' The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat' which was performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton (Auslander 3). This was under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade. The reason why this piece of art was considered the thwarter of cruelty was the emotional hysteria that was in the performance.

Artaud influenced theater performance through his opinion that it was not more of psychological domain but rather it was more of a physical, plastic domain (Kegley & Robert 125). Within such a domain the actor was an athlete of the heart where feelings, actions, emotion was appropriate to the theme. Artaud simply was telling directors and actors that in as much as there was truth in the inner message; this truth to the audience was what they could see from feelings and believing. The desired effect in his performance theory was realized through the use of psychological effects of gestures, words and feelings on the audience. Therefore, this presents the biggest similarity between Artaud and Grotowski in performance theory of theater.

Within this context we find that Jerzy proposed the ' poor theater' (Hodge 23). He was seen to have rejected the notion that theater could attempt in matching the effects and spectacle of film and television. He declared that the basic element in theater is the relationship between the spectator and <https://assignbuster.com/theater-performance-theory-overview-theatre-essay/>

the actor. In his view, theater could exist without the make ups, lighting, separate stage, sound effects, however without the actor-spectator relationship it cannot exist. To this theater theorist, the issue was that the actor had the duty of working using his body to communicate. The main instruments then to this actor are then the plastic, physical and vocal training that gives him skills and training (Grotowski 24). Within the theoretical grounds, the actor looks for the signs that can express movement and sound.

To Artaud, the body is the third referent that in mimetic, dialogue, psychological theater, it is a dramatic situation that is able to convey. As compared to Grotowski, Artaud sees the body as the secondary sign for oral logos (Ronald 24). Therefore for the performer who is acting for any given vocal or psychological behavior, is beyond all instruments in the world of actions that are concretized without making mention to a body in any manners. Artaud requires that there is an interact approach to performance in order for the bodies of the character and the actor to act. This interaction is expected to be very different from any semiotics signs fashioned by the words and gestures of the performer on the stage and that are immediately interpreted by the audience (Ronald 40). The reference to the body as a complex referent to Artaud is referring to what can be called as epiphanic function of bodies based on the understanding of the character. Such a character within the performance theory is expected to act according to a specific scene and dialogue as depicted by the playwright.

This epiphanic function is also seen in Grotowski's work, which also shows the epiphanic function of the character as communicative (Temkine 31). This <https://assignbuster.com/theater-performance-theory-overview-theatre-essay/>

is manifested in terms of somatic and material corporality in performance. Therefore, within the performance theory of Grotowski and Artaud, the body in this theater calls for semiotic manifestations unlike the semiotic communication. In the semiotic manifestations there is no regard for autonomous theatrical as the rejection of the psychological theater (Esslin 25). This autonomous theatrical is considered by many as the evolution in psychological theater. This evolution is seen to take the form of body: the third referent-material support of the action and verbal logos; epiphanic action of the body: complex referent-psychosomatic charge; theaterized body: prime referent-autonomous theatricality. Therefore we find that both Grotowski and Artaud made good use of the body in order to revolutionize modern theater performance (David 13).

They were able to do this through the incursion of the body within the textual modern theater by splitting the signs of logos and soma. This means they reorganized the theater to narrate the body as an instinctual structure. The signs of logos make use of ambiguity through dialogue that has structure where the body is a subject. For this reason we find that Artaud's performance was based on the use of words that were reduced by incantations, shouts, gestures, groans (Croyden 34).

One of the single major aspects of man within the field of theater is that man is a performing animal. This is because within the performance of theater, man becomes a self-performing animal, reflexive performance, and reveals himself only to himself (Brockett & Findlay 32). Self-performance means that the theater performer is expected to get rid of meditation and use impulses in order to produce effective performance. This is the basic requirement of <https://assignbuster.com/theater-performance-theory-overview-theatre-essay/>

the performance theory form every performer. By performers making use of impulse in their performance they end up performing to themselves and in the end effectively communicating to the audience (Brockett & Findlay 33).

The beginning of modern performance was marked during the era of Grotowski and Artaud, where actors were seen more than mere interpreters of the text as they began being repositioned as the center of the performance.

The development of the modern performance theorists and practitioners was seen by Grotowski and Artaud who are some of the major contributors.

According to (Brockett & Findlay 35) the idea behind modern performance is the capture of deep psychological and emotional layering and authenticity.

Therefore, in order to understand the performances of Artaud and Grotowski, we must analyse their stage plays on a psychological level. This will require the revealing of any psychological effects their plays have on both the performance, audience and the actors. In (Auslander 3), without a doubt where psychology is used, the human emotions are evoked, for this reason a good performance within this theory must evoke strong emotions in the audience and actors.

Artaud's gain in this psychological and emotional performance was realized when he encountered the Balinese theater in the Colonial Exposition back in 1931 (Hodge 6). This encounter deeply influenced him to develop ideas that allowed him to create performances that were deeply physical and sensual.

Artaud gave important reference to context were performance

commemorated non-verbal constituents of consciousness that were able to arouse therapeutic emotions in the audience (Chambers 4). He however did

not give modern performance concrete technique that performers would use, <https://assignbuster.com/theater-performance-theory-overview-theatre-essay/>

but made the contribution that the performer had potential physically (Chambers 4). This was could the effective athleticism where the performer could make use of their emotions. It was this perspective that influenced the physical theater in the late 20th century of Grotowski. For this reason, we find that it is believed that Artaud did in fact influence the theory of Grotowski.

The idea through out the development of theater, since World War II by the two theorists was that traditions played a central role in the development of the performers training and performance aesthetics. For example, we find that Grotowski to create this deep emotional connection through performance drew from martial arts, holistic practices like yoga as he prepared the body and mind of the performer (Hodge 6). Grotowski on the other hand, was interested in the physical actions of Stanislavsky (Hodge 4). In the process he developed psychophysical techniques that were concerned with the development of the performer's expression and imagination through physical structure discipline. It was very vital to Grotowski that the performer justified, by means of real and imaginary methods, specific details of the training. We can therefore, draw from this experience that the two stage directors were trying to make the performer to live truthfully on the stage. This truthfulness was in fact depicted through various aesthetic frameworks (Hodge 5).

Of the many proponents of this performance theory is the improvisation technique that has been characterized in theater and frequently practiced in rehearsal processes. These have been an important aspect for all performance practitioners on the stage. To (Albert 74) within this context, we <https://assignbuster.com/theater-performance-theory-overview-theatre-essay/>



find the modern performer making use of extemporaneous exercise to explore and express the authentic emotions that according to Jerzy and Artaud are necessarily to assist the performer to understand the thoughts of the parts they are playing (Albert 74). The two theorists and practitioners made use of these improvisational exercises as a means to represent the character the actor has taken up. To the two, the actor's body is known to know feelings and thoughts learn to better express these aspects on a deeper level in order to influence the performance of the theater (Albert 74). It is through this serious exercise that the performer was required to acquire the skills of body impulses that would assist them to enter the body of the character while communicating to the audience.

Such concepts on performance were proposed by the two theorists in their writings and journals that detailed their thoughts and ideas on performance (David 5). For example to Artaud, performance in theater was achieved through the use of gestures that to him were 'spontaneous conflagration' that was able to touch everything. Therefore, to Artaud, the gestures in the theatrical scene were to go to the extremes in order to have an understanding. Like we find, he was able to make constant use of improvisation through the use of aggressive pushing of the expressions to take them to the highest levels. To (David 5) Artaud's performance stage was characterized by language that was highly 'concrete', which was ideally of the physical sense. In the end, he expected any good theatrical performance to have concrete language that made use of everything on that performance stage. We find that his ability to improvise was due to the fact that he proposed and made use experimentation with gestures (David 5).

Moreover, it is within Artaud's 'theater of cruelty' where the actor finds it difficult as they risk their bodies in order to learn (Esslin 43). This is because the performance set requires the performers to make use of extreme action to get the meaning of the play. According to (Esslin 43) Such an approach according to Artaud makes it possible for the actor and audience to have a keen perception of their world. Therefore to achieve this, he made his performances and expected every theatrical performance to have continuity in creation.

Jerzy was similar too to Artaud since he viewed the theater as the space where expression could happen. For his theoretical performance he saw the theater as the best space for expression. He like Artaud also had experimentation and improvisation as the basis for his theater productions (Esslin 43). This is because we find that he continually tried to improve theater and what was theater. However, he believed that this rested on the vested interest and the performer's art and also on the presence of the audience. He mostly desired that the actor's could improve their gestures and actions to be more impulsive rather than premeditated (Esslin 45). Premeditation then would mean that the actors would not have fluid movements and therefore lack effective communication to the audience. In the end through the development of skills necessary the actor or performer in theater was able to be more impulsive. Impulsive gestures and movement in theater is a product only of experimentation and improvised exercise in rehearsals that hone techniques. In his concept we find that the meaning for the poor theater was one that had been stripped bare. Grotowski described this methodology of his as a training process that made use of elimination,

through the performer, instead of the building of skills. The performer is taken through a process of self penetration where they act through revelation against the audience (Chambers 4).

Within this performance aspect Grotowski believed that a performer should be able to show their inner most emotions and less of the impulses. This expression of the emotions is only capable if the performer is able to peel back every layer of their self. Therefore, their theatrical performance should be characterized by meaning and emotions in the bodies and faces. In the process he showed that in order for this requirement to be achieved the performer was expected to realize this through their initiative. Such initiatives were only possible if the performer made adequate use of improvisatory aspects within the theater stage.

Grotowski was able to realize this in his work and productions through the use of exercises that gave the performer the ability to explore themselves through bodies and gestures (Kegley and Robert 125). Often, his performances were characterized by the action and movement like that of animals, stretching, rolling, working of the voices and breathing with each performance piece. It was through such exercises that this theorist was able to feel the performers learning ability. In the end, the performances through exercise were able to give theater performances the real meaning of life and the communication of life to the audience. To (Hayman 23) Such achievement of goals was only achievable to Grotowski through improvisatory exercises and methods that gave performers advantage of the qualities of theater.

According to (Auslander 91), Wladimir Krysinski pointed that the autonomous theatricality of Artaud and Grotowski, is not the rejection of psychological theater. Their theater concept examined the evolution of psychological theater, which traced the notion that the human body is a site where autonomous expression assertion is conceived. This represents the physical nature of truth that is represented by the performer's body on the stage. The theorists Artaud and Grotowski allied since they both wanted to de-realize the body of the performer and make it disappear. The aim of this psychological theater was to make the body of the actor disappear right into that of the character. This is the goal of the autonomous performance in theater, in the words of Grotowski, "to make the body vanish and burn in a flash of pure psychic apprehension" (1968; Auslander 91).

As Michael Foucault argued, a fraction of the object of the social discussion is the disciplining of the body in order to make additionally manageable. This is the concept behind the performance theory as the social discourse is able to manage the body by stealing materiality from it and subjecting it to text discipline. This text is either dramatic or archetypal psychic impulse.

According to (Auslander 91) the aspect of Avant-gardist within the performance theory often claims the liberation of the body and therefore, it challenges the political and social hegemony. In the end this falls short in effectively conceptualizing the liberation, by deteriorating in seeing the body as ideally produced.

The problem is that modern performance theorists like Grotowski, have refused to acknowledge that the body is coded by the social discourse. They

fail to see that the body in fact has codes that originate for the social discourse. This body then is metaphysical, mystical notion, that is highly social, raceless, undifferentiated, genderless and hence it is entirely neutral. Therefore having looked at Grotowski's avant-gardist theory of performance there is needed to see the performing body as the instrument that counters hegemonic produces art (Theodore 25). Such a body within the performance theory is conceived by Artaud as that part that can only be understood from analyzing the history of the body. Such developments in modern performance theory of theater were simultaneous with transformations during the modern social era (Theodore 34).

Looking at the contributions Artaud and Grotowski made to this modern performance theory in theater, we find that the two theorists did in fact rely on the religious themes to describe man in their performance (Oscar and Robert 32). This presents the other similarity, where theater is a religious experience that gives spiritual adulation for the audience and the performer. Ideally we find that Artaud's performance compares to the traditional service within the house of worship in which religious comfort reconciles the congregation. Mean while, Grotowski's theater depicts the tribal religious set up that tries to purify religious myths, and orientations (Ronald 34).

Therefore the use of religion within their performance theory means that both theorists are the same. However, we find that by critically looking at the Laboratory theater production the nature of art is different from that of Artaud. This is because each artist is functioning at different levels of awareness. Otherwise, both artists do realize that effective theater performance is religious and highly spiritual (Ronald 36). This is because

though Grotowski's theater productions show that man is moral, which of Artaud show man to be immoral, but each show the spirituality involved.

Grotowski created his theater pieces, to essentially to show that the moral man has intrinsic concern for their fellow men's well fare. In contrast, Artaud assumed the immoral man to have innate selfish characteristics and behaviors that harmed others while the man tried to satisfy their lust.

These two facets of the religious views of the theorist Grotowski can be found in his productions and the expectation of his audience. As an example, the production by Grotowski, Calderon's "The Constant Prince", and the play, "Apocalypsis cum figuris" which was adapted from the bible, contend with the painful plight of the figure of Christ and the Christian martyrs (Temkine 54). This artist needs from his audience not only to get engrossed in the play or dram, but also they make judgment for themselves on who is wrong or right within the play. In (Temkine 56) Artaud on the other hand, made the theater to be the place of ceremony, ritual, healing, by becoming church and hospital. In this pace the audience had the chance to exorcise out the demons of cruelty and they were also able to contract plagues and be healed of them (Temkine 58). In the view of this paper this is like the absinthe-ridden Aristotelian tragedy that has the combination of holy water and laudanum.

We also find that the two theorists have created their performances to surround violence. The violence is inflicted upon the characters in the plays and dramas and consequently, shows the protagonist (Kegley and Robert 125). We find that the modern performance theory heavily makes use of and advocates for the use of violence as a means of depicting the protagonist <https://assignbuster.com/theater-performance-theory-overview-theatre-essay/>

within the framework of the art work. A close look at each of the pieces of work of Artaud and Grotowski reveals that the artists make use of violence genuinely (Kegley and Robert 125). The intention of Grotowski would seem is to make the audience uncomfortable through passivity. The efficacy of this intention can be said to then be based on the priori assumption, where the audience is affected by the spectacle of the feelings and sufferings of another human being. The assumption that for this to be effective the audience must end up feeling uneasy, worry a lot and even think concerning the feelings of suffering that are projected by the performer on stage (Bermel 51). In light of this ten, we can say that Grotowski tried to effectively make use of violence as a means of realizing responsive reactions from the audience. This type of performance has become a characteristic of the modern performance theory. The requirement is that the performer will be able to communicate to the audience emotional sides of the character that show their construct of violence. Therefore to (Bermel 52) this type of performance was also similar in Grotowski's production of the " Arkopolis".

In this production the success of the intentions of Grotowski were dependent on the audience humane nature and their indifference to the actors' condition. This play made use of violence were Grotowski, concerned the play with the fate of the inmates within a concentration camp (Bermel 54). The religious theme within the performance was shown by the actor's acting a scene of the last feast, of the resurrection. The scene depicted crude violation of humans, with the sight of the gas caber, where at the end of the play, Grotowski makes the characters b led to the chamber by a headless puppet, that they believe to b the messiah. The effect on the audience was

that of shock that was created by the performance of the actors, through the use of feelings, gestures and emotions of utter desolation, sickly skin that was very pale, cheeks that were hollow, very dilute pupils, which did not make use of make up but performance (Bermel 67). Such a performance then shows Grotowski's ability to make use of performances to depict violence and therefore extract feelings of desolation, suffering in the audience.

If the same perspective can be applied to Artaud, we find that it does not necessarily apply. This is because Artaud believes that the feelings of people tend towards instincts of perverse and violence. As we have seen in the cases of Grotowski, the protagonist is the victim; however, in the works of Artaud, the protagonist is the victimizer. For instance, the work by Artaud, "The Cenci" from Shelley, has a protagonist who is a wealthy, cruel and greedy count, that lust after his daughter (Brockett and Findlay 32). Similar to Grotowski, Artaud, requires the performers to be very convincing, yet, the response expected from the audience is that of sympathy for the Count and not for the daughter. Sympathy for the daughter is only required after the daughter brutally revenges. We find that these performances of Artaud are used to make the audience cleanse themselves from their own destructive thoughts and impulses by giving audiences, acts that bring them face to face with their consciousness. Nevertheless, Artaud's unlike Grotowski's success depends on an assumption that the human instincts are to hurt one another rather than help (Brockett and Findlay 57).

In the process of having two types of views of man within the theater

performance theory, gives two separate purposes for theater. Where,  
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Grotowski makes the assumption that his audience will have enough morals to care for the difference between wrong and right. Grotowski then feels that he is able to stimulate his audience to critically analyse the faculties through the use of dramas that depict moral conflicts. For this reason, we find that within the drama, " Arkopolis" Grotowski is trying to make the audience to make a consideration of if or not there is a dangerous illusion from the promise of salvation in Christianity.

Therefore, we are finding that Grotowski is advocating for modern performance to create theatrical dramas where they give benefits to the society, through the sharpening of the awareness of the audience on what is wrong and right. Artaud conversely, believes that the society can only benefit if the audience is made to understand that, it cares less for this distinction. Then the implication is that Artaud is effectively recognizing and confronting the dark impulses in humans and consequently make humans free and gain control of these impulses. In effect Artaud expected that his theory of performance " theater of cruelty" to have popularity, and in the process purge the world out of the evil instincts in each person in the society. This is through the letting of the instincts to have actualization under safe context in theater.

We also find that from a closer examination of the two performance theorist's perspectives, there is the lift by spirituality through theater performance. However, each theorist's spiritual lift is different. For Grotowski, the spiritual exaltation is realized through the performance depicting pain and suffering. In the drama " The Constant Prince", the prince character submits to castration and torture, where seriously suffers

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physically. At the same time, the physical suffering shows that there is a higher level to the actions of the prince that show motions of ecstasy rather than agony. Grotowski depicts the prince to be at a point of grace. The expectation of the audience is that they decide for themselves, the actor's ordeal and character are meaningful, where the audience is moved by the spectacle of a suffering noble. The expectation of the modern theory then in theater performance is that the performer will be able to physically and psychologically endure the pain to the extent that they exceed those of the audience to arouse a sense of wonder. In comparison, Artaud uses a different road towards ecstasy. The audience is expected to empathize in "the Cenci" with the Count's incestuous lusts. The actors are expected to perform and act out all the evil in the audience to exhaustion leaving the audience and the performer very cleansed, leading to spiritual purity.

In addition, the performance of Grotowski reveals to the audience a spiritual lift that is voluntary. This is a performance that evokes free choice on all levels. For this to be achieved, Grotowski required performances to be acted out in front of a few audiences between 40 and 60. The concept was the elite audience, which was not necessarily rich or wealthy but those who hungered for spirituality and wanted to communicate through such performances. The expectation of Grotowski was that such performances drew the audience into it, rather than swept into it. While free choice has a place in Grotowski's performance it does not have that in Artaud's performances. To Artaud, the impulses and passions are too strong for individuals to do a thing about them. The implied attitude is that the manner in which we are free in the world, makes more sense in the theater of Artaud. The reason is because we

are finding that through such uncontrolled impulses, men are making more mistakes and evil acts. For this reason the cause of the mistakes man makes are the uncontrolled free impulses as seen in the performances of Artaud's.

In stead of making the human think like the performance of Grotowski, Artaud wants the audience to feel. It is for this reason that the performances in theater within the realm of Artaud's work are seen to be very manipulative. Those playwrights and performers who choose to follow the example of Artaud end up with performances that are very controlling. The manipulation is being realized in the attempt of the performances trying to trigger aspects of psychic activity, by exposing the audience to certain images. Apart from the visual images created, there is also the use of the right aura. Aura was effectively used to manipulate the audience in Artaud's "The Cenci" through the use of sound and music that was rhythmic beats that was very hypnotic.

Interestingly Artaud and Grotowski depict the differences in man trough performance in two different Christian perspectives. These two perspectives are the protestant and catholic views. This is very contradictory of the fact that Artaud and Grotowski reject traditional religion since they believe that they do not fulfill their purpose any longer, to transform the spirituality of men. The two artists in their performances will be seen insisting that despite the rejection of these dogmas man still has spiritual needs, where trough conscious or unconscious use, traditional elements are seen in their performances. Religion is a major factor to both playwrights, since we find that they make use of religion as it is familiar to them in order to

communicate to their audiences. We can however; find that though <https://assignbuster.com/theater-performance-theory-overview-theatre-essay/>

playwright is an art, the idea presented to us by Grotowski and Artaud is that we cannot withdraw our religious influences on performance. Rather we can draw from experience the religious influences of both to create effective dram pieces.

We find that the two religions do depict the central elements of the performances of Artaud and Grotowski. For example, through Cath