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# An Implacable Force: Caryl Churchill and the “Theater of Cruelty”

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kerri Ann Considine entitled "An Implacable Force: Caryl Churchill and the "Theater of Cruelty"." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Stanton B. Garner, Jr., Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**An Implacable Force  
Caryl Churchill and the “Theater of Cruelty”**

A Thesis Presented for  
the Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kerri Ann Considine  
May 2011

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## **DEDICATION**

To Sean, for your unwavering support and understanding,  
and your unfailing ability to laugh with me when I need it most.

To my family, for your love and empathy.

To my friends and co-conspirators in the world of theatre,  
for your playful ability to inspire mischief.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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In addition, thank you to Sheila McKenna for introducing me to Caryl Churchill and to the vast landscape of experimental theatre, and to Dr. Rex P. Stevens for years of gentle insistence that I really could connect my work in the field of theatre with my work in the field of literature.

## ABSTRACT

Churchill's plays incorporate intensity, complexity, and imagination to create a theatrical landscape that is rich in danger and possibility. Examining her plays through the theoretical lens of Antonin Artaud's "theater of cruelty" allows an open investigation into the way that violence, transgression, and theatricality function in her work to create powerful and thought-provoking pieces of theatre. By creating her own contemporary "theater of cruelty," Churchill creates plays that actively and violently transgress physical, social, and political boundaries.

This paper examines three of Churchill's plays spanning over thirty years of her career to investigate the different ways Churchill has used concepts of Artaudian cruelty to layer and complicate the theatrical experience, and each offers a different vision of a modern "theater of cruelty." *A Mouthful of Birds* provides a starting point for exploring Artaudian concepts in connection to her work and uses physical, embodied cruelty as a catalyst through which the characters must come to terms with their subjectivity in a system which has allocated their rightful "place" in society. *Hotel* incorporates the same magnitude of cruelty into everyday rituals and mundane actions, and an Artaudian reading reveals the way in which an 'invisible' cruelty acts on both the characters and the audience as a form of erasure through which the "vanished" characters "signal through the flames" in an attempt to re-assert their subjectivity. In *Seven Jewish Children*, Churchill inverts the cruelty and re-enacts onstage the Artaudian 'double' of the terror occurring during the Gaza conflict in order to force the characters and audience into a direct relationship with the cruelty. Using Artaud as a framework through which to investigate Churchill's work foregrounds the way in which the interplay of cruelty rips apart the commonly accepted cultural norms on which our understanding of the world is based and opens complex and multi-faceted possibilities of interpretation and understanding that are absolutely necessary for investigating the intensity of the theatrical experience in her plays.

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## Introduction

Caryl Churchill remains somewhat of an enigma, despite having written over fifty plays for the stage, television, and radio. She has experimented with form and content, taking risks and challenging both accepted cultural and social mores and common theatrical structures. She rarely keeps to one style or type of play or character for very long. Because there have been significant changes in terms of content, theatrical techniques, and rehearsal and production methods in her work, it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to identify a single overarching aesthetic or artistic purpose. The brilliance of Churchill's body of work is that it defies these simple classifications, and her constant complication of interpretation in her many plays creates a theatrical landscape that is rich in danger and possibility. Critics have latched onto her ability to upset easy interpretations in order to build a connection between her work and the techniques of Bertolt Brecht, mapping a similar political and theatrical agenda onto her plays.<sup>1</sup> Focusing primarily on the plays produced in the 1970s and early 1980s, and predominantly referencing *Cloud 9* and/or *Top Girls*, scholars have identified Churchill as a socialist-feminist playwright, and the implications for gender relations, sexual politics, and political power in the plays of this era have been examined at length.<sup>2</sup> While Churchill shows a skillful mastery of Brechtian techniques, the overwhelming focus on this type of theatre in the analysis of Churchill's work has led to a tendency to rationalize her plays logically and intellectually, and often overlooks the

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<sup>1</sup> For selected references to Churchill's connection to Brecht, see Elin Diamond's "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," Janelle Reinelt's *After Brecht* and "Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama," Amelia Howe Kritzer's *The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment* and "Political Currents in Caryl Churchill's Plays at the Turn of the Millennium," and Stanton B. Garner's "Post-Brechtian Anatomies: Weiss, Bond, and the Politics of Embodiment."

<sup>2</sup> For selected works on gender relations and sexual politics in Churchill's plays, see Janelle Reinelt's "On Feminist and Sexual Politics," Michelle Wandor's "Women Playwrights and the Challenge of Feminism in the 1970s," Helene Keyssar's "The Dramas of Caryl Churchill: The Politics of Possibility," James M. Harding's "Cloud Cover: (Re) Dressing Desire and Comfortable Subversion in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9*," and Lisa Merrill's "Monsters and Heroines: Caryl Churchill's Women."

highly sensual and theatrical qualities that make her work so fascinatingly dangerous in the first place. Her plays do not work to alienate an audience so that they can calmly critique social hierarchies; they are violently transgressive. Churchill's plays are violent in an Artaudian sense; that is, the violence is not always defined by the slashing of knives and the flowing of blood. This element opens up another possibility for understanding Churchill's work. Looking at her plays through the theoretical lens of Antonin Artaud's "theater of cruelty" allows an open investigation into the way that violence, transgression, and theatricality function in her work to create powerful and thought-provoking pieces of theatre. By creating her own contemporary "theater of cruelty," Churchill creates plays that actively and violently transgress physical, social, and political boundaries. This type of transgression is not merely academic; Churchill skillfully uses the visual and sensual elements of the theatrical medium in order to create an embodied and sensory experience of this transgression.

The phrase "violent transgression" carries some immediate connotations that must be addressed. "Transgression" is a concept that is often applied to Churchill when noting her cross-gender/cross-racial casting choices, her treatment of taboo or uncomfortable subject matters, and her willingness to deliver scathing attacks on current political and social power hierarchies. Churchill, however, does not merely "show" transgression on the stage; she plays with the forms of transgression and the implications of transgression for both the characters and the audience. The term "violence" is typically associated with weapons, blood, coercion, and victimization, and Churchill does not shy away from using this type of violence in her work. However, Churchill also uses violence in a much broader sense, and the relationship between the act of violence and the theatrical expression of that violence in Churchill's plays takes on the same

mythological importance that Antonin Artaud assigned to the concept of cruelty in his work on the “theatre of cruelty.”

Primarily explained in a group of writings collected in *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud struggles to define and develop the concept of cruelty in the theatre and what that concept might mean for an embodied performance. For Artaud, cruelty is primarily an active, embodied experience. As he explains in the section entitled “The Theater and Cruelty” from *The Theater and Its Double*:

Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theater must be rebuilt.

Imbued with the idea that the public thinks first of all with its senses and to address oneself first to its understanding as the ordinary psychological theater does is absurd, the Theater of Cruelty proposes to resort to a mass spectacle; to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets.

(85)

Cruelty, in Artaud’s definition, begins as something that is sensory, that acts upon the senses, and Artaud views humanity as a mass of bodies engaged in a kind of Dionysian witnessing of the spectacle of cruelty in which bodies “convulse” and come into violent contact with one another (that is, they act on one another).

In the First Manifesto of the “Theater of Cruelty,” Artaud advocates the idea of a theatre that is primarily sensory rather than intellectual and champions a new kind of theatrical language. He calls for a language that does not privilege speech: “It is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language

half-way between gesture and thought” (89). In this way, Artaud continues his move toward a total sensory experience in which language involves all of the senses, not just speech. The physical “*expression in space*” (89, Artaud’s emphasis) of an idea or action is just as important, and often more important, than the spoken word. This opens up possibilities for expression and complicates signs and language. Instead of a theatre that attempts to re-create reality and in which an audience intellectually translates words into meaning, Artaud calls for a theatre in which words have “approximately the importance they have in dreams” (94), a theatre that bombards an audience with sensory experiences to which they must viscerally react.

Artaud defends his choice of the term “cruelty” in several different chapters in *The Theater and Its Double*, attempting to broaden the definition and application of the word. In “No More Masterpieces,” Artaud begins this defense emphatically:

With this mania we all have for depreciating everything, as soon as I have said “cruelty,” everybody will at once take it to mean “blood.” But “theater of cruelty” means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all. And, on the level of performance, it is not the cruelty we can exercise on each other by hacking at each other’s bodies, carving up our personal anatomies, or, like Assyrian emperors, sending parcels of human ears, noses, or neatly detached nostrils through the mail, but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And theater has been created to teach us that first of all. (79)

Artaud returns to this concept in a letter to his publisher, Jean Paulhan, dated September 13, 1932, and reprinted in the chapter entitled “Letters on Cruelty.” He once again rejects the limiting definition of cruelty, noting that “this Cruelty is a matter of neither sadism nor bloodshed, at least not in any exclusive way” (101). He takes pains to explain that cruelty comes

in many forms, and that cruelty against the body is just one form. As he observes, “From the point of view of the mind, cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination” (101). In both instances, Artaud asserts that the underlying cruelty is connected to implacable forces outside of ourselves. These may include standard forms of physical violence, and, indeed, Artaud’s writing is often filled with grotesque images of blood, illness, and suffering bodies. However, Artaud’s cruelty is not limited by these standard representations. One way to look at the “theater of cruelty,” then, is as a theater that gives sensory physical expression in space to these implacable forces outside of ourselves. For Artaud, this cruelty is a requirement for effective theatre. As he insists, “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” (99).

In November of 1960, well before Caryl Churchill was a well-known name in theatre circles, and even before her earliest radio plays aired on BBC radio, she published an article in *Twentieth Century* entitled “Not Ordinary, Not Safe: A New Direction for Drama?” In this piece, Churchill outlines her disappointment with the state of theatre at the time and proposes a new perspective that resonates with Artaud’s vision and that would presumably breathe life back into the stage. Attempting to break out of the “everlasting flat depression” she perceives onstage, Churchill calls for “new subjects and new forms” which can be discovered through the realization that “we do not have to feel, visualize, and imagine cautiously” (445-6). Churchill thus privileges a dangerous imaginative space that does not need to adhere to conventional rules of narrative dramatic storytelling. It is significant that Churchill chooses the terms “feel, visualize, and imagine” when looking for new subjects and forms, for these terms situate her methodology in a holistic vision of the entire theatrical apparatus rather than an apparatus based

primarily on the intellect, language, or text. She observes that “what is said and how it’s said are hardly separable in the theatre; setting, language and form are all part of the way of looking at a play” (448). Like Artaud, then, Churchill calls for a theatrical language that involves more than just words on a page; in addition, they are both looking for a theatrical language that crosses accepted boundaries and hierarchies, moving into transgressive territory. She calls attention, for example, to the usefulness of poetry in drama, noting that “the imaginative logic by which words are related in poetry is better suited than prose to drama, where the action is not a literal copy of life but an image, where action is used with the same poetic logic as words in a poem” (450). In a move similar to that made by Artaud, Churchill de-prioritizes the “conventional” text, viewing theatre as a mutable experience more than a literal projection or copy of life. This conception of an active poetic language for the theatre that courts danger and transgression resonates with Artaud’s desire to create a new theatrical language not based on the prioritization of text and whose action on the audience becomes a cruelty, a transgression.

Over the past half century, Churchill has developed a body of work full of mutability, aggression, cruelty, and splendor. From her very early days, Churchill’s work was progressive and transgressive, never allowing an audience to relax. The radio play *The Ants*, her first professional production, was broadcast on BBC radio on November 27, 1962. When asked by Geraldine Cousin, during an interview printed as “The Common Imagination and the Individual Voice” in the *New Theatre Quarterly*, if the play originally was intended for the radio, Churchill remarked, “No, I thought of it as a television play. I hadn’t realized, I think, what a visual medium radio is at that point” (3). The play tells the story of Tim, a young boy, who is playing with ants at his Grandfather’s house by the sea. His mother, Jane, has committed adultery, and she and his father, Stewart, are getting divorced and arguing over who will get custody of him.

The action primarily centers on an encounter that takes place between the boy Tim and his aging Grandfather while Jane and Stewart take a walk to work things out. The play's climax occurs when Jane and Stewart return, and Jane descends into begging Tim to tell anyone who asks that he wants to live with her, and that "if they say do you want to live with Daddy, you must say no, because Daddy left us, Daddy left us alone, long before Uncle Peter came, didn't he, darling?" (102). Tim becomes distraught and angry, and when Jane runs after Stewart, he helps his Grandfather set fire to the ants that had been his friends. The final haunting image is of Grandfather and Tim watching the petrol explode into flames while Tim "shrieks with laughter" (103).

This first foray into the professional world of performance contains some striking elements that Churchill has developed throughout her career. The most important, perhaps, is her ability to contrast emotional extremes for their full visual and theatrical effect. This attention to the way in which emotions or actions are heightened by their "double" will be even further developed in her later works and provides an interesting connection with Artaud's concept of the "double." Her attention to the way in which words and images can have a physical effect on her audience can also be seen in this play – there is a brief segment in which Tim has been letting his friends, the ants, crawl on his hand, but after a while there are too many, and the boy becomes overwhelmed with the insects crawling all over his hand and arm (99). In a very Artaudian way, hearing the description of ants crawling all over the boy creates a very physical reaction of revulsion in the listening audience. While it seems strange to put a radio play, which can only involve the audience through the sense of hearing, into conversation with the work of Artaud, who was concerned that theatre should appeal to all of the audience's senses, these early moves to physically affect the audience through the theatrical medium and to confront shocking and

transgressive subjects suggest important concerns on Churchill's part that align her with Artaud from very early days in her work.

As Churchill transitioned from the radio to the stage, these concerns remained central to her artistic endeavors. *Owners*, her first professionally produced full-length stage play, was presented in 1972 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. This was, of course, not her first foray into theatre, but because most of her professional productions before 1972 involved radio, and after 1972 she mostly focused on stage productions, it is an important piece to consider when tracing the main movements in her work. In the introductory notes to the collection of her works, *Plays: 1*, Churchill herself comments on *Owners*'s place in her professional career, noting "my working life feels quite sharply divided into before and after 1972, and *Owners* was the first play of the second part" (xi). A scathing attack on capitalist ideas of ownership and the effect of these ideas on society, *Owners* is a prime example of Churchill's fearlessness when it comes to boldly portraying the darker side of controversial topics. Although the actual staging is, by today's standards, rather conventional, the play itself marks a strong step toward Churchill's preoccupation with female and political concerns. This unwavering ability to examine and destabilize the power hierarchies at play in society would become a central theme and goal of Churchill's work throughout her career and once again aligns her with Artaud – specifically, with Artaud's notion that theatre breaks down the traditional social codes and values.

Her concentration on the destabilization of political and social hierarchies, including a very strong focus on gender concerns, continued unabated throughout the 1970s and early 1980s when many of her most well known plays, such as *Vinegar Tom* (1976), *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), *Cloud 9* (1979), and *Top Girls* (1982), were first produced. Churchill's work during this stage in her career involved the use of Brechtian techniques to



highlight the political and social power structures at play, and began the long association in critical circles of Churchill's work with the work of Bertolt Brecht. This association, while not unwarranted, has led to too strong a focus on the ways in which her plays function on a political and intellectual level. Churchill's work certainly involves alienating an audience in order to reveal the uncomfortable inner workings of power, but it does so through a primarily physical and sensual apparatus which actively affects an audience. While Brechtian theories are useful for understanding the techniques employed, it is through the double-sided nature of Artaudian cruelty that Churchill's violent transgression can be seen in its complete theatrical effectiveness.

For example, *Cloud 9* includes many elements normally associated with Brecht, such as the breaking of the fourth wall, song, and parody. The farcical nature and the Monty Python-esque characters in the first act of *Cloud 9* often dissolve an audience into fits of laughter. The intriguing nature of this comedy is that the comedic material is quite transgressive and sometimes cruel in nature, such as in Act I Scene III when Clive scolds Betty about her kiss with their mutual friend Harry Bagley. Clive himself has recently had a much more explicitly sexual encounter with Mrs. Saunders than Betty and Harry's quick kiss. The scene is usually played with an over-the-top comedic tone: Clive playing the wounded patriarch who will "soldier on" and lecturing Betty about the dangers of "dark female lust," and Betty (played by a man in full Victorian female dress) begging Clive to forgive her "wickedness" (277). The incongruity of Betty's "punishment" for her less transgressive "crime" and Clive's self-righteous prattle is deciphered as funny by the audience, especially since his claims about women are directed at an actor who is biologically male. However, underneath the farce, the "truth" of the scene is quite dark. Betty, a character that has been denied even her bodily sexuality, is re-confined to her role as wife and subservient Victorian female by an overbearing and hypocritical patriarch.

The connection to Brechtian alienation is difficult to miss here: instead of emotionally relating to Betty's humiliation and confinement, the audience disconnects from the characters in order to laugh at their absurdity. This directly aligns with Brecht's description of the epic theatre found in the essay "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," where he notes that rather than connecting emotionally with the characters, the epic theatre provokes an audience to "laugh when they weep" (71). If this scene were to be played truthfully, an adulterous husband verbally abusing his wife and her pain and guilt for her far less socially problematic transgression would be difficult to watch. The audience would more than likely be outraged, and would definitely not laugh. The audience's laughter, here, is much more complex than a critical comment on the social hierarchy in play or a moment of instruction during which the audience "learns" something. Played as a comedy, Clive's transgression is mirrored by the audience: their laughter aligns them with a certain power hierarchy without their conscious acceptance of that fact. In this way, the audience is implicated in the transgression: they may recognize the imbalance of power – they may even dislike Clive – but through their laughter they enjoy the power of the moment along with Clive. Rather than simply an alienation technique, Churchill's use of laughter here, as elsewhere in the play, takes on a much darker purpose. Artaud, in the first manifesto of the "Theater of Cruelty," spends some time discussing "humor as destruction," which he notes "serve[s] to reconcile the corrosive nature of laughter to the habits of reason" (91). Churchill's use of laughter is closer to this conception of "humor as destruction." The laughter here is dangerous; it does not reveal an audience critically analyzing the gendered construction of power in Victorian England. Instead, it acts on the audience to implicate them in an act of cruelty, aligning them with the perpetrator of the violence (Clive) through the physical act of laughter at the victim of violence (Betty).

In the mid-1980s the structure of Churchill's plays became even more destabilized and more recognizably Artaudian in terms of their staging and focus on the theatrical apparatus as a whole. Churchill began to incorporate physical movement more fully and to play with language and text in a way that deconstructs it as the primary structural apparatus. While many plays of the mid-late 1980s, such as *Fen* (1983), *Midday Sun* (1984), and *Fugue* (1987), moved in this direction, *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) has, arguably, become the best-known text from this era and is an excellent place from which to begin any investigation into Churchill's relationship to Artaud. Because *A Mouthful of Birds*, of all of Churchill's work, is the play which most resembles Artaud's own *Jet of Blood*, with its quickly shifting scenes and violent imagery, it will serve as a launching point for investigating the way in which the "theater of cruelty" can open possibilities for reading and interpreting Churchill's work. As always, Churchill's style does not remain so openly "Artaudian" for long, but while her work through the 1990s and into the new millennium, including *Hotel* (1997) and *Seven Jewish Children*, her most recent play to date (2009), may not immediately appear to be Artaudian in nature, I would argue that they are, in fact, a modern "theater of cruelty" and that acknowledging this connection reveals the complex way in which Churchill layers or "doubles" meaning and experience in her plays as an act of cruelty.

Churchill cunningly plays with Artaudian cruelty in many forms, constantly layering and doubling intention, meaning, understanding, and interpretation in order to lead her audience down a rabbit-hole of complex human experience and to break through accepted social and political hierarchies. Her plays are often centered on violence and violent acts or contain violent imagery and language, and yet the violence is often hidden or muted behind other elements such as comedy, song, theatricality, poetry, alienation, or propaganda. This creates a fascinating

intersection between cruelty, the characters, the performance, and the audience. Churchill's plays are full of cruelty, then, but it is not the recognizable violent act that lies at the center of her plays. Rather, it is the cruelty in Artaudian terms – the sensory physical expression in space of implacable forces outside of ourselves – and Churchill's cunningly transgressive use of that cruelty that make her plays a provocative experience.

## Chapter 1:

### ***A Mouthful of Birds: Mythology, Possession, and Embodied Cruelty***

Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds*, co-written with David Lan in 1986, provides perhaps the most obvious connection to Artaud's theories and methods due to its experimental form, collaborative process, and violent content. Loosely arranged around Euripides's *The Bacchae*, *A Mouthful of Birds* clearly illustrates a contemporary vision of Artaudian concepts of cruelty in performance. Churchill and Lan bring to life their exploration of violence and possession by allowing different forms of violence and cruelty to play against one another in almost every aspect of the play. Although physical violence plays a central and important role, it is the ability of Churchill and Lan to express the implacable forces that possess and control the characters physically – and their inability to defend themselves against these forces of cruelty – that truly highlights the transgressive possibilities here.

In "The Workshop and the Play," Churchill's introductory notes to the 1986 script published by Methuen, she discusses the collaborative process and the development of the production. As Churchill notes, she and Lan began "with an interest in possession and in women being violent – two things that come together in *The Bacchae*, which is why we took it as one of the starting points for the workshop" (5). She explains that she wanted to investigate the relationship between men, women, and violence, challenging the common misconception that women are somehow intrinsically more peaceful and men intrinsically more violent (5). After participating in research that included hypnosis, living outside "in the open," and meeting with those often considered marginal in society, such as spirit mediums, women that had been violent, and transsexuals, Churchill and Lan developed the idea of "an 'undefended day' in which there is

nothing to protect you from the forces inside and outside yourself” (5). The theatrical expression of this “undefended day” upon which the play is based correlates exactly to the Artaudian idea of cruelty as physical expression in space of implacable forces outside of the self. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, it is not just the characters who are “undefended,” the audience is bombarded with violent sounds and images, and the play itself is possessed by the mythic tale of *The Bacchae*. Churchill and Lan take the active cruelty of these forces one step further, firmly situating the mythic elements within a contemporary context and highlighting their dangerous and transgressive potential to disrupt current power structures.

*A Mouthful of Birds* presents the audience with seven characters: four women and three men. We are introduced to the characters in short, overlapping scenes that provide a kind of “snapshot” image of both the minute details of day-to-day existence and much larger concerns and difficulties faced by the characters. The audience then acts as witness to each character’s possession in longer scenes that vary greatly in structure and form. Finally, we are given a glimpse of the consequences of the possession with a short epilogue in which each character allows us to see a new (resulting) “snapshot” through a short monologue. The structure gives us a uniquely Artaudian view: the character and its double (the beginning and ending “snapshots”) separated by possession and a purely mythical theatrical experience (cruelty) contained in a theatrical production that literally bombards the audience with sound, movement, text, and context in an overlapping and often confusing milieu which must be experienced more than decoded or read.

The story itself cannot be boiled down to a simple explanation or plot line, and the dialogue, while intriguing, is never prioritized over the other theatrical and physical elements of a scene. Since it is the conflation of all of the physical, verbal, and theatrical elements that create

the “story,” Artaud’s conception of the *mise-en-scène* works particularly well here. Artaud, in *The Theater and Its Double*, calls for the development of a “concrete language” that would be specific to the theatre, and he develops this idea by using the concept of the *mise-en-scène*. He asserts, “I say that this concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, has first to satisfy the senses, that there is a poetry of the senses as there is a poetry of language” (37). This language involves the entire theatrical medium, but Artaud is quick to point out that he is not reducing his language to stagecraft (the way the lights are positioned, the sound effects, the positions of the actors, the stage props and furniture). It includes these items, but it moves beyond them to also include the tone, feel, and quality of the physical expression of the scene (a physical expression Artaud would note is primarily sensory). The *mise-en-scène* is not subordinate to the text – it involves the text but lives apart and beyond it. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, Churchill and Lan have expertly crafted a play in which the movement through the *mise-en-scène* and the changing of this sensory setting is primary. The spoken text rests on top of or to the side of this main apparatus, just as the original Euripides story informs but is not central to the text itself. Even following each character individually will not result in a simple plot narrative. The play is not about dialogue, it is not about psychology, and it is certainly not about linear narrative. Instead, the play very accurately portrays on stage the visceral nature of human experience and involves the audience in the complications of this experience. The play acts on the characters and the audience, forcing them out of the comfort zone of recognizable narrative and provoking them to “sense” everyday situations as acts of cruelty in one form or another.

Churchill notes in her opening remarks on the play that Euripides’s tale was merely the thematic “starting point” and that, originally, “we didn’t intend to do a version of *The Bacchae* but to look at the same issues of possession, violence, and ecstasy” (5). While the contemporary

characters must grapple with cruelty in the “everyday” situations of their lives, the inclusion of the mythic component highlights the ways in which minute elements become universally important. The myth re-interprets in a contemporary setting a certain relationship to violence that, as Churchill notes, existed before Euripides and still exists today (5). In the original tale by Euripides, Pentheus refuses to recognize Dionysus as the divine son of Zeus, maintaining instead that Dionysus’s mother, Semele, was rejected by the god and therefore that Dionysus is not a true god. Dionysus, understandably angered by this, confronts Pentheus disguised as a human traveler. When he cannot get Pentheus to admit to the divinity of Dionysus, he inflicts his Bacchantes (mostly female followers, including Pentheus’s mother, Agaue) with madness and has them kill Pentheus by ripping him apart. Agaue jubilantly brings the head of Pentheus back to town, still under the influence of Dionysus’s possession. She has no knowledge that she has just ripped apart her own son until Pentheus’s father, Cadmus, makes her recognize what she has done. Agaue, the female Bacchantes, and Cadmus are exiled in disgrace. While the tale contains obvious material useful for a study of violence and possession, *A Mouthful of Birds* does not simply re-tell Euripides’s story. Rather, the tale sits parallel to the action of Churchill and Lan’s play: intersecting when characters are possessed by characters from *The Bacchae*, centering on a similar convergence of possession and violence, and addressing the same concerns over possession, madness, power, and control.

The calculated way in which Churchill and Lan integrated the Bacchic myth into *A Mouthful of Birds* reflects a concern in Artaud’s work over using the past in the theatre. He calls for immediacy and presence in theatrical content, but for him this does not mean that the past is useless or that all theatre must involve situations dealing with current events or socio-political issues. Rather, Artaud demands a constant re-interpretation of the past. In the section entitled



“No More Masterpieces” in *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud asserts that “We have the right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a way that belongs to us, a way that is immediate and direct, corresponding to present modes of feeling, and understandable to everyone” (74). In this way, it is important to take the ‘useable’ or ‘pertinent’ truths about the past and interpret them through current perspectives. Instead of relying on old stories, Artaud calls for old stories to be re-imagined, creating new mythology. In a letter to Jean Paulhan dated November 9, 1932 and printed in *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud gives theatre a purpose situated in myth:

The true purpose of the theater is to create Myths, to express life in its immense, universal aspect, and from that life to extract images in which we find pleasure in discovering ourselves.

And by so doing, to arrive at a kind of general resemblance, so powerful that it produces its effect instantaneously.

May it free *us*, in a Myth in which we have sacrificed our little human individuality, like Personages out of the Past, with powers rediscovered in the Past. (116, Artaud’s emphasis)

For Artaud, then, a re-imagining of past stories can lead to the creation of new myths tied to contemporary needs. Churchill described the outcome of effective theatre in very similar terms in her early essay entitled “Not Ordinary, Not Safe: A New Direction for Drama?” In the piece, she calls for a theatre in which we do not imagine cautiously, and notes that when this is accomplished, the theatre can show “a hypothesis about life in the imagery of its action; if it is good enough it creates almost a mythology” (447). As such, mythology becomes a metaphor for the theatre; the theatre can create its own reality and affect our reality in the same way that

mythology can influence society. Given the strong mythological connection of *A Mouthful of Birds*, and in light of Churchill's early comments, it is important to discern how the Bacchic myth is functioning here within the concept of the "theatre of cruelty."

One way to approach the function of mythic elements in *A Mouthful of Birds* is by reading them as a re-working of archetypal story arcs into a contemporary framework. In "'How Sweet the Kill': Orgiastic Female Violence in Contemporary Re-Visions of Euripides' *The Bacchae*," Allison Hersh examines the way in which the Bacchic myth is "re-vised" in *A Mouthful of Birds* and in Maureen Duffy's *Rites*. Hersh uses Adrienne Rich's definition of "re-vision" as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" in order to reveal a feminist reading in which these re-visions confront patriarchal demands and open possibilities for female expression (409). Leaving the gender concerns for a moment (I will come back to this important point), Hersh points out a very Artaudian way of approaching an "old text." Hersh describes the use of *The Bacchae* here as follows:

*A Mouthful of Birds* incorporates a re-visionary strategy wherein the Bacchic myth operates as a parallel text, as a disruptive and disrupted narrative which is interwoven throughout the scenes of contemporary life which primarily comprise the action of the play [...] In fact, the mythic and the mundane texts become so intertwined that they are ultimately conflated with one another at the end of the play. (411)

What Hersh terms a "conflation" may more accurately be described as a reverse possession: the moment in which the "mundane text," as she calls it, takes on the mythical, magical qualities of the "mythic text." The "gods" leave, the "action" of the play is finished, and we are left with the seven contemporary characters giving quiet monologues. While this event looks sparse on the

page, the quiet monologues resonate with the same force of Doreen's quiet "No" in Act 2 Scene 23 that bounces Tony off the walls (49).<sup>3</sup> They contain more power than expected, and the characters themselves have gained mythic proportions.

Whether or not these mythic proportions represent an improvement in the lives of the characters or whether or not their interaction with the divine reveals assertion or lack of agency is up for some debate. In the original Bacchic myth, the Bacchantes become possessed by Dionysus to a frenzy or madness. Agaue loses her ability even to recognize her son as she is tearing him apart limb from limb. Dionysus causes Pentheus to lose his grip on reality enough that he no longer objects to dressing as a woman and walking in front of his people, something he abhors earlier in Euripides's play. In this way, possession in the original myth is a physical act of cruelty, an implacable force erasing the identity of the possessed. Possession is associated with violence, shame, madness, and punishment. The extent of the characters' responsibility for or association with the cruelty is muted by placing the blame for the violence on madness and possession. Agaue is mad when she tears apart her son, but when she can recognize and appreciate the effects of that violence it is an indication of her returning sobriety. This makes her mournful and not insane, suggesting that she does not feel her actions are her responsibility. In addition, having the actual cruelty and violence take place off-stage in this nebulous manner also frees the audience from extensive association with the cruelty.

Churchill and Lan complicate this iteration of cruelty and play with the question of whether or not madness represents a complete loss of agency with the seven possession sequences. For example, in Lena's possession sequence, she is bombarded by Roy's endless prattle and by the Spirit's negative comments, disgusting descriptions, and an order to "kill the

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<sup>3</sup> This and all subsequent references to the play text refer to the edition published by Nick Hern Books in *Plays: 3*, London, 1998.

baby” as she goes about her domestic routine (11-15). In the midst of this verbal abuse is a movement sequence in which she and the Spirit transform into different animals and objects, each one affecting the next “transformation”:

*He is a frog. She approaches threateningly as a snake. He seizes her arm and becomes a lover. She responds but as he embraces her he becomes an animal and attacks the back of her neck. She puts him down to crawl and he becomes a train. As he chugs under the table she blocks the tunnel with a chair and he rolls out as a threatening bird. She becomes a baby bird asking to be fed and he feeds her. As he goes to get more food she becomes a panther, knocks him to the ground and starts to eat him. After a moment he leaps up with a fierce roar. She goes into the next scene. (11-2)*

In this way the relationship between the Spirit and Lena does not have a fixed structure; the actual possession is a struggle between the two which could result in either claiming power. Lena even manages to subdue the Spirit at one point and leaves him “lying still as she goes into the next scene” (13). When Lena finally drowns her baby, her difficulty acknowledging the act is similar to Agave’s inability to accept the responsibility of her own actions. Lena does not even admit certainty about whether or not her child is dead, initially telling Roy “I have to talk to you. I think if you go to the bathroom. I think Sally’s drowned,” and she rejects her role in the incident, claiming “It wasn’t me that did it” (15). In the scene, Lena is ultimately powerless to banish the Spirit from her presence, does not accept responsibility for her actions, and denies her own agency. This version of events, however, is further complicated by her closing remarks in her final monologue in which we discover that Lena is now working with “old people.” Reflecting on the murder of her daughter, Lena notes “Every day is a struggle because I haven’t forgotten anything. I remember I enjoyed doing it. It’s nice to make someone alive and it’s nice

to make someone dead. Either way. That power is what I like best in the world. The struggle is everyday not to use it” (51). Here we see a Lena in full possession of her own agency, aware of her own power and possibilities for violence and peace, and even acknowledging an enjoyment of the act of violence.

This, of course, complicates the reading enormously, and this complication is what moves *A Mouthful of Birds* beyond a simple theatrical investigation of violence and possession and into Artaudian territory. In the First Manifesto of the “theater of cruelty,” Artaud describes the objectives of his theatre in terms of “temptations” that “appeal to certain unhabitual ideas, which by their very nature cannot be limited or even formally depicted” (90). Instead of offering an intellectual, psychological, or rational treatment of transgressive topics, Artaud attempts to create “indraughts of air around these ideas” so that we are situated within the transgression ourselves rather than being “told” about it. In Lena’s case, Churchill and Lan leave both the character and the audience struggling with very transgressive ideas about the relationship between power, motherhood, violence, and humanity rather than allowing a sense of finality or closure. In addition, while an audience may recoil in horror at the thought of a mother enjoying the violent murder of her own daughter, the audience itself, by witnessing the act of violence as an act of theatre, is also situated in the curious and problematic position of “enjoying” the violence as “entertainment.” The Artaudian conception of cruelty allows us to see once again how Churchill’s use of cruelty has complicated the relationship between violence and possession, and transgressed the accepted boundaries of how violence and cruelty are interpreted.

In order to understand more fully this complicated relationship in *A Mouthful of Birds*, several critics, including Hersh, have pointed to David Lan’s work with spirit mediums in Zimbabwe as a possible aid in the interpretation of the possession sequences. In *Guns & Rain:*

*Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*, Lan traces his observations from two years spent in the area known as Dande in Zimbabwe. Lan concludes that the possession of the spirit mediums by the ancestors in this culture is actually a form of resistance that the peasants use against the Rhodesian state. He describes this act of resistance as “the remarkable act of ‘co-operation’ between ancestors and their descendants, the dead and the living, the present and the past” (xvii). He comes to this conclusion after examining the role of mediums and the way possession works in the community. Lan notes that mediums occupy a paradoxical position:

Although the medium is thought of as an ordinary person, when a particular man or woman is selected from all others, they are marked out as extraordinary, as unique. The medium combines in one body two contradictory aspects: he has no special qualities and he is as close as anyone can come to divinity. He has no influence on the will of the ancestor, yet the ancestor cannot act without him. He is a person of no special powers and he is a source of the most significant powers on earth. (49)

Mediums, in Lan’s estimation, project helplessness -- he notes the medium “does not wish to be possessed” (49) -- but they also wield much power. They occupy both the passive role of victim (the spirit takes over and subsumes their identity) and the active role of victimizer (their power lies in perpetuating the hierarchy). Unlike in some societies, Lan observes that possession in Dande is a “highly structured” process, and mediums must go through years of vetting and have the entire community believe in them before they reach their high status as spirit medium (51-56). Thus, the community invests belief in the medium and the connection with the ancestor, and because of this, the medium gains status in and power over the community.

Possession contains the same paradoxical difficulties and works in a similar manner in *A Mouthful of Birds*. Just as possession grants both power and vulnerability for the spirit mediums

in Dande, so, too, does it both aid and undermine the characters in their separate stories. The cruelty in the play also reflects this paradox. It empowers the characters by giving them power and control, but the price that must be paid for that control is steep. The cruelty is both terrifyingly painful and euphorically joyful. The characters are not the only ones who must discover this frightening paradox; the audience, by acting as witness to the cruelty, is forced into an impossible evaluative position. The audience serves as the community which must either invest or not invest belief in the characters' possession by the mythical figures of *The Bacchae*. Putting the audience in this role builds an active link between the audience and the violence, cruelty, and possession, and opens the possibilities of interpretation. Rather than giving a specific moral evaluation on the role and effects of cruelty, the play reflects contemporary concerns over power and control. Read this way, the play works only in real-time, in production, as each and every audience must decide whether or not to invest the characters with belief and accept the possession or reject the possession and view the character as an empty fraud. And it is not an "all-or-nothing" prospect, either. It is possible that the audience will invest in some characters and not others, and this very real possibility is what makes the play so spectacular.

René Girard's work on the relationship between a community and cruelty has been hugely influential on the way violence is currently understood, and his discussion of Euripides's *The Bacchae* in *Violence and the Sacred* provides some interesting points for considering the relationship between *A Mouthful of Birds* and Artaud's "theater of cruelty." Girard argues essentially that *The Bacchae* follows a fixed pattern for festival-based violence. The first step in this pattern is the "destruction of differences," in which the social or political boundaries establishing the current power hierarchies break down (127). Girard describes this collapse in terms of illness and contamination, noting that "the Dionysian outbreak spells the disintegration

of social institutions and the collapse of social order” (127). As such, Pentheus reads his subjects’ defiance of his will as an illness that is spreading. Artaud also aligns a breakdown of social order with contagion and infection in his famous comparison, “The Theater and the Plague.” Artaud observes that “Once the plague is established in a city, the regular forms collapse” (23). He reads a similar collapse of established forms occurring in the theater, and notes that these disordered structures, “by occurring in the context of the theater, discharge themselves into the sensibility of an audience with all the force of an epidemic” (26). For Girard, this disorder creates the necessity for violence in order to return to a previously established communal social order. As he asserts, “The rite is directed toward order and tranquility, not violence. It strives to achieve violence solely in order to eliminate it” (132). For Girard, then, this type of mythological violence ultimately perpetuates and cements social order rather than breaking it down. For Artaud, the theatrical violence perpetuates the violent break down of social hierarchies. As he explains, “The theater is a disease because it is the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction” (31). Both Girard and Artaud, then, find violence and contagion at the heart of the collapse of social order, but while Girard reads the violence as a reaction to this collapse and a way to re-establish social codes (the re-assertion of the King’s authority over the Fool), Artaud sees the violence as a necessary destructive force that undermines social codes (putting the King on even footing with the Fool).

This argument is important because it once again underlines a discussion occurring around *A Mouthful of Birds* regarding whether or not the transgression that occurs in the possession scenes ultimately breaks down or reinforces the accepted cultural power structures. The possibility that some characters might transcend accepted social and cultural mores is something that is addressed directly in feminist scholarship on the work. Using feminist and



gender theory to examine the violence in *A Mouthful of Birds* can give new illuminating perspectives on how cruelty functions here, and several scholars have made important in-roads on this topic. Perhaps the two most often noted pieces are Janelle Reinelt's "Feminist Theory and the Problem of Performance" and Elin Diamond's "(In)Visible Bodies in Churchill's Theatre." Reinelt uses *A Mouthful of Birds* as an example of a new kind of feminist theatre that sees gender as "a field of experience, socially constructed, constantly changing, not a pair of bi-polar opposites inevitably fixing the subject in relation to an either/or cultural practice" and at the same time takes into account "the specific historical character of our situation with its particular inscriptions of gender" (51-2). She points to the scenes involving Dan/Dionysus dancing in prison and Derek/Herculine Barbin recounting his/her experiences as a hermaphrodite as evidence for the play's ability to do this kind of work. As she concludes:

Beyond noting what is left out of or absent in the dominant discourse on sexuality, this play is able to represent that excess, that energy of resistance, that quality of intentionality which belongs to the subject by way of its agency as producer of meanings, constitutive as well as constituted. The inadequacy of a bi-polar conception of gender, the possibility of confounding gender identity, and the historical limit on such activity is both balanced and exercised in Churchill and Lan's remarkable play. (54)

For Reinelt, then, *A Mouthful of Birds* provides both social commentary and a possible route to exploding the gender binary, while acknowledging the reigning social gender prescriptions.

Instead of focusing on the physical violence, Reinelt focuses on violence against accepted social codes. She even assigns the death of those for whom Dan dances a symbolic rather than physical end, asserting that he "causes their gender specific identities to vanish – leaving only the hat, unmarked by gender, to mark the site of seduction" (53). While this reading implies an

almost transcendent state of gender ambiguity, it fails to take into account the very real physical violence Churchill and Lan neglect to symbolically replace with hats, such as when Doreen slices Mrs. Blair's face in Act 2 Scene 23 (47) or the discovery in Act 2 Scene 21 that Yvonne "cuts" her mother (42-43). Reinelt calls attention to the final image of Derek's possession by Herculine Barbin, in which the female actress leans over the male actor playing Derek and kisses him on the neck. While Reinelt (and many after her) have read this as a transcendent moment in which we see "an image of two heads, one body, accepting and embracing multiplicity and ambiguity" (54), there is also a haunting resemblance to iconic vampiric imagery here. Indeed, when read in relation to Lena's earlier possession sequence in which the Spirit comes to her as a lover but when she responds "*becomes an animal and attacks the back of her neck*" (11), the scene is complicated by resonances of the relationship between predator and prey and the cruelty, both physical and psychological, that is implicitly connected to exploding the gender binary. It might be transcendent, but it is also painful and problematic. Churchill and Lan do not ignore or work around this difficulty, but rather embrace the physical expression of the paradox in order to create their own Artaudian "indraghts of air" around the transgressive possibilities.

Elin Diamond's piece, by comparison, spends a bit more time dissecting the pain and embodied complications involved in these scenes, making a cursory gesture toward the usefulness of Artaud's "theater of cruelty." Diamond shows how Churchill's work represents a possible prototype of Hélène Cixous's concept of "écriture féminine," focusing on a "double strain in Churchill's work" that she describes as follows:

On the one hand, a commitment to the apparatus of representation (actor as sign of character, character as sign to a recognizable human fiction) in order to say something about human oppression and pain [...] on the other hand, a consistent though less obvious

attention to the powers of theatrical illusion, to modalities within representation that subvert the “aboutness” we normally call the work’s “content.” (189)

In this way, Diamond looks not only at the possibility for gender critique but also the layering of meanings that occurs in the embodied performance. While she does not frame her discussion in this manner, she focuses on characters that physically embody not only themselves but also an Artaudian “double” or shadow of themselves that reveals the societal prescriptions of gender “normality” as a cruelty acting on their physical bodies. Like Reinelt, she highlights the scene between Derek and Herculine Barbin as evidence of this dual role. Diamond notes the ironic doubling of Derek here with Pentheus, commenting that in the original play “sexual confusion is precisely what Pentheus struggles against” (202). Diamond, like Reinelt, interprets this scene as a necessary return to gender androgyny. While Diamond focuses her attention on the “physical and emotional agony of separation,” she also concludes her discussion with the image of Herculine kissing Derek’s neck. Here, rather than a complete acceptance, Diamond calls it “an ‘impossible object’ – like an Escher drawing, a Medusa’s head, or an unheard song” (202-3). If, as Diamond claims, Churchill sticks to her “consistent though less obvious attention to the powers of theatrical illusion” and “modalities within representation,” then it is reasonable to assume that the scene more accurately portrays an “impossible object” than a site of transcendence. This concept of the “impossible object” aptly illustrates the paradoxical position of Derek/Herculine, who struggles through the “implacable force” or cruelty of the traditional social codes in order to embody a physicality not inscribed with a traditional gender binary.

In “Women and Violence in ‘A Mouthful of Birds’” Raima Evan has taken issue with the fact that Diamond and Reinelt focus almost solely on the androgynous male characters and, additionally, dismisses Hersh’s attempt to use Lan’s work to support an empowerment argument

as reductive (263-4). Evan seeks to explore the female characters individually to understand better the volatile relationship between women and violence. For Evan, a conclusion that violence is an act of resistance or empowerment for women in *A Mouthful of Birds* does not take into account that “violence is used against women more than it is used to empower them” (264). Although she argues that through violence some of the women reach a better self-understanding that leads to a more empowered position, she feels that the violence itself cannot be read as a tool of empowerment. While it might catalyze change, it also might not, and if there is a change, it is not *necessarily* positive or negative. She notes that for the women, “all four possession scenes stage violence against women,” and further explains that the women’s possession is an embodied possession – it has to do with being confined in bodies, suffering in their bodies, or being hurt through physical means (265-6). In this way she argues that the possession of the male characters enacts a release from their bodies or socially constructed gender rules and expectations, whereas the females are contained and entrapped in their physical selves, and the violent encounters they enact are domestic in nature. In Artaudian terms, the mundane rituals of the domestic space become a cruelty acting on the female characters, to which they respond with cruelty of their own in the form of violence against these domestic routines and those that inhabit them.

Through her reading, Evan notes that women’s bodies are heavily policed, and that “women are perceived by patriarchal societies as inferior, contaminating, and potentially threatening to men” (268). It is interesting that we once again see the concept of “contamination” surfacing in relation to power hierarchies. Women’s violence, for Evan, threatens the domestic sphere and the patriarchal order, challenging the accepted gender hierarchy, and this threat is infectious. However, as Evan notes, there is a fear that if women

must be contained in order to be docile, then perhaps women are violent/cruel by nature (269), resulting in further attempts to confine them. In this way, Evan argues, while there is empowerment (and perhaps transcendence) in violence for men, the women become more, not less, isolated. In addition, as previously mentioned, when the spectacle is violent, then violence itself can become entertainment. For women, this is another paradox. Here, female violence disrupts the accepted social hierarchy, but it also can become an object of entertainment or the impetus to further confinement within the system rather than the subject of change. It has both the power for change and the power to contain and negate change.

Evan attempts to read the four women and their stories as showing four different interactions with and reactions to violence (and the consequences of those reactions) that highlight different outcomes resulting from this paradox. She spends significant time with each of the female characters and aptly works through the complexities of their relationship to the violent acts in the play. However, rather than focusing on the way violence opens up multiple possibilities for each character, when she gets into the details, Evan neglects her own acknowledgment of the complicated dual nature of the violence and attempts to attach specific labels to each character's journey. Lena and Yvonne, in Evan's estimation, have gained power and control, ending the play in a better position than they began; Marcia has lost power and control, ending in a less empowered position; and Doreen apparently remains in exactly the same position she began, with no change whatsoever (270-84). Unfortunately, Evan's argument is ultimately as reductive as those she criticizes. Using an Artaudian framework instead opens up possibilities, putting the different forms and elements of cruelty at play in conversation with and against one another and revealing the complex visceral effects of embodied cruelty on the stage. While some characters arguably do improve their situation while others experience a

deterioration, in each case the struggle with possession reveals the “implacable forces” acting on them from both inside and outside of themselves.

The characters in the play are subjected to an “undefended day” – are possessed by the gods and other implacable forces outside of their control – and they are as powerless to resist these forces as they are to counter the critical analysis that wraps up their experiences in neat little packages. Churchill and Lan do not make any part of the play ‘easy.’ Each story, scene, and character, each image, sound, and movement is layered and complicated to explode and violate stability and certainty in all forms. This is dangerous territory and can cause serious discomfort for those who want, like Girard, to restore the community to an understandable paradigm. With *A Mouthful of Birds*, Churchill and Lan have done more than simply use the idea of Artaud’s “theater of cruelty”; they have created an experience that transgresses the boundaries of the stage, situating the actors, characters, and audience in the midst of the cruelty, vainly striving against their own implacable forces in an attempt to wrest control from the chaos.

## Chapter 2:

### ***Hotel: Ritual, Erasure, and Invisible Cruelty***

The mythological elements present in *A Mouthful of Birds*, along with the physical and emotional violence, possession, and transgression, serve to illustrate a very clear connection between the work of Caryl Churchill and Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty." In *Hotel*, however, Churchill plays with cruelty in an entirely different manner. While the play may not immediately appear to be Artaudian in nature, Churchill once again cleverly creates a contemporary theatre of cruelty, all the more interesting for this appearance of something more quotidian. Made up of the two smaller pieces "Eight Rooms" and "Two Nights" and written as an opera, *Hotel* has been virtually overlooked in critical discussions, apart from a few passing mentions and some performance reviews. When placed next to the fascinating disintegration of reality in *The Skriker* (1994), the political crisis of *Mad Forest* (1990), or the linguistic labyrinth of *Blue Heart* (1997), it may seem to be less exotic or transgressive than her other works of the 1990s. However, the theatrical spectacle and the explicitly "cruel" elements are just as present in *Hotel* as in these other works, but the cruelty here disappears behind the mundane, everyday elements and routine tasks of the hotel experience. The Artaudian elements are at times subtle, but perhaps even more dangerous for this subtlety. The public and the private collide and recoil, and the characters must struggle through this cruelty in order to re-assert their presence and their own subjectivity.

The reviews of the original Second Stride production in 1997 focus on the merging of public spectacle and mundane private rituals, and are primarily positive in tone. Maggie Gee in "Rooms of Their Own," a review published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, praises "Eight

Rooms” for its “amalgam of imaginative freedom and minute realism,” remarking on the way in which the facades people normally put on in public are undermined by the sometimes vulgar realistic actions that generally only occur in private (21). Gee was less impressed with “Two Nights,” however, and spends much less time on this portion of the production. She calls the end result “cryptic and unfocused” and concludes that “Eight Rooms” could have stood alone (21). Unlike Gee, Elaine Aston, in her performance review published in the *Theatre Journal*, gives a detailed account of the action of the play and praises both segments, calling it “extraordinary and brilliant” and “a remarkable new collaboration between Churchill and Second Stride” (512). She also notes the clash between the public and the private in the hotel space and discusses the way the different scenes happening simultaneously create a “clash of emotional registers” (511), underscoring the fusion of the emotionally charged and the everyday in the play. While she remarks on the much darker tone of “Two Nights,” Aston believes the two sequences together raise interesting questions about the relationships between the individuals and society (512). By reading the two pieces together, Aston’s review opens up further possibilities for seeing the juxtaposition of different theatrical elements and objectives.

In “Eight Rooms,” the disparity between the relentlessness of the routine physical actions and the spectacle and stylization of an opera illuminates the potential for “invisible” cruelty: the cruelty effectively disappears or is hidden within the structure of the play itself. Beginning with language, Churchill builds a theatrical structure that is constantly hiding, minimizing, or erasing an easy comprehension of its purpose. In the introductory notes for “Eight Rooms,” Churchill addresses the important role of language as well as the concept of disappearance in the piece. She explains, “What do I want from words in an opera? A situation, an emotion, an image”



(Introductory Notes).<sup>4</sup> As with *A Mouthful of Birds*, Churchill uses language as one piece of the entire theatrical experience rather than prioritizing the text over theatricality. That is, the language contributes to the theatrical experience but is not the central goal. As she states, “I decided there would be no complete sentences, just little chunks of what was said or thought, that could be absorbed first time round or in a repeat or even never” (Introductory Notes). In this way, the audience is given an impression of the characters through small glimpses and pieces of textual elements paired with action rather than a full exposition telling them about the characters. The rational account thus disappears behind these flashes of information, leaving the audience to construct its own understanding from the way the play is experienced rather than explained.

This concept is echoed in the notes on physical choreography and stage action. In his notes on “Two Nights,” choreographer Orlando Gough debates the way in which the physical choreography and text should connect, asking “Should the dancing mimic the text? NO! Should it ignore the text? Not quite – it should connect, but on an emotional rather than literal level” (Introductory Notes). Gough, like Churchill, wanted the play to move away from a “literal” representation and toward a representation that involves sensing or feeling the connection between action and words. While this method of approaching the text once again aligns Churchill with Artaud’s calls for a new type of language in theatre based more on theatrical poetry than text, it is the way in which she creates this new language that makes her theatre a “theater of cruelty.”

Artaud often used vivid and disturbing imagery and usually moved to metaphysical and metaphorical realms in an attempt to imagine his theatre, and it may seem counter-intuitive to connect his vision of cruelty with the action of “Eight Rooms.” Here the cruelty is firmly

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<sup>4</sup> This and all following references to *Hotel* refer to the edition published by Nick Hern Books, London, 1997.

situated in actions that carry less overtly dramatic connotations than Artaud's plague: the characters brush their teeth, watch TV, and work through typical hotel bedtime routines. By addressing these mundane actions through the heightened medium of opera, however, Churchill increases the signification value of simple actions. They become more than just "stage business," revealing both the corporeal, physical reality of these actions and a metaphysical connection between the characters as the routines begin to mimic and echo one another.

In "Two Nights," the collision between the physical and metaphysical becomes darker and more urgent, and the play deals more openly with violence and cruelty. Discussing the two dancers in the piece, Churchill notes that "Both the characters disappear in different ways, and the diary is written by someone who becomes invisible. What might be in a diary apart from how the body begins to vanish? [...] Again I used few words, glimpses as we flick through someone else's diary" (Introductory Notes). Here, we begin to see a concern with the erasure of the physical body by the text, and once again, in true Artaudian fashion, Churchill addresses this concern through spectacle and cruelty rather than linear narrative. While the chorus sings the "glimpses" from the diary, two dancers act out different scenes of violence involving blood, drugs, and transience. The subject of the diary is never fully revealed: we only see the violent after-images and hear pieces of his or her words.

In this way, Churchill's characters begin to vanish, both linguistically and physically. Indeed, the entire play is littered with disappearance and erasure; from the opening the audience is challenged with bodies and subjects that quickly cease to exist. The first bodies physically onstage in "Eight Rooms" are those belonging to the 'Silent Couple' who "arrive, start to settle in" (3). After this less than descriptive stage direction, nothing more is mentioned about the couple until the piece is almost over, when it is noted that the "SILENT COUPLE who have

been asleep throughout wake up,” and then, a few lines later, we discover that with the exception of the insomniac still sleeping in the bed and the chatter of the television, they are the last to exit the room (19-20). It is interesting that “Eight Rooms” is thus framed by the entrance and exit of a couple who do not talk and whose actions cannot be inferred from the script. Here are two bodies on stage that go through the routine with everyone else, must physically navigate the space of the hotel and their relationship with one another, but are never granted a voice, are never granted their own subjectivity. Reading the text, one might even forget they are part of the cast (and, indeed, they are rarely mentioned in comments on the play). In production, their physical presence becomes tied to the routine tasks of the hotel; they are anonymous, going through the motions. While the other guests are able to vocalize their dreams, desires, or, at the very least, their personal situations, the personal dreams and desires of the Silent Couple are subsumed by the sense that they represent an “everyman” kind of hotel experience: just another body filling space.

The ‘Silent Couple,’ although they represent vanishing subjects, are still technically corporeally present. With the use of the Ghost and the TV, however, Churchill goes even further in erasing the subject. As Aston notes in her review, “the woman who plays the ghost also performs a key hotel presence: the television set” (511). These entities occupy an interesting contradictory position: neither the Ghost nor the TV has a physical, corporeal form in reality, and yet they are the only “characters” that exist across all the different hotel rooms. While the ‘Silent Couple’ shows the way physical bodies can disappear into the routines of life, the Ghost has left behind both the physical self and the ties that bind her to the daily routine. As a result, we see a type of alienation and erasure that is far more disturbing. The Ghost sings “It’s me. / Let me into your sleep. / Let me in when you wake. / I’ve been dead so long / I’ve forgotten why

/ I've not gone away. / I walk out of the night / can't you hear / can't you see / it's me / I've forgotten who / I've forgotten why" (16). This is a person that has been completely erased from everything but herself, and even her sense of self is crumbling. Ironically, the Ghost is the only character that speaks in complete sentences, making her the most linguistically complete character when her voice has the least "power" and will never be heard by the others.

While it does not directly address the Ghost character in *Hotel*, Ann Wilson's "Hauntings: Ghosts and the Limits of Realism in *Cloud Nine* and *Fen* by Caryl Churchill" attempts to decipher the role of ghosts in Churchill's works. Wilson uses Freud's assertion that ghosts are related to the repressed, which in her description are "impulses that are inadmissible into consciousness" (159). She associates this repression with violence and the suppression of identity. Wilson further notes that ghosts "mark the return of repressed histories (both social and personal) which have been displaced from the history of the community" (165). Read in this way, the Ghost in *Hotel* would represent the acknowledgment of the way people 'vanish' in society, and the dissonance between an individual identity and the identity of the larger community. The Ghost has been permanently cut off from society: it literally no longer occupies the same plane of existence. The TV also has no real connection to the community: it is merely a projection, not an actual consciousness. The irony is, of course, that the Ghost and the TV are the only characters that physically occupy all of the separate rooms and connect to all the other guests. In this way they become memories or after-images, standing in for something lost, something erased. Artaud's formulation of the "theater of cruelty" is based on an idea of the subject that encompasses three major points: a concern with the limits, requirements, and senses of the physical body; the disintegration of social structures; and the ability somehow to affect the metaphysical self. By contrasting the Ghost/TV and the Silent Couple with the other characters

in the play, we can see an emphasis emerging on a similar tri-fold relationship of the physical body to the social self and the metaphysical subject in *Hotel*.

The issue of the body-as-subject thus becomes the central focus of the play. The director Ian Spink, commenting on the directorial challenge of organizing fourteen bodies in one space, notes, “In rehearsal we were to discover that the simplest of acts, the cleaning of teeth, the hanging up of a dress, the reading of a magazine, demanded a relaxed yet rigorous precision when taking into account the thirteen other occupants of the space” (Introductory Notes). Rather than being the result of off-hand or thoughtless action, these everyday tasks must become precise and controlled, taking on the importance of ritual. The rigor and precision required for these bodies to work physically in the same space but not interact offers a physical representation of Artaud’s definition of cruelty as signifying “rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination” (101). The characters’ actions are in direct relation to the actions of the other characters around them; they are both oblivious to the other people onstage and irrevocably tied to them. In this way the characters are affected both by their location in the social structure and by their own physical needs. That is, the actors are forced into action by the movements of the other actors onstage, revealing, metaphorically, the social forces that impel the characters’ movements throughout their lives. They are also forced into action by their own bodies, which require certain responses to different physical stimuli and natural bodily functions. The clash between the socially constructed ties that bind the characters to society and the necessary bodily rituals that tie them to their own physical selves make up the Artaudian forces of cruelty – the “implacable forces outside of ourselves” – in this play and bear more than a passing resemblance to his discussion of the plague.

In his famous discussion of “The Theater and the Plague” in *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud links the physical and social effects of the disease to the action of the theatre. As he asserts, “first of all we must recognize that the theater, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicable” (27). Through a grotesque and violent discussion of the symptoms of the plague, Artaud uses the language of contagion to show the way in which the destruction of social forms is directly connected to the physical convulsions and paroxysms of the body. The plague crosses boundaries; it is an intensely personal physical experience that also violates the boundaries between individuals. In “Artaud, Germ Theory, and the Theatre of Contagion,” Stanton B. Garner, Jr. discusses at length the connection between the language of contagion and the individual and collective bodies in Artaud’s formulation of the “theater of cruelty.” Garner notes that within germ theory, “categories of internal and external lost their distinctiveness” (5), and he goes on to remark that “In its historical and contemporary forms, the ‘power of contagion’ embodied in plague offered Artaud an archetypal vision of catastrophic invasion, of the body seized and the psyche shattered by external forces that operated within” (9). Plague and contagion, like theatre, thus offer an ultimate kind of transgression: the violation of the boundary between the inside and the outside. Even more importantly, the plague represents another type of invisible cruelty. As Artaud observes, “Everything in the physical aspect of the actor, as in that of the victim of the plague, shows that life has reacted to a paroxysm, and yet nothing has happened” (24). The underlying cause of plague, for Artaud, is an invisible, implacable force acting on the body. As he asserts:

If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of

latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized. (30)

For Artaud, then, contagion – the destruction of boundaries – is the visible element that reveals the invisible cruelty, and it is the exposure of this cruelty that represents the full transgressive possibilities of the theatre.

The space of a hotel is quite unique and itself represents this same kind of desecration of the boundaries between the physical self and the social self. A hotel is both public and private, it provides a place of sanctuary but the sanctuary is temporary, and many different people inhabit the same intimate space but never meet. In hotels, behavior becomes highly ritualized, and the lines blur between one person's behavior and the next. Churchill comments on these characteristics by showing the action occurring in eight separate hotel rooms in the same physical space. While the guests all inhabit separate rooms, on the stage they all exist in the same physical space of one hotel room. The audience can thus clearly see the blurring between the private and public. Audiences are used to seeing intimate moments portrayed on the stage and do not readily associate the act of watching a play with an intrusion of privacy, but it is difficult to miss the potential discomfort of having the private exposed here. The action of getting ready for bed, completing toilet routines, and the sexual relationships between some of the guests are certainly very personal, but here every intimate detail is effectively made public, and watching the play begins to take on the same dynamic as watching animals in a zoo.

This kind of hyper-observation necessitates a reference to Michel Foucault's discussion of the panopticon, and Churchill's ties to the work of Foucault are undeniable. Churchill herself has admitted her fascination with Foucault's work, citing *Discipline and Punish* as the

inspiration for her 1978 play *Softcops*,<sup>5</sup> and many critics such as Janelle Reinelt have noted the connection between Foucault's theories of social constructivism and Churchill's work. While Reinelt, like most critics working with Foucault's influence on Churchill, focused primarily on *Softcops*, *Cloud 9*, and other plays of the 1970s, it is clear that Foucault's work has continued to influence her plays. *This is a Chair*, another play written by Churchill in 1997, echoes the title of the Foucault's 1983 *This is Not a Pipe*, a work that looks at a painting of a pipe by surrealist painter René Magritte's entitled "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is Not a Pipe), which was itself created after Magritte had read Foucault's *The Order of Things*. *This is Not a Pipe* examines the way signs signify, and playfully looks at the connection between the sign for a thing and the thing itself. Churchill's *This is Not a Chair*, published the same year as *Hotel*, focuses on the themes found in *This is Not a Pipe*. Each scene in the play begins with a phrase projected on the wall which is followed by dialogue that appears on the surface to be entirely unrelated. This connection, made evident through the staged disconnections between sign and signified, suggests that Churchill was still ruminating on Foucauldian themes at the time she was working on *Hotel*. Foucault's concept of the panopticon highlights the effect of an Artaudian 'implacable force.' For Foucault, this force is situated in the social codes and hierarchies that create the world in which we exist. While this kind of social panopticism is useful for examining one aspect of control in *Hotel*, Churchill's play recognizes other forces at work, specifically inner physical and metaphysical forces that are outside of Foucault's social organization, thus aligning her with Artaud's broader definition of 'implacable forces' that act on her characters. However, by acknowledging the spectacle of the Foucauldian panopticon and the relationship of sign and

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<sup>5</sup> In the introduction to the collection, *Plays: 2*, Churchill notes, "*Softcops* was written in 1978, after reading Foucault's *Surveiller et Punir*. It fitted so well with what I was thinking about that I abandoned the play I was groping towards and quickly wrote something that used Foucault's examples as well as his ideas."



signified in *Hotel*, we can see the development of the social element so important in this play: the effect of observation, social codes and hierarchies, and the way in which our world can be socially constructed.

As in the panopticon, every intimate detail is effectively made public here. Every action that normally would occur behind closed doors away from others becomes connected to the other people sharing the space and strangely dependent on the collective movements of the group. Through this process, even individual emotional shifts or tonal shifts in language become connected to the group: everything any individual does is colored and affected by the actions and emotions of the others in the group. This blurring between individuals becomes so pronounced that it becomes startling when we are reminded that this is supposed to be a private space. For example, when the Drunk Couple has a loud fight and the other guests react, we are reminded that in reality there are physical walls between the guests (9). There is, however, an important difference between Churchill's portrayal of the hotel and Foucault's discussion of the panopticon. For Foucault, the panopticon represents the ultimate demonstration of the way society perpetuates its socially constructed boundaries and hierarchies and disciplines the body. For Churchill, the hotel blurs the boundaries and hierarchies, disrupting the normal social routines, exposing the illusion of privacy, and revealing the physically embodied existence in contrast to the socially constructed existence.

Here is where Churchill moves away from Foucault and embraces the physical sensuality of Artaudian cruelty. The characters in the play are trapped within the structure of society, but they are also trapped within their physical selves. They must work through the physical trappings of the body and bodily functions in order to connect in this shared space. In "Eight Rooms" this concept is introduced in the dissonance between the physical actions and the

emotional and metaphysical desires of the characters, but in “Two Nights” the idea becomes darker and more starkly Artaudian in its presentation. The self-violating and violent dances of “Two Nights” resonate with Artaud’s call that we should be “like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames” (TD 13). In addition, the characters in the diary are contained and bound by the strictures of society, yet another set of implacable forces that act on them. They literally only exist within the perceptions of others, coming to life as their diary entries are read. While they are alienated from each other and from their own physical selves, they make a physical effort to assert their own embodied presence. They may not fully re-gain subjectivity, but they certainly do make a statement, “signaling through the flames” of their own captivity, and forcing the audience to witness the violent clash between the physical subject and the socially contained consciousness.

By putting the deceptively ordinary “Eight Rooms” and the startlingly dark “Two Nights” side by side in *Hotel*, Churchill layers the cruelty in fascinating ways. The different elements of the production must be taken together and read in relation to one another in the same way that the different elements of the physical, metaphysical, and social subject both depend upon and recoil from one another. Churchill has created the ultimate “physical expression in space” of an Artaudian spectacle, which seeks “in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets” (TD 85). By using Artaud’s “theater of cruelty” as a theoretical framework for analyzing this struggle, we are able to expose the way things are erased or subsumed as a direct result of the cruelty enacted by the implacable forces inside and outside of the characters. While this exposure may not imply transcendence of the system that seeks to erase subjectivity, it nevertheless reveals the “invisible” cruelties and effectively allows

the vanished characters to “pour out into the streets.” Once again the “theater of cruelty” opens new possibilities for understanding and interpreting Churchill’s work.

### Chapter 3:

#### ***Seven Jewish Children: Propaganda, the Double, and Inverted Cruelty***

*Seven Jewish Children*, Caryl Churchill's most recent play to date, set off a maelstrom of political controversy when it was first produced in London at the Royal Court Theatre on February 6, 2009. Accused of anti-Semitism, Churchill and her play have recently been at the center of critical pieces questioning her politics, her aesthetics, and even her humanity. Putting aside the concerns over content for the moment, it is quite astounding that such a small ten-minute play, written and produced in about a month, could have caused such large waves in the political and theatrical worlds. The furor over this production is fueled in part by its political agenda, and given Churchill's open remarks about the work's political leanings, it is not surprising that the first responses have been primarily op-ed pieces, blogs, and reviews focused on the play's politics. While people have both championed and condemned the play's content, the structure and theatricality of the piece also have much to do with the way *Seven Jewish Children* has been interpreted and the resulting violent reactions. Using Artaud as a framework through which to explore *Seven Jewish Children* allows us to see the way the play both hides and reveals the different forms of cruelty in play here.

As with *Hotel*, it might appear counter-intuitive to read this play in conversation with Artaud's "theater of cruelty." Made up of seven scenes in which an unidentified voice (or voices) gives imperatives on what a child (or children) should be told (or not told) about the history of Israel, *Seven Jewish Children* contains little in the way of gross theatrical spectacle, performed violence, or the sense-bombardment normally associated with Artaud's work. With the exception of the brief passionate monologue near the end of the play, the repetitive language

and tone have a calming effect, developing the cadence of a lullaby and masking the dangerous and controversial subject matter with which it deals. The primary question becomes, of course, how *Seven Jewish Children* can possibly act as a theatre of cruelty when it seems to be the exact opposite. Artaud himself would likely never agree to accept it as a valid incarnation of his “theater of cruelty” as it seems quite tame in comparison to his own “Jet of Blood” with its jarring scene changes and visual aggression. However, the play’s relative tameness is exactly what allows it to function as a form of the theater of cruelty, contrary to what many would believe. The play’s content deals with events of monumental cruelty and violence which are not directly portrayed onstage; indeed, many have become so used to seeing images of blood, violence, and passion in connection with political conflict that it would hardly seem a bold or wise choice to depict them onstage. By re-enacting a ‘safer’ version of these events onstage in such a way that the violence, bloodshed, and terror are hidden by the adult mantra “Don’t frighten her” (*Seven Jewish Children*), Churchill effectively creates an Artaudian ‘double’ which foregrounds the cruelty in new and unexpected ways.

Artaud’s concept of the ‘double’ is a bit tricky to tease out, as he himself did not spend time thoroughly defining the term. He did use the concept when titling his collection *The Theater and Its Double* and referred to it in several different ways that are useful for our reading of *Seven Jewish Children*. Artaud begins the preface of *The Theater and its Double* by discussing a “rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation” (7). This disconnection between the sign and the signified, similar to the earlier discussion of Foucault’s *This is Not a Pipe*, allows theatre to layer, contrast, and double meaning. In this way, from the very opening of his book, he frames his thoughts on theatre by the way in which things, ideas, and signs double, reflect, and represent as well as misrepresent

reality. Relating this doubling to the concept of culture, or “culture-in-action,” Artaud notes that “a cultivated ‘civilized’ man is regarded as a person instructed in systems, a person who thinks in forms, signs, representations,” and that this civilized man “derives thoughts from acts, instead of identifying acts with thoughts” (8). Artaud calls for a theatre that would work in the opposite direction, offering a double for culture that instead of deriving “thoughts from acts” would move from compelling ideas to their reciprocal compelling actions. Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children* is framed in this manner: rather than seeing actions portrayed onstage and translating those actions into ideas, the play presents compelling ideas and language in order to construct a double or shadow image of the actions identified with the thoughts. In this way, as in *Hotel*, the words here take on “approximately the importance they have in dreams” (TD 94), and these words are dangerous. They stir up shadow-like images of violence and terror that are even more terrifying for their lack of definition.

The concept of the dream is an important one to Artaud, who believed very strongly in the power of the unconscious mind, and it is an important concept to consider when reading *Seven Jewish Children* in conversation with Artaud’s conception of the ‘double.’ Artaud, when describing the importance of dreams in “The Theater and the Plague,” uses as an example the story of the Viceroy of Sardinia who dreams of the plague ravaging his city and then later, when the Grand-Saint-Antoine attempts to dock at his city, turns it away out of fear of the plague. The Grand-Saint-Antoine later docks at Marseille, bringing the plague to that town (15). Artaud notes that the dream creates a connection between the Viceroy Saint-Rémys and the plague – strong enough to make him act but “not strong enough to infect him with the disease” (17). By experiencing the conflict in Gaza in the theatre, an audience can interact with this hidden double in the same way that the Viceroy of Sardinia interacted with the plague – forced to take note and

deal with the immediate threat, forced into a direct relationship with something terrifying, but through the medium of the dream, the double, the theatre.

Churchill creates such a dream, a shadow: a double of the physical and emotional realities of war, of fear, and of blatant cruelty in all forms. The “theater of cruelty” here involves not just the theatrical presentation of the Gaza crisis but seeing this theatrical representation as the double of the actual crisis with all the violence and bloodshed that entails. *Seven Jewish Children* thus inverts the common rendering of the Artaudian “theater of cruelty.” Rather than portraying the cruelty onstage and revealing the complex structure within which the characters are trapped and from which the cruelty originates, Churchill’s play portrays the complex structure in which the characters are trapped, revealing the cruelty from which that structure originates. The language acts as a kind of linguistic impressionism – giving many short vague strokes of color and form that, taken as a whole, represent something far more complex and detailed. The audience, through the experience of this linguistic impressionism and the dream-like double, become implicated within the very structure from which they initially seem so distanced.

The audience’s experience of this ‘real-world’ crisis through the medium of the double elicits the same reaction as the experience in its more visceral theatrical form and means that the energy expended in the theatre is fed back into the audience. This creates a connection between the play’s representation onstage, the dream-like double to which it gestures, and the audience.

As Artaud notes:

In the true theatre a play disturbs the senses’ repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt (which moreover can have its full effect only if it remains

virtual), and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic. (28)

In creating *Seven Jewish Children*, Churchill is careful that the spectacle remain ‘virtual,’ calm, and outside of reality. By presenting the audience with a representation of a political situation they know to be violently contentious in a manner that feels muted and dream-like, Churchill ensures that the audience must take an active role in following the trace of the violence back to its source. The repeated imperatives “tell her,” “don’t tell her,” “don’t frighten her” implicate the audience. The audience becomes the unnamed character who must wade through the sea of imperatives and must attempt to create a singular vision from the discordant voices. The audience is thus connected to the violent and terrifying specter of war through the play’s double and so is compelled to action – to decide what information they feel should be revealed and what information should be withheld. The act of arranging information resonates with the composition of political propaganda and provides yet another double useful to an Artaudian reading of the play.

It is this invitation within the play that encourages the audience members to compose their own narratives that has provoked such strong reactions to the play. Different viewers have chosen different strands within the bombardment of imperatives in order to create a narrative and a message, actively associating certain signifiers with the signs presented while ignoring others. Depending on how the narrative signs are chosen, the play can be read in many different ways, and one common controversial reading is to see the play as inviting an audience to participate in creating propaganda against the Jewish people. Many reviewers have noted Churchill’s use of anti-Jewish rhetoric, perhaps none more forcefully than Melanie Phillips of *The Spectator* who calls the play “a ten-minute blood-libel” and remarks “Ostensibly about Israel, it is actually a



direct attack on the Jews. It tells them in effect that they are to be held responsible for the fact that in Israel Jews have turned into Nazis” (*Spectator.com*). Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon take a different view of Churchill’s play in their article published in *The Nation*. Noting the play’s ability to cause discomfort even as they praise the play for its bravery, they ask this:

Why does the play feel, even to those of us who admire its virtues, so peculiarly, and at times, almost brutally painful? It is an exigent text, a rapid public response to and at the moment of slaughter, and, remarkably, as few such texts are, it is contemplative, interior, almost entirely soft-spoken, and demanding. (13)

While a thorough political examination of the play would certainly prove interesting, the main concern for our purposes is the way in which the play puts the audience members in the position of editing and piecing together information in order to generate a message with which they are comfortable. One possible outcome is, of course, that an audience might choose the elements in the play that create an anti-Jewish message, in effect creating a type of anti-Semitic propaganda, but this is only one possible reading. Regardless of the exact outcome, however, the play forces the audience members into a position whereby they are invited, and perhaps compelled, to create a narrative history of a political conflict, to choose specific threads and elements from which to piece together an edited vision of that conflict. The audience is thus implicated in the creation of this “propaganda” and effectively become part of the cruelty. Artaud once again opens up a reading that will allow us to acknowledge the complex and multifaceted perspectives at play both in the Gaza conflict and in Churchill’s play. By acknowledging the way the play acts as an Artaudian double to put the audience in contact with the brutal reality of the conflict, we can see that political propaganda is an important, but not the only, element of cruelty the play reveals.

Beyond the context of political propaganda, the piecing together of information becomes a controlling trope for the play and represents the ‘implacable force’ the characters must work against in order to assert their subjectivity. Expression becomes twisted and redefined by the fact that it is always mediated, always weighed, dissected, and pieced together. The signs themselves – the gestures, language, and action of the play – must be deciphered and reworked. Artaud uses similar language when discussing the theatre’s ability to de-stabilize signs in “The Theater and the Plague.” He observes:

The theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go: like the plague it re-forges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature. It recovers the notion of symbols and archetypes which act like silent blows, rests, leaps of the heart, summons of the lymph, inflammatory images thrust into our abruptly wakened heads. The theater restores [to] us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names we hail as symbols: and behold! Before our eyes is fought a battle of symbols, one charging against another in an impossible melee; for there can be theater only from the moment when the impossible really begins and when the poetry which occurs on the stage sustains and superheats the realized symbols. (27-8)

*Seven Jewish Children* certainly “superheats the realized symbols,” forcing the characters and the audience to sift through a history of signs and conflicting signifiers. The characters struggle with ancient rhetorics of hatred and contemporary symbols of power. Here, then, all expression becomes a kind of propaganda, and, therefore, all expression becomes cruelty, and we begin to see the breakdown of sign and signified in different elements of the play.

The structure of the play itself points to a breakdown of sign and signified. On the page, the text looks more like a poem than a play, and, in fact, someone who did not know the work to be a piece of theatre might be hard-pressed to guess it is a script. In addition, there is very little to indicate staging. In fact, the only clear directions Churchill gives are those at the front of the play:

*No children appear in the play. The speakers are adults, the parents, and if you like other relations of the children. The lines can be shared out in any way you like among those characters. The characters are different in each small scene as the time and child are different. They may be played by any number of actors. (Seven Jewish Children)*

There are no distinct characters, there is no distinct set, and there is no scripted action. There is nothing to link the words (signs) to their actions (signified performance). Instead, the only information Churchill gives involves the relationship between adult and child, and the way in which adults pass information and edit histories for children. Neither the text, nor the place, nor the specific characters have any defining characteristics outside of this transfer of information. As such, the words reverberate with heightened importance, taking on significance beyond the simple content of the text and, as was previously suggested, develop “approximately the importance they have in dreams” (TD 94). The words themselves build an image of war, pain, loss, and loneliness, but it remains just that – an image.

While Artaud voiced strong distaste for conventional dialogue in the theatre, this has often been translated on his behalf into a total disregard for spoken language. In fact, Artaud did (although hesitantly at times) acknowledge the possibilities for language, when used in a theatrical manner, to have the same powerful physical effect in the theatre as other elements of the theatrical language he desired. In “Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène,” Artaud briefly

mentions the possibility that language can have the same effectiveness as other forms. As he notes:

I am well aware that words too have possibilities as sound, different ways of being projected into space, which are called *intonations*. Furthermore, there would be a great deal to say about the concrete value of intonation in the theater, about this faculty words have of creating music in their own right according to the way they are pronounced, independently of their concrete meaning and even going counter to this meaning – of creating beneath language a subterranean current of impressions, correspondences, and analogies .... (38, Artaud's emphasis)

Artaud goes on to mention that playwrights do not take into account this “theatrical consideration of language,” and this is the reason he focuses so heavily on de-prioritizing the text (38).

Churchill, however, is a playwright who has a very strong understanding of the “subterranean current of impressions, correspondences, and analogies” which language can create, and the language of *Seven Jewish Children*, as presented in performance, develops the musical and theatrical qualities Artaud calls for in order to effectively construct an Artaudian “double.” In this way, the onstage language suggests action to the audience, but the words are themselves a sign standing in for an absent presence. This absent presence – the Artaudian double – is made up of several different pieces that work in tandem to create an effective piece of theatre.

The most obvious absent presence is that of each scene's absent child, around which the scenes are centered. The children both exist and do not exist, and occupy an interesting contradictory position of symbol and reality. As a symbol, the absent children represent innocence and openness. The symbolic child can be re-written; her understanding of her world can be shaped and guided by adults – edited and handed to her in the manner of their choosing.

As a reality, the absent children point to the physical and emotional reality of growing up in the midst of this kind of political crisis. While adults dealing with the politics of loss, pain, and fear can be compelling, a child dealing with complex and difficult situations of loss, pain, and fear more strongly plays on an audience's sense of pathos. An actual physical child in the space 'acting' frightened would not have the same effect. The invisible children, on the other hand, can stand in for the entire emotional range of the experience of war simultaneously. In addition, they become doubles for the other children mentioned in the text, most strikingly, the "family of dead girls" in scene 7 (*Seven Jewish Children*). This doubling is particularly haunting, infecting the seven girls indicated in the play with violence and death. Rather than clearly delineating seven separate children, Churchill's play evokes the feeling that the invisible children become an "every child," automatically making them more accessible to the audience who are free to imagine children like the children they know, while simultaneously tainting that image with the double implicated in violence and death.

As with *Hotel*, then, Churchill creates an invisible or disappearing subject. The child has no agency or power; she is denied both a voice and a physical presence. We know the child only through the directives from adults, and these are not even given directly to the child since the repetition of "tell her" implies that the adult figure is speaking to another adult figure (*Seven Jewish Children*). While cruelty against a figure that is neither physically nor emotionally present may seem impossible, the ability of the adults in this situation to create the frame of history given to the child is, in itself, the ultimate expression of Artaudian cruelty. The information received from adults becomes an implacable force – something the child is compelled to accept. Indeed, the 'implacable forces' outside of ourselves are heightened when viewed from a child's perspective. A child learns to know the world through the support and

guidance of adults; the children here simply receive information, and contradictory information at that. Each child loses her entire subjectivity – both her voice and her physical presence, left only with the gender marker “her.” Each child is marked with a gender stereotypically associated with passivity and becomes nothing more than a vessel for receiving information, something she can neither create nor control for herself. Her knowledge is thus necessarily alienated and alienating. As such, the information from adults serves the same purpose as propaganda – messages that have been carefully chosen and edited to ensure very specific connections are made in terms of interpreting the relation between sign and signifier. The adults in *Seven Jewish Children* attack the problem of how to frame the political situation for the child with ‘rigor and precision,’ demanding the same in their interpretations of the world.

While the adults create the implacable forces with which the child must grapple, they, too, must work through forces acting against them in order to assert their own subjectivity. In a meta-theatrical moment, the characters must in fact work against the framework of Churchill’s play, which does not even grant them individual status. Their subjectivity is called into question by her front-notes, before the first word is spoken. In addition, these characters are situated within the context of very real, physical violence in the form of war and the political brutality of a specific historical moment. They exist within a political and social climate that requires they interact with physical, emotional, political, and religious threats. They have very little control of their own lives in an unstable and quickly changing landscape, and grab onto the only amount of control they can muster – the ability to shape a child’s view. As a result, their actions and words begin to resemble an Artaudian mass, “convulsed and hurled against each other” (TD 85) as different voices (or different variations of the same voice) attack, overlap, and attempt to assert

their control over the child, hoping that this form of control will serve as a proxy by which they can, at least in some sense, control their world.

Unfortunately, this control is only illusory. The adults in *Seven Jewish Children* lose even the power of their own voices – that is, they cannot “tell” the child their own perspectives, but must direct some unknown third party to do so for them. Their voices are effectively stifled, and the only line of communication between them and the child is mediated through the process of creating propaganda. Once again Churchill includes characters who are, in effect, “signaling through the flames” (TD 13), attempting to communicate through the implacable forces of cruelty.

The audience, by association, becomes the link between the child and the adult – editing the expression of the adults into a specific narrative and then acting as the medium through which that edited information will be passed on to others. Thus, the way information and propaganda move through society takes on the same qualities as the theatre and the plague described by Artaud. By interacting with war and murder in the theatre in this way, the energy of these actions is discharged directly into the audience “with all the force of an epidemic” (25-6), and they then pass on the cruelty/plague/propaganda, thus spreading the ‘infection.’ This virulent spreading of cruelty is what links the physical and emotional realities of the Gaza conflict to the dream-like theatrical expression of that conflict. The audience’s inability to see the violence of the situation acted out means that the energy accumulated from witnessing the play is turned back on the audience, forcing them to come to terms with their own editing of information. Artaud, in discussing theatre that uses just this kind of disinterested presentation, described the process as follows:

How hard it is, when everything encourages us to sleep, though we may look about us with conscious, clinging eyes, to wake and yet look about us as in a dream, with eyes that no longer function and whose gaze is turned inward.

This is how our strange idea of disinterested action originated, though it is action nonetheless, and all the more violent for skirting the temptation of repose. (11)

By presenting the audience with a shadow or dream-like double, Churchill effectively turns the audience's gaze inward, forcing them to recognize a direct relationship with the violence in Gaza.

Deciphering the many levels on which *Seven Jewish Children* is operating is a difficult task made even more complex by the political controversy surrounding the play. Artaud's conception of the double opens possibilities for interpreting and analyzing Churchill's surprisingly complicated ten-minute play. By approaching the text as the shadow or double of the reality occurring in Gaza, we can address the way in which a play that only broadly gestures toward violence is irrevocably tied to it and simultaneously enacts that violence. The language helps to create a dream-like vision that "doubles" the violent realities of the Gaza conflict, forcing the audience into a relationship with that reality through the medium of the theatre. The characters, through the struggle with the conflicting versions of events and a framework which erases their subjectivity, reveal the different elements of cruelty at play. In this way, the play becomes a "double" of the spectacle of cruelty – the conflict in Gaza. This inversion of cruelty and the layering and doubling of sign and signified allows us to see how the translation of information itself acts as a cruelty, becoming an implacable force with which both the characters and the audience must contend. There is no doubt that for Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children* was meant to "hurt" us into thinking in new ways.



## Conclusion

Caryl Churchill is a phenomenally important playwright, both for her bold handling of transgressive subjects and themes as well as her fearless use of the entire range of theatrical possibilities. Her ability to delve deeply into imaginative and dangerous territory coupled with her willingness to dramatically vary the form and content of her work sets her apart from many current playwrights, and is what has allowed her to remain a force in the theatrical world for over fifty years. Reading Churchill's work as a modern interpretation of Artaudian concepts of cruelty allows us to explore new possibilities for understanding the ways in which her plays so effectively upset traditional boundaries and power hierarchies.

While *A Mouthful of Birds* provides a starting point for examining the usefulness of Artaudian concepts in connection to the work of Caryl Churchill, it is important to note that many of the main Artaudian threads in the play, such as the physical sensuality, the unabashed use of violence in many forms, and the implication of the audience in the spectacle of cruelty, are elements that had already surfaced in Churchill's plays, and, indeed, some can be traced to her very first works. What *A Mouthful of Birds* does provide, however, is a production that is unquestionably Artaudian in its conflation of the physical, verbal, and theatrical elements and its focus on the physical expression in space of the implacable forces outside of ourselves. Both the characters and the audience are powerless before the "undefended day," and reading the play in conversation with Artaud's concept of cruelty as an implacable force highlights and underscores the transgressive possibilities here. Using physical, embodied violence as a catalyst through which the characters must come to terms with their subjectivity in a system which has allocated their rightful "place" in society, Churchill frames the entire play as an Artaudian "double": the

first scenes introduce the characters, and then the characters are doubled and re-doubled as they are physically possessed by the characters of the *Bacchae* and then are released back into the world after the possession. Churchill complicates and layers the forms of cruelty at play, and using Artaud as a framework foregrounds the way in which the interplay of cruelties rips apart the commonly accepted cultural norms on which our understanding of the world is based.

This violation of physical, social, and political stability is dangerous territory, and becomes even more dangerous when Churchill manages to incorporate the same magnitude of cruelty into everyday rituals and mundane actions, as she does with *Hotel*. Here, the cruelty is hidden and subsumed by the very structure which releases it. The space of the hotel, a place in which the private and the public both merge and recoil, serves as a metaphor for the characters' struggle to re-assert their own subjectivity through the implacable forces acting on their physical, metaphysical, and social selves. The cruelty and the characters are hidden or subsumed by the 'rigor and precision' of the system in which they exist, a system in which the necessities of the body and the mind are entrapped and erased by mundane ritual actions. This erasure is underscored by the play's operatic medium which also acts as a cruelty; the stylized movements of dance and the way in which Churchill only uses phrases and pieces of sentences provide a contrast to the everyday, routine actions they are meant to portray and work on yet another level to erase or subsume the characters by restricting their ability to speak and move freely. Reading *Hotel* through an Artaudian lens reveals the way in which the invisible cruelty and transgression of physical, metaphysical, and social boundaries acts on both the characters and the audience, thus allowing the "vanished" characters to re-surface and "signal through the flames" in an attempt to re-assert their subjectivity.

Churchill uses a similar method of erasure in *Seven Jewish Children*, re-enacting onstage a ‘safer,’ dream-like “double” of the violence, bloodshed, and terror occurring during the Gaza conflict. Viewing the play as an Artaudian double reveals the way things, ideas, and signs double, reflect, and represent reality, presenting a shadow image of the actual theatre of cruelty: the spectacle of war. Through the experience of the “double,” the play forces the audience into a direct relationship with the cruelty, in which they must wade through the confusing and conflicting imperatives and take an active role in attempting to decipher the reality of the situation. This active attempt to piece together a narrative implicates the audience in the creation of the very system in which the cruelty is situated. The cruelty here concerns the editing and transmission of information, and, indeed, all expression becomes twisted and marked by its function as a form of propaganda. The characters themselves must struggle with their lack of definition and subjectivity; functioning as absent presences, without names and, in the case of the seven children, without physical presence. These inversions of cruelty – taking as its main subject the “double” of the Gaza crisis, the distortion of sign and signified caused by manufactured interpretation, and the absent presence of the characters – can help us understand the way in which a play that appears, on its surface, to be quite calm, can be so irrevocably tied to extreme physical and emotional conflict.

Reading Churchill’s works through the lens of Artaudian cruelty can open new possibilities for understanding and interpreting the many levels on which her plays are acting on both the characters and the audience. Her work plays with Artaudian concepts in many different forms, vastly varying and changing methods, focus, and purpose in order to re-interpret constantly the theatrical experience through the most appropriate framework. While some of her works may not appear Artaudian at first glance, Churchill’s focus on different forms of

transgression in imaginative and dangerous ways aligns her with the similarly imaginative and dangerous work of Artaud. Artaud's writing on the subject can hardly be called a practical guide to building a "theater of cruelty"; instead, his work uses metaphor and striking visual imagery to tease out the sensual and dangerous qualities of the theatre in order to destroy political, social, and individual boundaries, allowing the visceral experience of the implacable forces outside of ourselves to rise to the surface. Just as Artaud plays with different metaphors and frameworks for deciphering the action and effect of cruelty in the theatre, so, too, does Churchill play with different forms and structures which create similar movements and effects on her characters and audiences. The mutability, aggression, splendor, and cruelty of Churchill's large body of work require a theoretical framework that incorporates the same heightened level of mutability, aggression, splendor and cruelty. By putting Caryl Churchill's plays in conversation with the work of Antonin Artaud and the "theater of cruelty," we open complex and multi-faceted possibilities of interpretation and understanding that are absolutely necessary for investigating the complexity and intensity of the theatrical experience of her work.

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