

Theatre and Tragedy Between Rite and Performance

The uncertain horizon of new identity practices in social drama.

Fabio Tolledi¹

Today the destiny of tragedy seems to be swinging more than ever between the two poles, apparently apart, of rite and performance. The cultural tradition of the West – moreover – considers tragedy as an absolute point of reference, so to become incontrovertibly one of the founding ‘topics’ of culture.²

1 Fabio Tolledi is theatre director, playwright and artistic director of Astràgali Teatro, a theatre founded in 1981 in Lecce (Italy). Since 1992, he directs all the performances and training activities of Astràgali Teatro company. He is President of the Italy Centre of the International Theatre Institute and Vice-President of the CIDC (Cultural Identity and Development Committee) of ITI. He collaborates with the teaching of “Sociology of Religions” at the University of Salento. In the last years, he has been project director of the many international projects promoted by Astràgali and supported by the European Union and by other international organisations, realising artistic collaborations with theatres, cultural institutions, universities, artists from Albania, Kosovo, Cyprus, France, Great Britain, Greece, Turkey, Malta, Jordan, Palestine, Spain, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan. His performances have been played all over Europe and the Mediterranean countries.

2 This text is based on a research which has been co-financed by the European Union (European Social Fund – ESF) and Greek national funds through the Operational Program “Education and Lifelong Learning” of the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) – Research Funding Program: THALIS -UOA- «The Theatre as educational good and artistic expression in education and society».

For decades it is something absolutely acquired by the debate – through the intuitions of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet³ – to highlight the complex universe turning round tragedy, considered as an integrated system that even in the organization of the space of theatre included inseparably the acropolis, the agora, the temple and the theatre.

Theatre was not that ‘domestic’ place apart that the naturalistic theatre has transmitted to us. It was not the emblem of the interior of a bourgeois house or the multilayered condominium of the United States scene of the XXth century. Tragedy was the place where *polis* and *techne* were connected giving a sense to community.

An essential paradox lies on the possible considerations about tragedy.

There is a sort of philological option, respectful in principle of the immutable sacredness of what was once. The institution of a totemic sacredness that seems regardless of the fact that the eyes that see, the hands that touch, the tongues dancing on the lips are all in the present. A present that for more than thirty years we can call the field of post-modernity.

It is useful to make a step behind. It is not possible to ignore that the new issue of contemporary age finds its roots at the end of the XVIIIth century.

In agreement with the main work of Lacoue-Labarthe⁴, we can say that the issues raised by Hölderlin (inevitably through the lens of Martin Heidegger) mark the changing of statute of *mimesis*.

The starting point of a meditation on tragedy is the continuous connection of politics, art and techniques, that is to say the indissoluble relation between *polis* and *techne*.

In the intimate nature of the aesthetic experience and of the processes of institutionalization characterizing it there is the almost obligatory corollary of the internal challenge among those who consider themselves as the authentic bearers of the true tradition.

3 Vernant Jean-Pierre, Vidal-Naquet Pierre, *Mito e tragedia*, due. Da Edipo a Dioniso, Einaudi, Torino 2001

4 Lacoue-Labarthe Philippe, *L'imitazione dei moderni*, Palomar, Bari 1995

It is interesting to relate those elements to a lucky expression of Eric Hobsbawm⁵ concerning the “invention of the tradition”.

The English scholar has pointed out that although nothing seems to be more ancient and linked to a past without memory than the ceremonial of the British monarchy in its public displays, actually the modern form of that ceremonial is a product of the late XIXth and of the XXth century.

According to Hobsbawm the ‘traditions’ that seem to us or are expected to be authentic often have a quite recent origin and sometimes are totally invented. In this perspective the invention of a tradition appears to be essentially a process of ritualization and formalization characterized by the reference to the past, from the moment when – at the minimum executive level – it imposes in its development a series of repetitive actions.

In my opinion it is useful to lay down some interpretative parameters concerning the relationship between ritual forms, theatre, performance in the framework of a dynamics of processes related to the production of social reality.

In the theatrical field since long they don’t speak about the actor but about the performer. This is essentially due to the fact that the performer is a man of action, that is in the action he makes, not representing anything, rejecting the dynamics of the play, his horizon being not the play but the experience of knowledge.

According to Jerzy Grotowski⁶ the performer is not the man playing the part of another one. He is the dancer, the priest, the warrior: he is beyond the artistic genres.

According to one of the most influential men of theatre of the second half of the XXth century, the ritual is performance, an accomplished action, an act. At the same time it is interesting to note that, on the contrary, the degenerate rituals are considered by Grotowski as ‘play’. In the intentions of the Polish director there is the will not to discover something new, but something forgotten. To discover such an ancient fundamental principle of the human experience (and of human consortia) so that any distinction between artistic genres is no more valid. In this perspective a social

5 *L'invenzione della tradizione*, edited by Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Einaudi, Torino, 1987.

6 Grotowski Jerzy, *Il Performer*, Edizioni Pontedera Teatro, Pontedera (PI), 1990.

dynamics, favouring and taking as positive the whole actions aiming to enhance the social bounds and establishing the shared practice of a community, seems to come out.

It is important to set out that the theatrical practice goes beyond the frame of the scene and of representation.

This comes to be clear if we observe that in the anthropological tradition the ritual forms and theatre are often fused. This issue – besides tracing a clear line of the genealogy of theatre and of the debt of the last century to Nietzsche's approach – opens a vision that puts beyond the narrow and restricted limit of the stage. Theatre, through the whole XXth century, conquers a new and meanwhile ancient space. Theatre calls forth its ancient function of place of social relationships and place of the elaboration of social reality on a symbolic and imaginative level. A place of transformation that goes through the bodies of the actors.

The discourses that constitute the complex social device, that concerns the body, cannot neglect the work of George Lapassade. For Lapassade the dissociative paradigm allows to establish a process enabling to overcome the heavy legacy of Freud. His contribution is important in highlighting that the body, through the modified states of consciousness, finds essential vital resources.

The dissociative paradigm, the practices of trance, the modified states of consciousness mark a social use of the body. These options tend to institute social practices and habits, especially in the 'metropolitan' context, in which a new status of the body takes shape.

According to Michel Leiris, that studied the possession and its ritual aspect in the Ethiopians of Gondar since the Thirties of the last century, in this ritual it is not difficult for the 'actor' to put himself in the character's place, feeling encouraged by his own environment and faith to believe to the real existence of *zar* as a spirit that shows itself through possession. According to the French scholar "such a particular kind of theatre, that can never recognize its theatrical nature, is also lived by the spectator. In fact in any moment the spectator himself can be possessed and, in any case, he is never a simple observer: he contributes to the evocation of the spirits by clapping his hands or singing and once they come to earth he communicates with them, with no barriers between them

and those who embody them. That's why the spectator, even if not possessed and not participating directly, is really involved in the event, living it together with the protagonists, not being a passive witness"⁷.

In Leiris' words, actually, such manifestations, "thanks to the collective participation, to this continual osmosis between actors and public, cannot be put in a particular sphere where people who devote themselves to them are set apart, being at the borders of life, as it happens in true theatrical manifestations."⁸

According to Leiris these can be considered as privileged moments in which "the collective life itself takes the form of theatre"⁹.

It is fundamental for the scholar of theatre forms, that are present in such a "theatrical" possession cult, to understand the very subtle border between authentic and not authentic.

This issue concerns also the internal dynamics of the participants to a ritual form that is still alive in the little town of Torre Paduli, near Lecce, in the South of Italy, called the night of San Rocco. In the night between 15th and 16th August people make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of San Rocco, while all around people play *tamburello* and form the so called "ronde". Within each "ronda", or circle, some members make the "dance of knives", an ancient syncretic form of dance of defiance, where once people held knives. The participants recognize to the members that play the "dance of knives" a sort of orthodoxy and ability creating a hierarchical system, an authority within different fields of membership.

The study of a ritual manifestation so strictly connected with theatrical and spectacular aspects, is concerned with many problems. The first one is the foundation-reference to the authentic tradition.

In the European theatrical tradition there is a multilayered universe of reference characterized by a great dishomogeneity. What is traditionally called 'traditional theatre' presents many differences from the European notion (and more specifically cinematographic one) of theatre.

7 Leiris Michel, *La possessione e i suoi aspetti teatrali*, Ubu libri, Milano 1988, p.67.

8 Ibidem.

9 Ivi, p.68.

In highly sophisticated cultures, as the Indian culture, generally there is a line of demarcation between rite and theatre. But in other cultures, like the Haitian, it is not easy to find such a demarcation.

The voodoo rite – for example – has been considered for many years by the Europeans as a form of traditional theatre, like a form of pure theatre.

But for the participants, for the people involved in it, this form is a ritual with coherent forms of theatre inside, but not of spectacle *tout court*.

This original ‘defect’ of interpretation seems to mark the whole theatre in the XXth century and, if we look carefully, it’s as if its genealogy finds its turning point in Nietzsche’s birth of tragedy. How not to be struck by Antonin Artaud’s perception of the Balinese dancers? A vision that affects the whole trajectory of the heretic of theatre in the XXth century, that – it’s important to underline – occurred in the context of a *colonial* exhibition, in Paris in 1931. What did Artaud see and with him other great innovators of the XXth century like Berthold Brecht and Walter Benjamin?

How much of exotic and colonial was there in the organization of that performance?

In anthropology and in the cultural studies we assist to a great deal with the theatrical forms. In the eighties the approaches of Richard Schechner¹⁰ and Victor Turner – on one hand – and of Erving Goffman – on the other – prevailed.

The first position aimed to study the “social dramas” by using a theatrical terminology in order to describe disharmonious or critical situations. While describing Turner’s theory Schechner states that some situations – controversies, fights, rites of passage – have a particular dramatic relevance because the participants not only act, but manage to show to the others what they are doing and did, so that the actions are such as “made for an audience”¹¹. Erving Goffman adopts a more scenographic approach, employing the theatrical paradigm. Besides for Goffman any social interaction has

10 To this regard an essential reference is SCHECHNER RICHARD, *La teoria della performance*, 1970-1983, edited by V. Valentini, Bulzoni, Roma 1984 e SCHECHNER RICHARD, *Magnitudini della performance*, Bulzoni, Roma 1999

11 Turner Victor, *Antropologia della performance*, ILMulino, Bologna 1993.

the aspect of a play. According to this approach the protagonists arrange the backstage, they confront themselves with their adversaries while putting their masks on and play their roles, using the stage for ordinary actions etc. For both approaches the basic human plot is the same: someone starts to move from the ambit of the social order; as highlighted by Schechner "this moving is accomplished through the rite or it is blocked, but in any case a crisis bursts because any change of condition implies a re-settlement of the whole mould: this is realized through a ceremony, that is to say by the means of theatre".

Turner has effectively pointed out four phases in order to describe the dynamics of social drama processes: 1) Breakdown of the ordinary social relationships; 2) crisis during which the breakdown widens; 3) reparatory action; 4) a final phase consisting of the reintegration of the rebel social group or in the recognition and legitimation of an irreparable schism between the rival parts.

Certainly this perspective would enlarge the vision also on the ritual of the night of San Rocco, by taking into account also the role of the police present since long in the ritual space of the dance. By also taking into account the role of the organizing committee and of those associations that aim to create a committee for the authenticity and protection of brand.

This is much more useful since Victor Turner's interesting definition of the rite as a "transformative performance revealing important classifications, categories and contradictions of the cultural processes"¹²

According to Eugenio Barba theatre anthropology is the study of the pre-expressive scenic behaviour that is at the base of different individual or collective genres, roles and traditions. In the context of an organized performance, the physical and mental presence of the actor/dancer is based on principles different from those used in daily life. The extra-ordinary use of the body-mind is what in the theatrical tradition is called technique. According to Barba and Savarese the different techniques of the actor/dancer can be aware and codified or unaware but implicit in the use and repetition of a theatrical practice.¹³ Theatre anthropology, as developed by some

¹² Ibidem, p.148.

¹³ Barba Eugenio, Savarese Nicola, *L'arte segreta dell'attore. Un dizionario di antropologia teatrale*, Argo, Lecce 1996.

theatre groups from the Sixties of the last century up to now, has tried to carry out a sort of trans-cultural analysis. This analysis has tried to show how it was possible to distinguish in the field of theatre techniques some recurrent principles. These principles if applied to some physiological factors – weight, balance, position of the spine, direction of the eyes in the space, use of the breath – produce pre-expressive physical tensions.

According to this approach the body conquers a decisive, vital and credible role that makes visible what can be defined as “presence of the actor” or life on stage. This element comes to be central, making it possible to attract the spectator’s attention, going beyond the transmitted message. This condition was pointed out as the source of the work of body in theatre. This is a sort of pre-expressive layer forming the elementary level of the organization in theatre. A multiplicity of other levels of organization must be added that are inseparable and undistinguishable for the spectator and within the performance.

In this sense theatre lives its existence not only in the scenic space, but in the dilation of the experience to all the participants.

It is besides necessary to say that theatre anthropology is not concerned with the application of the paradigms of cultural anthropology to theatre and dance. Theatre anthropology cannot be defined as the study of spectacular phenomena in those cultures that are traditionally studied by the anthropologists. In this sense theatre anthropology – so to trace its own coherent and organic field of action – marks a new distinction between theatre and performance.

So it seems that some ideas linked to theatre anthropology mark an empirical approach to theatre, by encouraging, as an essential field of theatre experience, the actor’s knowledge experience, by addressing the attention to an empirical territory in order to trace a way between different techniques, aesthetics, genres and specializations concerned with the scenic practice. And if on one hand theatre anthropology doesn’t want to fuse, accumulate or catalogue techniques of acting, on the other it looks for the technique of techniques.

Finally for Lapassade the dissociative paradigm is the founding element of the concrete experience of the individual. It is a vital

resource in which the modified state of consciousness is a device enabling the body to enact a strategy of survival, of resistance, of life. Trances are culturalised, ritualised, socially shared forms of the modified states of consciousness. Within this perspective there is the attempt to recognize the plurality of identities inside the same individual, and how the actor's transe is a vital source.