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Antonin Artaud (Critical Lives)

David A. Shafer

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Poet, actor, playwright, surrealist, drug addict, asylum inmate—Antonin Artaud (1896–1949) is one of the twentieth century's most enigmatic personalities and idiosyncratic thinkers. In this biography, David A. Shafer takes readers on a voyage through Artaud's life, which he spent amid the company of France's most influential cultural figures, even as he stood apart from them.

Shafer casts Artaud as a person with tenacious values. Even though Artaud was born in the material comfort of a bourgeois family from Marseille, he uncompromisingly rejected bourgeois values and norms. Becoming famous as an actor, director, and author, he would use his position to challenge contemporary assumptions about the superiority of the West, the function of speech, the purpose of culture, and the individual's agency over his or her body. In this way—as Shafer points out—Artaud embodied the revolutionary spirit of France. And as Shafer shows, although Artaud was immensely productive, he struggled profoundly with his creative process, hindered by narcotics addiction, increasing paranoia, and an overwhelming sense of alienation. Situating Artaud's contributions within the frenzy of his life and that of the twentieth century at large, this book is a compelling and fresh biography that pays tribute to its subject's lasting cultural reverberations.

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