1

ALFRED JARRY

From Of the Uselessness to Theatre of the Theatre (1896)

'Let us note that there are many theatre audiences, or at least two: that of the intelligent, small in number, and that of large number . . .' So wrote Jarry in reply to a questionnaire in 1896. He speaks again here for the former, whose number he now puts at five hundred.

What follows is an index of certain things that are notoriously horrid and incomprehensible to these five hundred spirits, and that encumber the stage uselessly: above all the *scenery* and the *actors*.

The scenery is hybrid, neither natural nor artifice. If it looked the same as nature it would be a superfluous duplicate. . . . It is not artifice in the sense that it does not offer the artist a realisation of the outside world seen through himself, or better created by himself. . . .

There are two kinds of setting: interiors and open air. They claim to represent rooms or natural fields. We shall not go back over the question of the stupidity of *trompe l'œil*;[1] it is agreed upon once and for all. Let us simply say that the said *trompe l'œil* creates an illusion for those who see crudely, that is to say, do not see, and shocks and offends those who see in an intelligent and discriminating fashion, by presenting them with a caricature by someone with no understanding. Zeuxis deceived brute beasts, they say, and Titian an innkeeper. . . .

We have tried *heraldic* scenery,[2] that is to say, designing the whole of a scene or act in a unified and uniform hue, the characters passing harmonically on the field of a coat of arms . . . each entering into the *locality* desired, or better, if the author has known what he wanted, into the true scenery which appears on stage by a process of exosmosis.[3] The signboard brought on according to changes of location avoids the periodic recall from the world of the mind caused by physical changes of scenery – scenery one perceives above all at the moment one sees it to be different.

In these conditions, every part of the scenery that meets a special need – a window that is opened, a door that is burst through – is a prop, and can be brought on like a table or a torch.

With make-up the actor assumes the character's face and should assume his body. Expressions, the play of the visage etc., are various contractions and extensions of the facial muscles. People have not considered that under the assumed face and the make-up the muscles remain the same, and that Mounet[4] and Hamlet do not have the same zygomatic formation,[5] although anatomically they are believed to be one man – or the difference is said to be negligible. By means of an enclosing *mask*, the actor should substitute for his head that of the CHARACTER in effigy. This would not have, as in the antique world, the appearance of tears or laughter (which are not characters) but the character of the part: the Miser, the Hesitant One, the Covetous, piling up his crimes...

And if the eternal character of the part is included in the mask, there is a simple means, similar to a kaleidoscope or even more a gyroscope, to highlight, one by one or severally, chance moments. . . . By slow movements of the head, from up to down and down to up, and librations[6] from side to side, the actor moves the mask's shadows over its whole surface. And experience proves that the six main positions (and the same for the profile, though these are less distinct), are sufficient for every expression. We do not give instances, because they vary according to the original essence of the mask; and because all those who have known how to look at a Guignol[7] could verify them.

As they are simple expressions, they are universal. The grave error of present pantomime is that it ends up with a conventional mime language, tiresome and incomprehensible. An example of this convention: a vertical ellipse around the face with the hand and a kiss on that hand to express beauty are supposed to suggest love. – Example of a universal gesture: the puppet shows his amazement by a violent recoil and by banging his head against the wings.

Through all these incidental happenings the intrinsic expression subsists, and in many scenes the best thing is the impassivity of the mask as it dispenses its hilarious or solemn words. This can be compared only to the inorganic nature of the skeleton concealed under the flesh, whose tragi-comic quality has been recognised throughout the ages.

It goes without saying that the actor must have a special *voice*, which is the voice of the role, as if the mouth cavity of the mask could emit only what the mask would say if its lip muscles were supple. It is best for them not to be supple, and for the delivery throughout the play to be monotone.

Translated by Richard Drain and Micheline Mabille

NOTES

1 Painting that 'deceives the eye'.

2 The original version of *King Ubu* was the third act of a four-act work, *Caesar Anti-Christ*. Each act shows the further metamorphosis of this Anti-Christ, from a golden cross into a heraldic band or fess, and then into the fleshly incarnation of Ubu himself. The second act is entitled 'The Heraldic Act'; each of its scenes is envisioned in terms of heraldry, and some consist simply of a heraldic motif, e.g. 'Scene II. Sable, a unicorn passant argent.' Here as elsewhere, his visual concept of theatre is of a kind of animated iconography.

3 *Exosmosis*: Jarry's notable erudition is evidenced in his frequent use of scientific terms. Exosmosis denotes the passing of a liquid etc. through a membrane from a region of high concentration to low. Jarry seems to suggest that the writer will bring the scene into being for the audience as if through the evenly-painted canvas 'membrane' of the set. In practice, the set for *Ubu*, whose production was in the hands of Aurelien Lugné-Poe, was painted to represent at the same time interiors and exteriors as well as different climatic zones, so that snow, blossoming apple trees, palm trees and a fireplace were all depicted. (See Arthur Symons' description in Roger Shattuck's *The Banquet Years*, London, Faber & Faber, 1959, p. 161). But Jarry had recommended a plain backdrop and no scenery, on the principle of the 'uniform . . . field' he recommends here.

4 Paul Mounet, one of the 'awe-inspiring *Shades*' whose memory still haunted the Comédie-Française when Jean-Louis Barrault joined it in the early 1940s. 'And in the Café de la Régence there survives the thundering Shade of Paul Mounet.' (Jean-Louis Barrault, *Reflections on the Theatre*, London, Rockliff, 1951, p. 92).

5 The zygomatic arch comprises the cheekbones and the front of the skull.

6 Again a scientific term: the librations of the moon denote the way it seems to oscillate as its 'edge' is alternately perceptible and imperceptible. Jarry seems to be suggesting that very slight turns of the mask could alter its outline back and forth.

7 A puppet character, who originated in Lyon. Like Punch, Guignol is often in trouble with the police. The word is also used generically to mean the puppet shows in which he features; hence 'Grand-Guignol': violent and gruesome melodrama.

Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), French writer and artist. This article by Jarry was written some three months before the staging of his play *King Ubu* in December 1896, and outlines the thinking from which it sprang. Written according to Jarry as a 'Guignol', the play broke drastically with the kind of scenery and acting that Jarry lambastes here, and with all other accepted theatrical norms of the time. Yeats, who saw its first performance, wrote: 'The players are supposed to be dolls, toys, marionettes, and now they are all hopping like wooden frogs, and I can see for myself that the chief personage, who is some kind of King, carries for Sceptre a brush of the kind that we use to clean a closet . . . after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Condor, what more is possible? After us the Savage God.' (*The Autobiography of W. B. Yeats*, London, Macmillan, 1955, p. 233).

2

ADOLPHE APPIA

From A New Art-Material (*c.* 1902)

At present, theatrical technique is about one thing only: scenic illusion. With very rare exceptions, everything is sacrificed to the pursuit of this illusion. The important development of scene-painting on vertical canvases, the parallel aligning of those canvases, the construction of the stage with the single end in view of enabling them to be handled, and the almost total dedication of the lighting to the task of showing them off to best advantage – all this leaves no doubt that someone is wanting to make us believe in the reality of the scenic picture.

But...the Actor? Is it painted canvases that determine the drama? A play without an actor is a diorama. That plastic, living, moving form . . . how much care is taken over that? Where do we place it? Ah, that's it! – the actor is a most inconvenient necessity for our scene painters; they do not exactly resent him, but they make him feel how out of place his presence is in front of their fine painting. Every bit of the painted scenery designed to accommodate the real solid form of the actor, is called 'practicable'; these are the concessions that painting is willing to make to the free human body. Let us admit for the moment that reasonable concessions have been made. Here then is the actor in front of painting generously cut out on his behalf. To enhance himself, what is there left to him? A plastic form, whatever it may be, exists only by virtue of the light. How is the actor lit? Alas, not at all; the painting has taken all the lighting for itself. Those long rows of electric lamps which run parallel to the slices of scenery, or which even run right round the stage, are designed to let us see the painting clearly. No doubt they also let us see the actor clearly, lit from all sides at once . . . But is that *Lighting*? Would a sculptor have thought of lighting in this way his bronze or marble dreams? . . .

However, if we leave aside painting for a moment and attempt really to light the actor...what happens? All the vast apparatus of the stage would suddenly lose its *raison d'être*, and the actor would suddenly find himself in excruciating emptiness, in a veritable void. What is called twilight and night lighting on our stages witnesses to that with a crudity we know.

We must therefore conclude that our scene-painting is based on a

principle of immobility in contradiction with the presence of the actor, and the decorative factor which gives this away is: *the Lighting*.

It is useless to wish for movement without light, without real lighting that creates forms, and it is useless to seek to have light that creates forms if one remains under the tyranny of dead painting. This follows rigorously.

But in that case, some will say, how is the scenic illusion to be maintained?

Is this illusion then to be so cared about that anything and everything is sacrificed to it? In the presence of the actor, everyone knows that the most beautiful scenery is nothing more than an assembly of painted canvases; and if, perhaps accidentally, a particularly favourable arrangement for deceiving the spectator happens to be found, will not the following arrangement immediately destroy its effect? Now, an illusion which is not constant simply does not exist. Our eyes, tricked, do us a disservice here; and yet the first indispensable conviction we must acquire where representation is concerned is that illusion, not only does not exist on our stages, but that it is impossible and...*must* not be possible.

Yes, drama must not, any more than independent paintings or sculpture, seek to deceive the eye.

From How to Reform Our Staging Practices (1904)

An attempt of this kind[1] cannot fail to teach us the path to follow in order to transform our rigid and conventional staging practices into an *artistic* material, living, supple and fit to realise no matter what dramatic vision. It will even come to surprise us that we neglected for so long such an important branch of art, and abandoned it, as if unworthy of our direct attention, to people who are not artists. Our aesthetic feeling is thus positively anaesthetised where theatrical production is concerned; he who would not tolerate in his apartment an object of less than exquisite taste, finds it natural to book an expensive seat in a theatre, already ugly and built in defiance of good sense, to spend hours at a show beside which the garish prints sold at the fair are delicate works.

The procedures of staging, like other artistic procedures, are founded on forms, light and colour; now these three elements are in our control and we can in consequence arrange them in the theatre as elsewhere in an artistic fashion. Until now it has been believed that staging must achieve the

highest possible degree of illusion; and it is this principle (unaesthetic though it is) which has barred our progress. I strive to show in these pages that scenic art must be based on the one reality worthy of theatre: the human body.

Translated by Richard Drain and Micheline Mabille

NOTE

1 This passage follows the discussion on staging a scene from Wagner's *Siegfried* that will be found in Part IV.

The 'new art-material' of the first (unfinished) article is, as the second suggests, what Appia believed theatre might become: a medium no longer blocking artistic expression, but giving it free scope.

Adolphe Appia (1862–1928), Swiss designer and theatre reformer. The groundwork for these ideas was fully laid in his *Music and Staging* (1899). Their aim, which he had been developing since 1888, anticipates that which Craig announced in 1905: 'The theatre has been, and should be, a medium for artists' (*The Art of the Theatre*, Edinburgh and London, T. N. Foulis, 1905, p. 11). But he differs from Craig in basing his aesthetic throughout the different phases of his thinking upon the human performer.

3

GORDON CRAIG

From Rearrangements (1915)

Inquiring into these results we find that the body of the modern Theatre is composed of strangely contradictory elements; of the organic and the inorganic hopelessly clinging together.

Regard for a moment this bunch of confusion; and first regard that side where all the stage conventions and inventions are clustered.

We find:

1 On the poet's part, an unnatural mode of speech – verse or prose.
2 On the actor's part, a natural, even colloquial mode of utterance.
3 Scenes imitating nature in paint and canvas.
4 Actors of flesh and blood.
5 Movements half natural, half artificial.
6 Light always failing in an attempt to simulate Nature's light.
7 The faces painted and disguised.
8 The facial expression always attempting to come through the paint and disguise.

Thus in 1, 2, 4, and 8 – the words, actors, their speech and facial expression are organic.

3 and 7 – the scenes and the disguised faces are inorganic.

5 and 6 – the light and movement are half one thing and half the other.

It is with this material that the modern Theatre fatuously believes it can fashion a work of art. And it is against this material that the nature of all art rebels and prevails.

Let us rearrange and change parts of this conglomeration and then see whether things are not more of a piece. And against those items which we rearrange or change we will place a sign (§), so that it will be seen at a glance.

1 The poet's work to be as it is – an unnatural mode of speech, or verse.
§2 The actor's work to be an unnatural mode of delivery.
§3 The scene to be a non-natural invention, timeless, and of no locality.
§4 Actors to be disguised beyond recognition, like the marionette.
§5 Movements conventionalised according to some system.

§6 Light frankly non-natural, disposed so as to illuminate scene and actors.
§7 Masks.
§8 Expression to be dependent on the masks and the conventional movements, both of which are dependent on the skill of the actor.

Now we find that without having to eliminate any one of the eight factors, we have been able to harmonise their conflicting purposes by altering some of them. . . .

I would propose, therefore, that we familiarise ourselves and our assistants with these seemingly new suggestions until we realise their *value*; and that where, by the addition and application of one or more of these suggestions we can increase the value of the whole Art of the Theatre, we should not be held up by an over-sensitive lack of confidence in our power to apply them, or by lack of faith in the power of the spectators to accept them.

This is one method of advancing our institution to a position which may influence the distinguished traducers of our work to reconsider their verdict that the Art of the Theatre is an *inferior* art.

Gordon Craig (1872–1966), English actor, designer, director and modern theatre pioneer, also offers in this article an alternative 'rearrangement' whereby theatre could become consistently 'organic' or natural – with idiomatic speech colloquially delivered, natural movements, the setting a facsimile of nature, perhaps with real objects, etc. But his preference for the more provocative option of the 'inorganic' is clear, and this is in line with the most notorious of all his proposals, that actors be replaced by marionettes. But Craig, initially an actor himself, backed off from this proposal afterwards – as befitted the son of a renowned actress (Ellen Terry), and an admirer of Henry Irving, his first employer. From 1897 he worked as designer and director, for Beerbohm Tree, Otto Brahm (of the Berlin *Freie Buhne*), Max Reinhardt, Eleonora Duse, and Stanislavski. At the same time he furthered his fertile ideas on theatre through his magazine *The Mask* (1908–29), and his numerous articles and books. His volume *The Art of the Theatre* (1905) and the extended *On the Art of Theatre* (1911) where the marionette is extolled, were landmarks, rapidly translated into all the major European languages.

PROLOGUE

ANDRÉ ANTOINE

FROM The Free Theatre (1890)

As the hoped-for emergence of a new generation of dramatists and dramatic works takes place, it may be affirmed that this rebirth will necessitate new means of expression. For works that are all observation and study, actors are needed who are spontaneous and authentic, in touch with reality through and through.

These long-awaited works, conceived according to a more spacious and flexible aesthetic and no longer circumscribing their characters; this new theatre, no longer based like its predecessor on five or six agreed types who are always the same, reappearing again and again under different names, in different plots, in different milieux; one cannot doubt that in this new theatre the multiplicity and complexity of the stage characters will bring about the rise of a new generation of actors flexible enough to take on any role. Young leading players, for example, will no longer all be cut from the same cloth, but will become in turn good, wicked, elegant, common, strong, weak, valiant, cowardly – in short, they will become living beings, diverse and variable.

The art of the actor, then, will no longer depend, as in previous repertories, on physical qualities or natural gifts; it will gain its life from truth, observation, and the *direct* study of nature. . . .

Since the theatrical style of the new plays tends to keep close to daily conversation, the actor must no longer '*speak*' in the classic theatrical sense; he must *talk* – which without doubt will be just as difficult.

What is meant at present by the phrase *the art of speaking*, consists solely in endowing the student with an exaggerated articulation and concocting a voice for him: a peculiar *specialised* organ quite different from the one he really has. For sixty years, all actors have uniformly spoken *through the nose*, solely because this way of speaking has to be adopted for them to be heard by the audience in our theatres, which are either *much too big* or have *poor acoustics*; and also because this nasal voice is resistant to the passing years and does not age.

In present-day theatre, all the characters gesticulate and express themselves in the same fashion, whether they are old or young, sick or healthy. All the actors, by *speaking well*, renounce those infinitely numerous nuances which can throw light on a character and give it a more intense life. . . .

The same transformation must be carried through in other areas of dramatic art: once the scenery is scaled back down to the dimensions current in contemporary milieux, the characters will express their emotions in credible settings, without continually concerning themselves to strike pictorial poses and form *tableaux*. The audience will enjoy an intimate drama, with natural and fitting moves, and with unaffected gestures and movements appropriate to a modern man, living our normal daily life.

Moves that are part of the blocking will be modified: no longer will the actor continually come out of his frame to pose in front of the audience; he will move around among the furniture and props, and his acting will be filled out with the thousand nuances and thousand details now indispensable to the establishing and logical composition of a character.

Purely mechanical movement, and effects of the voice, along with flamboyant and redundant gestures, will disappear with the simplification of theatrical action and its return to reality; and the actor will revert to natural gestures, and replace *effects* made *only* with the voice with a *composition* of elements: his expression of things will gain support from familiar, real objects, and a pencil revolved or a cup tipped over will have as much significance and as intense an effect on the audience as the grandiloquent exaggerations of the romantic theatre.

Translated by Richard Drain and Micheline Mabille