

The Influence of Artaud on Béla Pintér's Theatre

“The further prostitution of the theatrical ideal must not be permitted. Theatre is worth something only if it stands in a magical, spine-chilling relationship with reality.” [1]

Összefoglalás: A tanulmány Antonin Artaud Kegyetlenség Színházának koncepcionális és strukturális hatását vizsgálja Pintér Béla és Társulata munkásságára a kortárs magyar színház kontextusában. Bár Pintér nem veszi át közvetlenül Artaud formai és esztétikai radikalizmusát, dramaturgiája mély rokonságot mutat az artaud-i alapelvekkel, különösen a kegyetlenség fogalmának kezelésében, a test központi szerepében, a rituális struktúrák alkalmazásában, valamint a néző destabilizálásában. A tanulmány amellet érvel, hogy mindkét alkotó számára a színház nem pusztán reprezentáció, hanem az emberi lét feltételeivel való ontológiai és etikai szembesítés terepe. Fontos előadások elemzésén keresztül bemutatja, miként fordítja le Pintér Artaud metafizikai és rituális színházeszményét egy társadalmilag beágyazott, történetileg meghatározott színházi nyelvre. A tanulmány továbbá szélesebb összefüggésbe helyezi e kapcsolatot Jerzy Grotowski módszertani és etikai újraértelmezésének bevonásával, hangsúlyozva egy olyan hármasszisztemet, amelyet a testiség, a nézői részvétel és a színházi igazság kérdései kötnek össze. Végső soron a dolgozat azt állítja, hogy Pintér színháza az artaud-i kegyetlenség szekuláris és kortárs újrafogalmazásának tekinthető, amely megőrzi annak kritikai erejét, miközben a jelen társadalmi-politikai valóságához igazítja.

Kulcsszavak: Kegyetlenség Színháza; kortárs magyar színház; Pintér Béla; Antonin Artaud; Jerzy Grotowski; rituálé; testiség; nézői részvétel; intézménykritika; dramaturgia; kegyetlenség; performativitás.

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[1] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 147.

Abstract: This study examines the conceptual and structural influence of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty on the work of Béla Pintér and Company within contemporary Hungarian theatre. While Pintér does not directly adopt Artaud's formal or aesthetic radicalism, his dramaturgy reveals a deep affinity with Artaudian principles, particularly in its treatment of cruelty, the centrality of the body, ritualistic structures, and the destabilization of the spectator.

The paper argues that for both artists, theatre functions not merely as representation but as an ontological and ethical confrontation with the conditions of human existence. Through analyses of key productions the study demonstrates how Pintér translates Artaud's metaphysical and ritualistic vision into a socially grounded, historically situated theatrical language. Furthermore, the essay situates this relationship within a broader lineage by incorporating Jerzy Grotowski's methodological and ethical reinterpretation of Artaud, highlighting a triadic connection based on shared concerns with embodiment, spectator engagement, and theatrical truth.

Ultimately, the paper contends that Pintér's theatre constitutes a secular and contemporary rearticulation of Artaudian cruelty, preserving its critical force while adapting it to the socio-political realities of the present.

Keywords: Theatre of Cruelty; contemporary Hungarian theatre; Béla Pintér; Antonin Artaud; Jerzy Grotowski; ritual; embodiment; spectator engagement; institutional critique; dramaturgy; cruelty; performativity.

Antonin Artaud's theatrical theory and body of work represent one of the most radical and controversial undertakings in 20th-century performance thought, fundamentally challenging the foundations of Western representational theatre. The concept of the Theatre of Cruelty, the psychological and physical disintegration articulated in Artaud's correspondence, and the cultural discourse surrounding the figure of "Artaud the Momo" (the Bogeyman) all center on a singular realization: that theatre is not primarily an aesthetic concern, but an ontological and ethical one—a site for the threshold states of human existence.

Although operating in an entirely different formal and stylistic register, the work of Béla Pintér and Company maintains a continuous, if often latent, dialogue with this Artaudian legacy. While Pintér is not a disciple of Artaud in a literal sense, his theatre thematizes cruelty, bodily vulnerability, institutional violence, and collective complicity in ways that reveal the historical persistence of Artaud's ideals within contemporary Hungarian theatre.

In *The Theatre and its Double* [2], Artaud identifies the crisis of Western theatre as its detachment from the elemental experiences of existence, having been reduced to mere literary illustration. He argues that a text-centered theatre grounded in psychological realism is incapable of capturing the primal forces that define the human condition: pain, desire, fear, death, and the struggle with the transcendent.

“Consequently, theatre cannot regain its distinctive power until it rediscovers its own language.” [3]

For Artaud, ‘cruelty’ is not a moral category but an ontological necessity: theatre must be cruel because life itself is cruel, and any art that conceals this fact is a lie. This same fundamental assertion appears in Pintér’s theatre [4], albeit through a different aesthetic strategy. Pintér does not abolish language, nor does he reject narrative; on the contrary, he often relies on ‘over-written’ and self-referential dialogue. Yet, these dialogues do not reveal the subtle nuances of the soul; rather, they expose the brutality, repetition, and inherent emptiness of language. In Pintér’s work, speech is not a tool for understanding but a form of violence—one that wounds just as the shock to the body does in Artaud’s vision. *“This language belongs to the science of dynamic and spatial expression, rather than to the realm of words that transform into dialogue. In theatre, only that which lies beyond words may now be used—that which unfolds in space, which produces an alienating effect, and which makes human sensitivity vibrate.”* [5]

Artaud’s letters—especially those written from the asylum in Rodez—radically dismantle the boundary between life and theory. In these texts, the body is not a metaphor but a site of concrete suffering: a network of hunger, pain, electroshock, medication, and hallucination. [6] For Artaud, theatre emerges from this lived experience rather than as a theoretical construct. These letters testify that social institutions—medicine, the state, and the church—do not heal, but instead pathologize and isolate those who fail to conform to the order of ‘normality.’ *“Thus theatre must create a metaphysics of speech, gesture, and expression in order to escape the psychological and human treadmill. But all this is worth little if it is not backed by a real metaphysical temptation, by a demand for unusual thoughts whose very destiny is that they cannot be confined, indeed cannot even be formally circumscribed.”* [7]

[2] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról.* (*The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty*) Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 147.

[3] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról.* (*The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty*) Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 148.

[4] Artaud, A. (1998): *Artaud, the Bogeyman.* Budapest: Orpheusz.

[5] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról.* (*The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty*) Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 149.

[6] Artaud, A. (n.d.): *Artaud's Letters.* Budapest: Orpheusz.

[7] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról.* (*The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty*) Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 148.

[8] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 149.

[9] Pintér, B. (2002): *Peasant Opera*. Budapest: Pintér Béla and Company.

[10] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 150.

A cornerstone of Artaudian theatre is the concept of ritual. In Balinese theatre, Artaud discovered a model in which theatre does not merely represent but enacts: movement, sound, and rhythm exert a direct visceral effect upon the spectator's body. The productions of Béla Pintér and Company—though seemingly embedded in realist or grotesque narratives—similarly carry ritualistic structures. The repetition of musical motifs, choreographed violence, and grotesque exaggeration are all elements that transcend storytelling to organize the performance into a collective experience. *“This objective and concrete theatrical language, however, is above all an explicitly Eastern mode of expression, and it primarily serves to convulse the human organs. It acts upon human sensitivity. It breaks with the Western use of the word and constructs enchantment out of speech. It cries out.”* [8]

Peasant Opera (Parasztopera) [9], for example, is not merely a family saga but an archaic ritual of transgression, in which incest, betrayal, and violence appear not as individual deviations but as the structural foundations of the community. In this sense, Pintér's theatre aligns more closely with Artaud's ritualistic vision than one might initially assume. *“The point, therefore, is that theatre should become, in the strictest sense, a life-function; a process as precisely localized and exact as the circulation of blood in the veins, or the seemingly chaotic unfolding of dream-images in the brain. And the way to achieve this is to captivate, indeed to truly hold the spectator's attention captive.”* [10]

The figure of “Artaud the Momo” (the Bogeyman) highlights how Artaud often persists in cultural memory not as a philosopher, but as a cautionary tale—the ‘mad artist’ whose fate serves as a warning. In the plays of Béla Pintér and Company, similar ‘bogeyman’ figures emerge: charismatic yet destructive characters onto whom the community projects its own latent fears and desires. These figures are not simply villains; they operate with the tacit, collective consent of the community.

This dynamic mirrors Artaud's correspondence, where the asylum staff exercise violence not out of individual malice, but as part of a systemic apparatus. In this sense, Pintér's theatre unfolds the social dimension of Artaudian cruelty: cruelty is not the exception, but the structural norm. *“In other words, theatre must call into question by every possible means not only all manifestations of the external, objective, describable world, but also the inner world in the metaphysical sense—that is, the human world itself. Only thus can there once again be talk in theatre of the rights of the imagination. Humor, Poetry, and Imagination can acquire value only if, through anarchic destruction, they provoke the marvelous flight of forms—this will be the*

performance itself—and if in this way they organically call into question man, his conception of reality, and his poetic place within it.” [11]

In the production *Foreign Body (Idegen test)* [12], this norm is explored through the loose relational network of a queer community. Since homosexuality has been repurposed as a political weapon, it no longer represents individual agency or freedom of choice; instead, it has become a synonym for social stigmatization and state-sanctioned exclusion. The ethos of the *Theatre of Cruelty* has alarmingly seeped into everyday social practice. For the perceived social majority, the ‘unacceptability’ of sexual identity creates a hierarchy of first- and second-class citizens.

For any rational, responsible citizen, the transformation of such stigma into a mandatory public discourse is intolerable. Here, Artaudian cruelty manifests as contemporary social intolerance—a primary marker of division where those who defend individual liberty are branded with the same stigma as those they stand for.

Foreign Body offers an even bolder critique by centering the issue of same-sex parenting. The chaos at the play’s conclusion acts as a photographic still, capturing the current hopelessness and the structural ‘impossibility’ of contemporary Hungarian society. “*The theatre is as murderous and inhuman as a dream in order to make clear and to engrave forever within us the consciousness of an inextinguishable and permanent, convulsive conflict, in which life is violently interrupted at every instant, and in which all creation stamps its feet because we are finished beings; to cast into a concrete and timely form, and to perpetuate, the metaphysical ideas of certain myths which, by their very cruelty and ferocity, bear witness to the possession of some vital essence.*” [13]

A crucial distinction remains: while Artaud’s theatre opens toward the transcendent, Pintér’s world is rooted firmly in the present. For Artaud, the ultimate stake of theatre is metaphysical—the purification of the body, the liberation of divine forces, and the proclamation of an apocalyptic truth. In Béla Pintér’s theatre, by contrast, there is no redemption and no transcendent resolution. Cruelty leads not to catharsis, but to a sobering recognition. This recognition is all the more heavy because the spectator is forced to acknowledge their own complicity in the mechanisms of the world presented on stage.

In this sense, Pintér’s theatre may be seen as a heightened version of the Artaudian program—one that incorporates the very absence of a ‘beyond’ into its cruelty. The closing line of *Foreign Body* is emblematic of this Pintérian sense of entrapment and impossibility: “*Help! Police! They’ve gone mad!*” Here, the individual and the community find no release from the pressures of alleged social norms.

[11] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 150.

[12] Pintér, B. (2024): *Foreign Body*. Budapest: Pintér Béla and Company.

[13] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 150.

[14] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról.* (*The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty*) Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 152.

[15] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról.* (*The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty*) Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 153.

Silence and despair manifest as a desperate plea for external intervention—hoping for an authority (the government, the police, the media) that will decide in their place and absolve them of the burden of personal opinion. “*The task of directing is not simply to stage a text, but to serve as the point of departure for theatrical creation. Around directing in this sense a specific theatrical language is constructed. Through the use and application of this language, unity emerges from the duality of author and director.*” [14]

Artaud rejects psychological realism and bourgeois theatre, arguing they remain on the surface of the soul and fail to reach the deeper strata of the unconscious and bodily experience.

Pintér, conversely, seemingly builds upon psychological motivations—yet these motivations repeatedly prove insufficient. His characters remain fundamentally incomprehensible because their actions are dictated by structural constraints. This incomprehensibility aligns with Artaudian thought: for both creators, the task of theatre is not empathy, but confrontation. The spectator does not sympathize; they are forced to face a reality.

In his choice of subject matter, Pintér ‘throws down the gauntlet,’ addressing the taboo themes of contemporary society before almost anyone else. He refuses to acknowledge the notion that certain topics are ‘improper’ to discuss in modern-day Hungary. While the mouthpieces of propaganda ignore systemic issues and refuse to reflect on phenomena that run counter to the mainstream, Pintér centers exactly those realities that the dominant ideology is unwilling to recognize.

Pintér’s theatre is not a mere imitation or a simple continuation of Artaud’s; it is its historically and culturally transformed extension. While Artaud’s radicalism regarding language and form is not mirrored exactly in Pintér’s work, the fundamental principle of cruelty—the focus on the body, the critique of institutions, and the merciless dismantling of the spectator’s comfort zone—is an unmistakably Artaudian legacy. “*If we wish to act directly upon human sensitivity through the human body, then we must seek sounds and vibrations that are unusual in every respect—modern instruments are unsuitable for this. There will be no stage and no auditorium; in their place will stand a hall in whose entire space the action unfolds. The spectator will take their place in the very midst of the action, feeling it around them, even touching it, and thus the relationship between spectator and performance, actor and spectator, will be restored.*” [15]

Pintér's theatre demonstrates that Artaud is not a historical curiosity, but a living provocation: the question remains the same today as it was in Artaud's time—can theatre confront that which society would most prefer to repress? “*I am a living torso; I have not been realized,*” Artaud wrote of himself and his aesthetics. This ‘torso-existence’ persists beneath the surface of Béla Pintér and Company's productions. Each play is an imprint of self-analysis and social reflection, fueled by an unstoppable field of energy that compels Pintér to generate responses to the disturbing phenomena he seeks to understand. Often, he anticipates a cultural shift; more frequently, he uncovers a motif that is already present yet concealed beneath the surface.

The influence of Artaud on Pintér is not a matter of explicit declaration, but exists at a structural and conceptual level.

Pintér does not consciously set out to create ‘Artaudian’ theatre, nor does he literalize the prescriptions of the Theatre of Cruelty; yet, at several fundamental points, he realizes a mode of theatrical operation in deep affinity with Artaudian thought. “*We shall not stage written plays; instead—through the means of direct staging—we shall build performances around known themes, facts, or works. The character and arrangement of the hall will determine the spectacle, and there is no theme, however grand, before which we would retreat.*” [16]

This influence is most palpable in the concept of cruelty. For Artaud, ‘cruelty’ does not signify mere moral brutality, but a confrontation with the merciless truth of existence. [17] In the plays of both Artaud and Pintér, domestic violence, sexual abuse, betrayal, political compromise, spiritual vulnerability, and sexual identity appear not as dramaturgical climaxes, but as structural conditions. This permanent cruelty—truth in the Artaudian sense—is the norm, not the exception. “*It is impossible to speak of theatre if some element of cruelty does not lurk in the depths of the performance. In our degenerate condition, we can absorb metaphysics only by feeding it back into our spirit through the skin.*” [18]

Artaud's legacy is also perceptible in the centrality of the body. For Artaud, the body is the primary bearer of meaning, preceding language. In Pintér's theatre, although the text is emphatic, the body continually resists it: characters' bodies are sick, injured, humiliated, and exhausted. Whether it is the ‘social bodies’ in *Filth* (Szutyok) [19], the abused bodies in *Our Secrets* (Titkaink) [20], or the incest-burdened family in [21] *Peasant Opera* [9], Pintér demonstrates that social order operates through the flesh. This Artaudian insight—that culture exercises violence upon the body—is rendered by Pintér in narrative form, yet carries the same ontological weight.

[9] Pintér, B. (2002): *Peasant Opera*. Budapest: Pintér Béla and Company.

[16] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 157.

[17] Sasvári, L. (2018): Cruelty and Irony in the Theatre of Béla Pintér. *Theatron*, 12., (3.), pp. 45–62.

[18] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 158.

[19] Pintér, B. (2010): *Filth*. Budapest: Pintér Béla and Company.

[20] Pintér, B. (2013): *Our Secrets*. Budapest: Pintér Béla and Company.

[21] Kékesi Kun, Á. (2015): *Theatre and Performativity*. Budapest: Kijárat.

[6] Artaud, A. (n.d.): *Artaud's Letters*. Budapest: Orpheusz.

[22] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 182.

[23] Lehmann, H.-T. (2009): *Postdramatic Theatre*. Budapest: Balassi.

[24] Artaud, A. (1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 184.

Finally, this influence is evident in the dramaturgy of ritual and repetition. Artaud envisioned theatre as a ritual event where repetition is a magical force. In Pintér's productions, musical motifs, recurring scene structures, and typified gestures fulfill a ritualistic function. The folk-song parody structure of *Peasant Opera* or the repeated confession and exposure scenes in *Our Secrets* are not merely devices; they are collective rites in which the spectator undergoes the same moral shock repeatedly. "*The Theatre of Cruelty is intended to awaken a passionate and pulsating necessity for life within theatre. In the cruelty upon which it seeks to rely, one must see this fierce consistency, this extreme concentration of stage elements. This cruelty will be bloody if necessary, though not inevitably and not always; it signifies a kind of bone-dry moral purity that is not afraid to pay the price of life.*" [22]

This means that themes are objectified in movement and gesture before they are ever cast into words. This approach fundamentally shifts the position of the spectator. According to Artaud, theatre's task is to shock—and even compromise—the audience physically and spiritually. Pintér's productions consistently create an uncomfortable vantage point. [23] Through grotesque humor, the audience laughs at the morally indefensible, only to be confronted by the sound of their own laughter. This self-exposing mechanism is deeply Artaudian: the spectator is no longer an observer, but a participant in the cruelty. "*Theatre must be built above all upon spectacle, and this spectacle must organically incorporate a new conception of space, whose essence lies in filling space completely on every possible level, in depth and in height alike. To this new conception is linked a new interpretation of time, added to the concept of movement.*" [24]

Artaud's correspondence [6] shows how the asylum becomes a legitimized space of violence. In Pintér's theatre, the family, the state security apparatus, and the church function similarly: they normalize abuse rather than protecting against it. This is not a direct borrowing of motifs, but a contemporary realization of the same truth: institutional cruelty remains invisible precisely because it functions under the guise of 'order.'

At the same time, it is important to delineate the limits of Artaud's influence on Béla Pintér. Pintér does not reject language, nor does he dismantle theatrical representation or strive for metaphysical or transcendent experience. While Artaud's theatre is apocalyptic and mystical, Pintér's world is profane, historical, and resolutely immanent. There is no redemption, no purification—only recognition and responsibility.

This divergence, however, does not weaken Artaud's influence; rather, it adds precision to it. Pintér's theatre can be understood as a secular, social, and historical rewriting of Artaudian radicalism.

Ultimately, *Artaud serves not as a direct template for Pintér*, but as the structural blueprint that informs the logic of his theatre. The principle of cruelty, the centrality of the body, ritual repetition, the compromising of the spectator, and institutional critique are all elements that align Pintér's work with Artaudian thought. [25] Pintér is not Artaud's disciple, but living proof that Artaud's theatrical ideal persists in the 21st century—articulated in a different language and a different form, yet marked by the same mercilessness.

Another significant influence is that of Jerzy Grotowski, founder of the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław. Grotowski's 'poor' or 'cruel' theatre [26] informed Pintér's work—yet, as with Artaud, this influence manifests not as a direct aesthetic model, but at the level of methodology, ethics, and the fundamental actor–spectator relationship. This connection is better described as a conceptual affinity or a creative extension of Grotowski's legacy, rather than a direct imitation.

The connection is particularly evident in the interpretation of cruelty. Following Grotowski—and by extension, Artaud, though diverging from him—cruelty is sought not in spectacle or shock effects, but in the merciless self-revelation of the actor. The actor's body and psyche become the primary material of the performance, leaving no room for falsehood or technical mannerisms. In Pintér's theatre, the performer's presence is cruel in a similar sense: actors do not create aestheticized figures, but morally and physically burdened characters who find no escape from their roles. The actors of Béla Pintér and Company often operate in extreme emotional and physical states without stylizing their suffering; this kind of relentless presence is akin to Grotowski's ethical conception of the performer.

Grotowski's influence is also perceptible in the nexus between actor and role. In Grotowski's ideal of the 'holy actor,' the performer does not merely portray a character but offers a sacrifice—risking their own inhibitions, fears, and psychological defenses within the performance. [27] In Pintér's theatre—owing specifically to its ensemble-based structure—actors repeatedly embody morally problematic roles that, over time, become inscribed onto their physical bodies and stage personas. While this does not constitute Grotowski-style training in a methodological sense, it shares the same ethical stake: the actor is forbidden from hiding behind the mask of technique.

[25] Schechner, R. (1988): *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge.

[26] Grotowski, J. (1970): *Towards a Poor Theatre*. London: Methuen.

[27] Grotowski, J. (1968/2009): *Theatre and Ritual (Selected Writings)*. Budapest: Kalligram.

The influence of Jerzy Grotowski is also discernible in the relationship with the spectator. In Grotowski's theatre, the spectator is not a passive recipient but a witness whose presence carries a moral weight. The productions of Béla Pintér similarly compel the audience into this position of witness. Spectators often become eyewitnesses to situations—such as pedophilia, domestic violence, betrayal, and moral collapse—towards which it is impossible to maintain neutrality. The spectator is granted not catharsis, but a profound moral unease.

Grotowski's 'poor theatre' rejects spectacle, technical effects, and elaborate scenography, prioritizing instead the concentration of attention on the actor and the action. Similarly, Pintér employs a minimalist toolkit: spare scenery, functional props, and a stark space where every gesture becomes saturated with meaning. Although Pintér incorporates music, song, and grotesque elements, these are never used for mere decorative effect; they are strictly subservient to the actor's performance. This concentrated theatricality is a clear manifestation of Grotowskian principles.

Grotowski's theatre was built upon a closed, intensive working community where long-term collaboration enabled profound artistic risk-taking. Similarly, Béla Pintér and Company functions as a long-standing collective with a potent internal language, allowing actors to maintain an authentic presence even in extreme moral and emotional states. Such ensemble-based operations would be nearly impossible without an ethical conception of theatre akin to Grotowski's.

At the same time, Pintér does not abandon narrative, dramatic storytelling, or irony. While Grotowski's productions were structured around ritualistic, often mythic frameworks, Pintér operates within an explicitly historical and social concreteness. His theatre is not sacred in a spiritual sense, but is instead radically profane. Here, cruelty does not lead toward transcendence, but toward the uncomfortable recognition—and the enforcement—of social responsibility.

In summary, Grotowski's 'poor' or 'cruel' theatre has informed the work of Pintér primarily through the ethics of the performer, the risks of stage presence, the positioning of the spectator as witness, and the nature of ensemble practice. However, Pintér does not propel this legacy in a ritualistic or spiritual direction; rather, he reconfigures it into a historical, socially critical, and ironic theatre. In this sense, Pintér does not merely imitate the methods of Grotowski or Artaud; rather, his work serves as a dynamic evolution of their radicalism within contemporary Hungarian theatre—rearticulated with different emphases and stakes, yet underpinned by the same moral rigor.

The influence of Antonin Artaud on Grotowski's theatrical thinking is fundamental, though neither linear nor uncritical. Grotowski regarded Artaud simultaneously as a point of departure, an inspiration, and a precursor to be surpassed. Without Artaud, Grotowski's theatre would be inconceivable; yet Grotowski consciously distances himself from him, primarily for methodological and ethical reasons. Their relationship is therefore not that of master and disciple, but a radical transformation of an inheritance.

In my view, as previously argued, a genuine connection exists between Artaud, Grotowski, and Pintér: a conceptual and spiritual kinship, a shared moral and ethical stance, certain aesthetic alignments, and even several overlapping theatrical methodologies [28].

Artaud's greatest impact on Grotowski lies in redefining what is at stake in theatre. For Artaud, theatre is not entertainment or representation but an existential event mobilizing the whole bodily and psychic being. Grotowski-like Artaud—starts from the premise that Western bourgeois theatre relies on false techniques, illusions, and literary texts while avoiding the ultimate questions of human existence.

Pintér, by contrast, accepts, utilizes, loves, and even insists upon the text he himself writes. He has repeatedly emphasized that a production must adhere to the written script until a superior version is proposed. For him, respect for the text is not a matter of creative ego, nor a conflict between writer and director; rather, without a fixed text, the primary goal—the creation of a perfect performance—is inconceivable. Classical dramaturgy, parallel structuring, cumulative scenes, radical counterpoints, and unpredictability often define his writerly attitude. It is impossible to imagine Pintér the director without Pintér the writer—and vice versa.

Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* opens the conceptual space in which theatre can once again become ritual, initiation, and a high-stakes event. Grotowski fully adopts this fundamental claim. Particularly strong is Artaud's influence on the concept of cruelty, which remains central for Grotowski, even if understood differently. Artaud's cruelty appears as a cosmic, apocalyptic, and often destructive force: theatre must tear open the surface of human consciousness and shock the spectator. Grotowski accepts the necessity of cruelty but reinterprets it: for him, cruelty is not external violence inflicted upon the spectator, but the actor's mercilessness toward themselves. The actor must renounce psychological defenses, mannerisms, and social masks. In this sense, Grotowski transfers Artaud's idea onto an ethical plane: cruelty becomes inner discipline.

In Pintér's work, cruelty is present but not structurally formative in the same way. It plays a role in dislodging comfort and unsettling the audience, yet it is neither primarily ethical nor metaphysical. Unlike Grotowski, cruelty in Pintér is not an ethical program but an organizing force of everyday reality.

Artaud's influence is also clear in the emphasis on the primacy of the body. For Artaud, the body is a pre-linguistic bearer of meaning capable of directly affecting the spectator. Grotowski systematically develops this recognition: the actor's body

[28] Ubersfeld, A. (1999): *Reading Theatre*. Budapest: Osiris.

does not illustrate the text but becomes the source of meaning itself. Voice, breath, muscular tension, and rhythm are organized into a rigorous training system—precisely where Artaud left behind visions and manifestos. Thus, Artaud formulates the problem; Grotowski elaborates its practical conditions.

While Pintér does not explicitly position himself within the discourse of physical theatre, he incorporates many technical elements into his productions. He occasionally employs striking tableaux or frozen moments, where a seemingly halted scene generates autonomous meaning in relation to the central theme. His rehearsal processes, much like Grotowski's, are remarkably intense—though the objective is not continuous actor training, but the precise tuning of the performance into a perfected whole.

All three engage, with varying intensities, the questions of chaos and self-destruction. In Artaud's oeuvre, theatre and madness are inextricably linked, where cruelty often borders on a total loss of control. For Grotowski, this was untenable: he believed theatrical radicalism could only be valid if coupled with rigorous discipline and restraint. This marks a decisive dividing line between them: while Artaud pushes theatre to the brink of disintegration, Grotowski contains that potential through conscious self-discipline. In this sense, Grotowski 'tames' Artaud without diminishing him. Pintér, by contrast, focuses primarily on the representation of chaos, depicting it with such force that it becomes the primary organizing principle of the performance.

Regarding the spectator, Artaud's influence is equally vital; he rejects the comfortable, passive observer, demanding a theatre that unsettles and endangers the recipient. Grotowski adopts this principle but reinterprets it: the spectator does not merely receive a shock but becomes a witness. In the intimate spaces of Grotowski's productions, the spectator's moral presence becomes paramount—a more refined, less destructive manifestation of Artaud's vision. Pintér's productions initiate constant interaction, involving and activating the audience while compelling sustained attention. He achieves a persistent intensity that pins the viewer to their seat, fostering an entirely new spectatorly conduct and practice.

In conclusion, just as Grotowski's theatre could not have emerged without Artaud, neither could Pintér Béla and Company have come into being without both predecessors. Grotowski is not merely a successor to Artaud, nor is Pintér a simple renovator or critical heir; rather, as a possessor of the intellectual ammunition inherited from them, Pintér has forged a radically new style together with a small group of similarly radical theatre-makers—one that can now be rightfully termed 'Pintérian.'

Artaud opened the possibility of rethinking theatre; Grotowski established that possibility on disciplined, methodological, and ethical foundations; and Pintér, fusing his writerly and directorial visions, has created a socially conscious, idea-driven 'poor theatre' of his own. Artaud is the vision, Grotowski the praxis, Pintér the catalyst; Artaud the explosion, Grotowski the concentration, Pintér the impulse. Their relationship constitutes one of the most fertile tensions in 20th- and 21st-century theatre history: the same fundamental question—what is truly at stake in theatre?—articulated in three distinct yet mutually presupposing answers.

“The theatre can only become itself again—can only offer true illusion—if authentic dreams precipitate within it, and if the spectator’s guilty inclinations, erotic obsessions, savagery, nightmares, utopian life-conceptions, even cannibalism, may freely erupt—not on the level of illusion or fiction, but within the interior of the human organism.”
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[29] Artaud, A.
(1985): *A könyörtelen színház: Esszék, tanulmányok a színházról. (The Theatre and Its Double. The Theatre of Cruelty)* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó. p. 150.