

## EXISTENCE AT THE CHALLENGE OF THE IMPOSSIBLE. CONTEMPORARY THEATRE AS A SYMBOLIC POUND OF FLESH

The present paper examines the back-and-forth exchange between Greek tragedy and contemporary theatre regarding the theme of violence, catastrophe, and existence at the challenge of the impossible. To put into words this impossible, I prefer to use the French version of the term, *hors-sens*, in order to describe what is opposed to the search of sense (*hors-sens* is also different from the nonsense), to describe what lies beyond any significance or meaning: the unbearable, the unendurable, the insufferable, the unimaginable, the insurmountable and so on. Contemporary theatre represents the art and the act of re-telling and not-leaving-behind; through its identificatory or repulsive side, contemporary theatre also requires a therapeutic and a psychoanalytic effect: not only for the audience, but also for the actresses/ actors or victims involved in the drama. My personal and psychoanalytic approach is that nowadays theatre transmits a symbolic pound of flesh, as a Shakespearian heritage and metaphor from his play, *The Merchant of Venice*. Finally, a substantial aim of this paper is to review how contemporary European stage directors deal with the nude condition of violence and *hors-sens*, therefore I will discuss three significant case studies – Milo Rau, Tiago Rodrigues and Pippo Delbono – with constant reference to some Lacanian major concepts from his clinical teaching: anxiety, pound of flesh, object (a), social bond, the triad the real, the symbolic, the imaginary and others.

**Key-words:** violence, contemporary European theatre, Lacanian psychoanalysis, pound of flesh, jouissance, sufferance and pain

### Introduction.

#### An Archeology of Violence in the Contemporary European Theatre

The category of the theatrical, what we generally name *the essence of theatre*, represents the central dimension in both Greek tragedy and modern theatre. If modern theatre adapts and embodies the major themes of tragedy, contemporary theatre requires a different aesthetics of interpretation or even its disappearance. The vigorous restoration of the tragic elements within the contemporary vision of the world is dominated by the new functions of the notions of individual and destiny, of stage and theatricality. Has destiny left behind the individual and the stage of its life or does it continue to act within its interiority? This paper aims to reevaluate the dramatic aspects of these new forms of representation: does the theatrical articulate, in its deep bound with tragedy and drama, distinctive and unusual tragic events, new and different acts or gestures?

Nowadays, when theatre is subjected to the *postdramatic* paradigm (the-after-drama-theatre), contemporary history and politics determine the present tragic motifs; moreover, the production of theatre is strongly influenced by what I intend to call *the*

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<sup>1</sup> Forum of the Lacanian Field, Romania.

*tragedy of life*, meaning the life – its rests, residues – which belongs to tragedy by way of modern war, guilt, collapse of cities, and especially genocide. In the realm of theatrical performance, especially after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, the tragedy of life continues and amplifies the already restrictive and altered species of tragedy. But since the ancient forms of tragedy as described by Aristotle are inappropriate to the (post)modern theatre and they do not create tragic heroes anymore, existence and violence on stage suffer a turning point in their development and require a new and *superhistorical* definition of the tragic phenomenon behind the horizon of the sacred and unsacred dialectic, as Hans-Thies Lehmann points it out in his book, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*:

The task is to theorize tragedy as a phenomenon not just as it is given abstractly but also in concrete terms: the that and the how of its connection to the reality of performance, *i.e.* to a theatrical process – however different may be the forms that tragedy assumes. In view of the high prestige that tragic literature has traditionally enjoyed, it is fitting to observe that tragedy does not represent the only form of theatre that may be of the highest order. To be sure, tragedy provides an especially interesting case; otherwise, it would not have garnered attention so consistently. What is more, the author admits that it has occasionally occurred to him that, after all, tragedy, with its characteristic combination of affective and mental convulsion (*Erschütterung*), might embody the essence of the theatre itself. All the same, the concern here is not to declare tragedy the crowning achievement of art. A great deal of exceptional theatre is not tragic, yet it is still great art – complex and “deep”. Contemporary postdramatic forms include brilliant documentary theatre, installation theatre, comedy, political theatre, the theatre of images, theatre bordering on performance art, and much more; none of them need be concerned with tragedy at all. The point merits emphasis, for every discussion of contemporary theatre includes an element of aesthetic evaluation...<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Lehman writes about different languages of theatrical approach which should be adapted to different new stage situations. Theatrical stage becomes the space of the performer (which represents both the actress/ actor and the spectator), a space of act and speech, a space of thinking, reflection, but also of impulsive and uncontrollable feelings, and fundamentally of violence. As I am trying to underline regarding the tragedy of life in the contemporary theatre, criminal and irrational violence takes over the cathartic function of sacrifice. Considering that for the ancient Greeks the sacrifice represented a sort of negotiation between the sacrificer and divinity, my question concerns the status of the victim in this chain of theatrical violence and its relation to the human catastrophe. If the victim, through its own death or through its crime, stands for an aesthetic interruption of the theatrical act, the modern director is thus confronted with a process of reflection upon the boundaries of violence and terror.

The main purpose of this paper is to evaluate how contemporary European stage directors deal with the nude condition of violence, of the impossible and its related states: expressions of power, post-colonialism and religion, terrorism and bureaucracy, society/ state/ government and dissimulated humanism, innocent children dying, rapes, mutilated bodies, and souls, etc. In this context, I believe that

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. by Erik Butler, Routledge, 2016, p. 2.

contemporary theatre transmits a symbolic pound of flesh; on these terms, it is very important to trace an archeological line of interpretation down to the Shakespearian heritage and metaphor from *The Merchant of Venice*. The impossible lies here in the fact that a personal debt can only be paid by means of one's body or life. Moreover, the discourse of the contemporary theatre creator embodies an authority that functions beyond the stage: the theatre director is the master of rehearsal, a “complete” artist with original views and marks, the artisan of the show created in a laboratory of metamorphosis and performance strategies. To be more precise, the contemporary director represents the “theoretical conscience” of the process (as George Banu writes in his study, *Les Répétitions. De Stanislawski à aujourd’hui*) that repeats and portrays the tragedy of life, by identifying this personal tragedy of the individual within the political play. This is a constant idea in the works of Luk Perceval, Eimuntas Nekrošius, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson and Silviu Purcărete, to mention only a few contemporary directors. In the next pages, I will discuss three significant case studies, Milo Rau, Tiago Rodrigues and Pippo Delbono, with constant reference to some Lacanian major concepts from his clinical teaching.

### **The Contemporary Pound of Flesh**

When I first heard of the theme of this special issue on the human catastrophe, my thought flew to the pound of flesh. On the one hand, the pound of flesh, taken near the heart and related to a supposed or imaginary harmony of the body, conveys an inherent cutting into pieces and refers to indetermination and, moreover, to the mysteries of the *psyche*. Certainly, it is as close as possible to the heart, as Shakespeare writes, but this question hides another one: how close could it be to the soul or to the psyche, how close could it be to something which is very difficult to comprehend or articulate? On the other hand, the sentence that William Shakespeare uses in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), namely that a personal debt can be paid only by means of one's own flesh, represents the object of Jacques Lacan's edifying analysis of Shakespeare's play in his Seminar *L'Angoisse*:

The engagement of the man who speaks in the chain of the signifier with all its consequences, with this henceforth fundamental springing forth, this elective point that I earlier called that of an ultra-subjective radiation, this foundation of desire in a word, it is in so far as, it is not that the body in its functioning would allow us to reduce everything, to explain everything in a reduction to the dualism of the *Umwelt* and the *Innenwelt*, it is because there is always in the body, and by the very fact of this engagement in the signifying dialectic, something separated, something statuified, something inert from then on: that there is a pound of flesh.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the possibility of a miracle within the catastrophe lies in the judicial exception through which the contract can be revoked. The pound of flesh – the memorable lines “A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off/ Nearest the merchant's heart”<sup>4</sup> – configures both separation and inertia, the signifier and the signified that cannot be considered separately, since the pound of flesh cannot be

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book X. Anxiety* (1962-1963), trans. by Cormac Gallagher, p. 201, [online]. <https://www.valas.fr> (accessed December 5, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The following quotations of the play are from the online edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, [online]. [www.williamshakespeare.net](http://www.williamshakespeare.net) (accessed December 5, 2023).

removed without wounding the heart or the body. The paradox lies in the fact that the pound of flesh represents something that the subject does not have; if he had had it, it would have been impossible to offer it; if he had had it and gave it away, he would have died and, therefore he couldn't be a donator. The pound of flesh also conjugates the social bond, which indicates the universal of the speaking being (fr. *le parlêtre*, the word of Jacques Lacan).

The cutting into pieces is the price that the subject pays for his life and the result, the piece of meat which must weigh no more than one pound (0.453 kg), is the signifier of all signifiers which is, after all, impossible to reattach to the imaginary body, to its image made up according to an illusion of unity. Precisely this private and privative slice of body, the piece of flesh that can only be accessed through the death of the organ and/or body, represents a lethal, sacrificial mark that enters the dialectic of demand and desire – the desire of the one who offers it, the request of the one who wants to receive it ("What does the Other want from me?"). As an example, Shylock's speech, the one of the Jew as a human, by which he argues his desire to possess the heart of the Christian man; he abandons the mercy in favor of violence and vengeance: "If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? / If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that." In addition, Shylock considers that he has the right to buy the dearly pound of flesh, since the promise was made in the sky and, therefore, he appeals with obstinacy and anger to the law of Venice.

The pound of flesh which I demand of him  
Is dearly bought; 'tis mine and I will have it.  
If you deny me, fie upon your law!  
There is no force in the decrees of Venice.  
I stand for judgment. Answer: shall I have it?

The word and speech that the subject utters is fully involved in his living body. For Jacques Lacan, the delivery of flesh, insofar as it represents the object (a), the object cause of desire, the rest that cannot be restored and a vacuole, has the quality of an acting-out that cancels the interpretation because the character has left the stage of the theatre (or the scene within the scene in Hamlet) for the public stage of the world. In Lacanian terms, acting out implies an avoidance of anxiety (fr. *angoisse*), an attempt to escape from it. Anxiety occurs when the subject is threatened by the object (a) as loss, which is in fact undesirable, but paradoxically and at the same time, anxiety signals the desire of the subject. The acting-out is opposed in its essence to the *passage à l'acte* (passage to the act/ action) and embodies the behavior of the subject who unfolds himself, that is, what he shows through his (impulsive) conduct. The passage to the act signifies a request for love, for symbolic recognition against the background of despair, it can be interpreted, and it is on the side of the unrecoverable and the irreversible. To act – a verb that applies not only to the stage of the theatre or of the game – means to play a part or to perform; in the moment of acting out, the parade makes itself visible. The pound of flesh links in Shakespeare's play, according to Lacan, the law of debt to the law of gift through a total social pact. It is, in fact, a pact executed (i.e., performed) as close as possible to the heart, from and through a forbidden area; detached from the body, the pound of flesh has no use in itself and it signifies *nothing – chose-ification* (> fr. *la chose/ the thing, l'achose*). For Lacan, the thing represents the lost object of the subject which will always remain strange to him, it is the cause of his desire (fr. *l'objet-cause de son désir*) and un

unassimilable residue; all in all, the thing hides a sign of longing for an impossible reunion of the subject with the object. Shakespeare writes that:

A pound of man's flesh, taken from a man,  
Is not so estimable, profitable neither,  
As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats.

The very instant of the sacrificial cut, at the limit of the law, thus opens a new way of negotiating the division between desire and *jouissance*, but it is also an implacable and threatening deal; it translates on the one hand the terrifying nature of the relationship with God and on the other the hour of the truth, *l'heure de la vérité* in Lacan's formula, the one that cuts the thought and the body in two and brings out the "anti-Semitic feeling". For Lacan, *jouissance* lies beyond the Freudian principle of pleasure, in such a manner that it becomes sufferance and pain, very close to the death drive<sup>5</sup>. The question of the French psychoanalyst is if this pound of flesh stays as an analogue of castration and for the waste left behind by divine vengeance, around which the whole scenario revolves:

The Christian has learnt through the dialectic of redemption to identify himself ideally to the one who at a particular time identified himself to this very object, to this refuse left by divine vengeance... [...] Such is the illusion of the Christian who always believes he has more heart than the others, and God knows why this is? The matter no doubt appears more clearly – this is what I believe I have helped you to see as being essential, it is the basis of masochism – this attempt to provoke the anxiety of the Other, become here the anxiety of God, is effectively second nature for the Christian, namely that this hypocrisy – and everyone knows that in other perverse positions, we are always capable in experience of sensing the playfulness and the ambiguity that are always there – namely that this hypocrisy is more or less the same as what he experiences for his part more as oriental hypocrisy.<sup>6</sup>

If Shakespeare's play ends in a guarantee of fidelity and love, the premises change in the contemporary theatre, where, in order to exist on stage, the body interrogates its limits and literally bears the marks of the cutting into pieces, the stigmatization and the uncanny, which is precisely a mysterious and frightening experience. As a matter of fact, Sigmund Freud elaborated the concept of the uncanny in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*: it is what unconsciously reminds us of our forbidden, threatening, and repressed impulses, combined with the dread of being castrated.

The mythical violence that arose in Greek tragedy from the patriarchal domination is transferred nowadays into the cruelty and monstrosity of some characters following the conviction that the body on which violence is committed engenders more violence and an explosion of consciousness. In the context of this psychological realism, there are multiple directions we must follow to reveal the consequences of the catastrophe: the game of destruction and creation – the brutal intervention in the author's text, the divided space and the divided ruins, the unusual mix of objects and music reflecting the everyday tragic, the fragments of dreams, the

<sup>5</sup> See *Le Séminaire Livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (1959-1960) and *Le Séminaire Livre XVII. L'envers de la psychanalyse* (1969-1970).

<sup>6</sup> J. Lacan, *The Seminar Book X. Anxiety* (1962-1963), *op. cit.*, p. 202.

character as an objectified victim. The victim is often confronted with the extreme stage intentions of the director, physical and psychic surveillance, and the incorporated character becomes a helpless creature, desperate and alienated, at the mercy of an impenetrable theatre director. To be and to become the violence-doer (my reference is to the famous play of Eugene O'Neill, *Mourning becomes Electra*, 1931<sup>7</sup>) demands a total involvement and an attempt to create a *marionette*, a sort of a scenic control that in the contemporary context may almost lead to a *de-theatricalisation* of theatre. The contemporary theatre modifies the essence of suffering and violence on stage becomes not an isolated act, but a social and cultural event, which should be understood in the historical and actual cycle of violence, nonviolence/ peace, (non)aggression, revenge, and vengeance.

### **Milo Rau, between Ihsane Jarfi and Orestes**

Theatre must stage violence and catastrophe to find out what they both really signify. For the Swiss director Milo Rau (b. 1977), also departing artistic leader of NT Gent, political theatre means to involve people who were already involved: the investigation from the part of the victim/ witness and the political circumstances of the theatrical event are two conscious choices. A former student of Tzvetan Todorov and Pierre Bourdieu, Milo Rau founded in 2007 the theatre and film production company *International Institute of Political Murder* (IIPM) with the purpose of documenting the last hours of Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu, but, over these years, the institute questioned important historical events with the help of film, literature, theatre, research papers, journals. But how does he represent catastrophe and the tragic human condition on stage? Rau creates a documentary theatre that incorporates heterogeneous materials and examines intra-aesthetically the fascinating appearance of violence and lamentation. This new form of imagistic theatre represents in fact a *conjectural tragedy*: crime is incomprehensible, senseless, and has its roots in the traumatic impermeability of violence. Milo Rau's production *The Repetition* (2018), the first part of the series *Histoire(s) du théâtre*, is a multi-perspective theatrical narration of a criminal case in 5 acts, based on the murder of Ihsane Jarfi in April 2012 in Liège, and also on Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical concept of repetition. If for Kierkegaard "There is no repetition at all"<sup>8</sup>, then there is no repetition of the same, but a repetition in difference, a different same and a changeless new in the contemporary theatre if we take into account that time and space, beginning and ending, memory and audience can never be the same, and the instant and aesthetic truth of the stage cannot be repeated, only reproduced at a mimetic level. Nonetheless, the category of repetition brings to life not only the I of the writer, but also the I of the audience or the I of the actor/ actress that makes an appearance, pointing to the performative dimension of a dramatic text that deals with a creative and unresolved

<sup>7</sup> For more details and for the relation between woman and violence, see my article "Long Life's Journey into Truth. Soren Kierkegaard, Eugene O'Neill, and the Woman," *International Journal on Humanistic Ideology*, vol. XI, no. 1/ 2021, Department of Socio-Human Research, "George Barițiu" History Institute of The Romanian Academy, Cluj University Press, topic: *Kierkegaard's Humanistic and Literary Heritage*, pp. 119-146.

<sup>8</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition in Fear and Trembling. Repetition, Kierkegaard's Writings VI*, ed. and trans., with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton Univ. Press, 1983, p. 131.

contradiction – the internal repetition, expressed within the individual and turning itself into a Kierkegaardian theatre of ideas.

Since the reality of theatre means understanding the violence or the aggressiveness of stage direction, the strategies of Milo Rau are those of a theatre director who should rewrite the strategies of a criminal. In the Ghent Manifesto, Rau declares that he wants to reshape the European theatre: theatre should speak to the present and change the world. A new genre of postmodern theatre emerges: the monologue of violence, fear or terror depicted by the victims themselves – *Compassion. The History of the Machine Gun* (2016, a production of Schaubühne Theatre Berlin). Two women, Consolate Siperius and Ursina Lardi, try to find an answer for Europe's hypocrisy in front of the refugees' crisis. How long can we pay attention to the suffering of the other and why... after all? Why does a dead person at the gates of Europe value more than a thousand victims of the Congo civil war? Ursina, a former drama teacher and now a volunteer at an NGO in Rwanda, walks on an over decorated stage setting, with a lot of furniture and ruined objects that outline the map of suffering and the violence of language; finally, she incriminates the role of these organizations that would only prolong the crises – again, the abovementioned tragedy of life –, and she urinates on the stage. Practically, Ursina urinates on the concept of empathy (compassion) that became a ruin without illusions in both theatre and its praxis, the theatre of life. Moreover, conjectural tragedy is insensitive to the fragility of the individual and to its inadequacy to the ideological or political sphere. I believe in a redefinition of the contemporary theatre (and a reformulation of tragic) as a *corporeal* one that reflects the very body of the theatre itself: the actor must see the event and participate in it; it is about Rau's necessity to imply the actor/ victim to create a substantial bound between the performer and the dramatic representation. After all, it constitutes the visual *transgression of the very process of mise-en-scène* since it unveils artificiality or even the impossibility of human relations. Nonetheless, being directly connected to the body, violence and catastrophe prescribe the entire tragic spirit of the performance.

In *Orestes in Mosul* (2019), the religious purpose merges with the political one: the state of emergency is analogous to the state of exception, and it is always correlated to a double issue: immigration, and revenge, on the background of catastrophe exercised by the Islamic State, in a devastated world and with an image in ruins of Mosul, arguably the first city ever created. Rau asks himself if Greek tragedy can truly help to heal a burnt city; therefore, he travels to Mosul to stage his personal version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. The story of violent death is perpetual, cyclical – at the interstice between the ancient tragedy and the Syrian tragedy of today, in eternal repetition and at every step, with daily “executions” to be performed theatrically, brutally, and cruelly in front of the eye of the camera, as if only in this way the truth would be known. The actors are spectators of their own bloody documentary, in which “it takes an eternity to hang a man” (quote from the play). In addition, Rau relies on a short-circuit between knowledge and recognition: the viewer is asked if he could look at the other in the moment of death, until the last gesture, a moment as intimate, intrusive, and pornographic as possible. Being a theatrical and tragic rewriting, the body of the actor must correspond to that of the victim; on the other hand, the spectator detaches himself at the end of the performance in a post-event interpretation, in an immemorial present, due to the identification to the victim. Just as importantly, the body of the actor stands for a symbolic pound of flesh in the

contemporary theatre, on the horizon of the illogical death, of a situation without sense or significance.

### **Tiago Rodrigues: to the Extent of the... Real**

In the face of fragility, disaster, and imminent obliteration, both Milo Rau and Tiago Rodrigues answer that the only thing that endures and can be delivered from one generation to another is the *word*. The word is the only remnant of the derision and the abominable, confronted with a horror that cannot be looked at, a word that goes beyond the borders of language and which transmits the untranslatable, moreover the word that refers to the part of life that cannot be narrated and, at the same time, to the speech which is simultaneously cut into pieces.

Actor, director, playwright, and the current director of Festival d'Avignon, Tiago Rodrigues (b. 1977) always considered theatre as a human assembly, a living one, which should be approached by means of compassion. It is important to note that in the theatrical creation of Tiago Rodrigues the feeling of catastrophe inspires affection and empathy. *Insofar as the impossible (Dans la mesure de l'impossible, 2022)* is based on excerpts spoken in French, English, and Portuguese from 30 interviews that him and his team conducted with humanitarian workers from the International Committee of the Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders:

There's one important thing you need to know: we're not heroes, confesses one of them, right from the start. I know, I know. "I'm not a hero", it is precisely what heroes say. But it may sound a little pretentious, but we're not heroes.

We're like an umbrella in the face of a tsunami.

We're a piece of bandage on humanity's suffering.

And when you understand that you can really start working.<sup>9</sup>

As for Milo Rau, the style, and the rhythm of this kind of documentary theatre translates the speech of the victim and the emergency of the word: the story of the life should refuse *ab initio* the *hors-sens* of the existence, without touching the feeling of common morality, and, moreover, it should transfer this existence into another reality. For Tiago, the transition is from chaos, crisis, starvation, violence, the death of the innocent child, the unspoken sufferance of the mother... to a world of change and peace. But even the title of this theatrical creation – *Insofar as the impossible* – contains the impossibility of change: it is impossible to remove the impossible, it is impossible to remove violence and pain. Therefore, my question explores the limits of theatre (and, subsequently the limits of existence) to the test of the impossible, the irremediable or the unbearable, which is often described by Jacques Lacan as "the real".

Lacan considers that for the human condition, the real is impossible, incomprehensible, behind the limits of knowledge, defined as that which never ceases

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<sup>9</sup> My translation from the original quote in French:

« Il y a un truc important que vous devez savoir : nous ne sommes pas des héros, avoue l'un d'eux, d'entrée de jeu. Je sais, je sais. « Je ne suis pas un héros », c'est précisément ce que disent les héros. Mais ça peut paraître un peu prétentieux mais nous ne sommes pas des héros.

On est comme un parapluie face à un tsunami

On est un bout de sparadrap sur la souffrance de l'humanité

Et quand tu comprends ça, tu peux vraiment commencer à travailler. »

not to write itself (in French: “ce qui ne cesse pas de ne pas s’écrire”), considering that it cannot be expressed *in* or *through* language, because the entrance into language marks the painful separation from the real<sup>10</sup>. The Lacanian real can only be understood in correspondence with the categories of the symbolic and the imaginary. Also, the signs of the real are often perceived as traumatic and threatening, full of tension, insofar as the real is in relation to the death drive and to the compulsion of repetition, which is mortiferous and destructive. Since repetition is perpetuated by the failure of the symbolization, Lacan defined the real as that which always returns to the same place. Nonetheless, the real is located in the irreducible realm of the nonmeaning, and my connection with the contemporary theatre grasps precisely the instance of the *infernal machine* of murder and catastrophe.

Returning from Rau and Rodrigues to Shakespeare, the persisting question is: what does it remain from the human existence that paradoxically continues to affirm itself only as suppression? As I have already noted, a pound (slice or portion) of meat must be delivered or slaughtered, according to a contract that indicates the fulfillment of the most important law. The marks of contemporary society – this is just one of the multiple lessons of theatre – denote the perverse *jouissance*, excessively inscribed *in* and *on* the body, the geography of exorbitant and illogical human sacrifices, which replace, without appeal, the singular desire, and the ethical solution.

### **Pippo Delbono and his Theatre – the Connection with the Dead**

As opposed to violence and catastrophe, Pippo Delbono (b. 1959, Varazze) proposes the hope and the idea of theatre as a fortunate encounter of bodies – both living and dead ones. The desire to recover the original loss of the human being is verified on the contemporary theatre stage by the poetic and (almost) psychoanalytic productions of Pippo Delbono: the Italian director creates performances *made* by the body and *seen* with the body, in a communion of bodies on the stage. Believing that it is the human’s destiny to love without limits, he builds an affective and empathetic theatre by exploring the experience of extreme human and social difference, and marginality, which he opposes to despair and depression, for example by impregnating his productions with the influences of Pina Bausch’s dance. The demand which is always addressed to otherness or to the marginal represents a special human relationship that is impossible to be seen. To be more specific, the person and character of Bobò or the person and character of Nelson embody above all the closure that opens up, the exclusion that should not be the norm: Nelson Lariccia is a homeless person, diagnosed with schizophrenia. The other one, Bobò, locked up in a psychiatric asylum for 45 years, deaf-mute, has never used sign language; microcephalic, illiterate, but Beckettian in his isolation, his mute cry on behalf of the things that cannot be named, they all sum up the abandonment, the loneliness and the constraints to which the individual is subjected in today’s society, meaning the price that he has to pay for his very living body.

Bobò, whose real name is Vincenzo Cannavacciuolo, was born in 1936 and died in 2019; the tragedy of his birth conceals the death of his twin brother at birth. Committed to a psychiatric asylum since 1952, Bobò is noticed by Pippo Delbono in a theatre workshop that the director holds in 1995. Pippo represents for Bobò the brother he could never have had. In fact, it is Delbono who brings Bobò out of his own asylum,

<sup>10</sup> See *Le Séminaire Livre IV. La relation d’objet*, 1956-1957; *Le Séminaire Livre XXIII. Le sinthome*, 1975-1976; *Le Séminaire Livre XXV. Le moment de conclure*, 1977-1978.

out of his own horror. He attributes to him the conception of a theatre that is not psychological but physical, the aesthetic model of his entire theatre. Delbono says that Bobò *exists*, while the other actors *show* themselves. He finds in Bobò the combination of tenderness and poetry, thus becoming the heart of his theatrical productions, but also the symbolic pound of flesh that he felt he had to sacrifice at the death of his companion.

*After the Battle* (*Dopo la Battaglia*, 2011) presents the spectacle of memories overloaded with the sufferings, smells, signs, and traces of all those who have passed through the “prison” of the asylum. Thus, an actualization of suffering and interior catastrophe takes place at each of Bobò’s stage appearances through his delicate body, the pale face made up of sadness, reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman’s tragic carnival characters, the awkward gestures as if each time he discovers something for the first time, the silence that only accentuates the open wounds of intimacy.

The transfer of love, as opposed to the powerless cry, gains meaning through a collection of poetic images in *The Joy* (*La Gioia*, 2018). The images are not only poetic, but they are also dreamlike or redemptive, graceful, and flowing from the director’s beliefs that in front of physical or mental illness, people are like flowers or children. *La Gioia* is the hymn addressed to the lost and to the capacity to love what is different from oneself, namely the deformed, the handicapped, the migrant, the wanderer, the cripple, the prostitute, the transvestite, the mutilated face and so on. Pippo Delbono’s theatre does not only imitate and reproduce reality in a realist or naturalistic way, but it also represents a living one, in the lineage of Antonin Artaud, of the self that must be discovered at all costs, of the indeterminate and of the gender that can oscillate from feminine to masculine and vice versa. The stage name is, after all, the *real* name. If, psychoanalytically speaking, love means giving something we don’t have to someone who doesn’t really want it<sup>11</sup>, Delbono insists on love that makes sense only in relation to the rest, to what remains after loss or division, on the whole he questions the lack of love or the need and necessity of love.

I believe that the feeling of hope and peace in the contemporary theatre is well-represented and well-rehearsed by an image that Delbono creates throughout his entire theatre: to dance always as in a war atmosphere, in the proximity of the dance of death and love, in the manner of Dante’s circles, Francisco de Goya’s paintings, the intimate Strindbergian theatre and Federico Fellini’s sad carnival. This peculiar type of eternal image denotes a necessity of a body for the other next to it (in the park, on the bench, in bed, on the stage), a necessity to dance with the audience, in the mosaic of solitudes or contradictions in which bodies are thrown, finally in an impossibility of recovering the lost innocence of the child. At the same time, the body must be told, through the incantatory power of the voice, that it is loved. The stake is not only about the recovery of the child, but also about the recovery of Delbono’s mother in *Orchids* (2013), a flower standing for a double-sided question: where does the truth end and where does the lie begin? In Lacanian terms, we often state that a truth is *half-told*<sup>12</sup>, in its nodal merging

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre VIII. Le Transfert*, 1960-1961: “L’amour c’est donner ce que l’on n’a pas à quelqu’un qui n’en veut pas.”, p. 19, [online]. <http://www.staferla.free.fr> (accessed December 5, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> In French: “La vérité ne peut que se mi-dire...”; “... nulle évocation de la vérité ne peut se faire qu’à indiquer qu’elle nous est accessible que d’un *mi-dire*, qu’elle ne peut se dire tout entière, pour la raison *qu’au-delà de sa moitié il n’y a rien à dire.*”, Jacques Lacan, *Le*

with the lie: a truth can never be fully conveyed and at its heart it dwells the lie. Decisively, if theatre becomes a celebration, Delbono believes that it must be, above all, one of life and of flesh; this brings about the possibility of a communication or connection not only with the different, but also with the dead, because the death of a loved one, despite the unimaginable pain, can constitute a redemption or a salvation for the person who remains alive:

When I decided to go into theatre, I hadn't yet known that my theatre would be a theatre of the body. At first, the theatre I was studying was a theatre of texts, of words, of interpretations of paper characters, without bodies. Then, in Denmark, after the loss of my beloved friend, I threw myself into the theatre of the body. I wanted to forget; I didn't want to die with him. I didn't want to think of my destroyed body, of his dead body. I didn't want to let my body die like his. That's why I began to spend hours, days, months, and years working relentlessly on the dance, on the body. To find a new life in this body, a life that would take me away from this loss, from this pain.<sup>13</sup>

Above all, Pippo Delbono's theatre is a theatre of the body writing its own text, of the body next to another body. Through this writing, through its singular and extraordinary corporeality, the body becomes aware of every part of itself, of every organ, precisely through the extreme awareness of the fragility inscribed in it. The poetry of the unconscious, of an unconscious that takes another unconscious by the hand and performs theatrically in a similar rhythm, is the central event despite the lack of dialogue – at times it is a dialogue without words, opposed by its nature to the dialogue full of words and emphasis of the victim used in the theatre of Milo Rau or Tiago Rodrigues. Finally, these are only a few faces of the representation of catastrophe in the contemporary theatre which underline the existence of the individual at the challenge of the impossible and of the incomprehensible, and my purpose was to reveal the mixture between sufferance and its articulation in two major directions: the speech full of momentous words and the speech without words.

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<sup>13</sup> My translation: "[...] quand j'ai décidé de faire du théâtre, je ne savais pas encore que mon théâtre serait un théâtre du corps. Au début, le théâtre que j'étudiais était un théâtre de textes, de paroles, d'interprétations de personnages de papier, sans corps. Puis, au Danemark, après la perte de mon ami adoré, je me suis jeté dans le théâtre du corps. Je voulais oublier, je ne voulais pas mourir avec lui. Je voulais ne pas penser à mon corps détruit, à son corps mort. Je ne voulais pas laisser mourir mon corps comme le sien. C'est pourquoi j'ai commencé à passer des heures, des jours, des mois, des années à travailler avec acharnement la danse, le corps. Pour retrouver une vie nouvelle dans ce corps, une vie qui m'éloigne de cette perte, de cette douleur.", Pippo Delbono, *Regards*, Actes Sud, Paris, 2010, pp. 104-105.

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