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Theatre and Obstinacy – a Friend's Perspective [1]

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If somebody living in Dublin and preparing a solo-performance for an academic audience in Cork retreats to a location in Berlin to rehearse for his upcoming show – isn't that somewhat peculiar?

> One evening in the winter of 1801 I met an old friend in a public park.[2]

That is the beginning of the text my friend Peter was reciting as he strolled through the *Kleistpark* in Berlin. I imagine the way he circles, at a leisurely pace, around the green, time and again pausing at a verge or under one of the mighty beech-trees to practise a gesture or test a graceful move.

> Each movement, he told me, has its centre of gravity; it is enough to control this within the puppet. The limbs, which are only pendulums, they follow mechanically of their own accord, without further help.[3]

Walkers, joggers and Turkish women and children sitting on the grass and having their picnic catch the odd word or sentence and may wonder about this elderly gentleman in an Irish sweater.

During his days in Berlin, Peter will be fully absorbed in his studies of Kleist's *On the Marionette Theatre* (1810) and he will scrutinise each word (e.g. 'rapier'or 'vis motrix'), each dot and comma that its eloquent and articulate German author used, thus arriving at his very own version of the text. He is passionate about discovering – à la Kleist – how, from the centre of gravity, *proportion, flexibility, lightness* can be achieved in performance.

A week later at University College Cork, the eyes of students of German are fixed on the lips of this actor – as in previous years when he recited Heine, Kafka, Grimmelshausen to them. The students are clearly moved by the rhythm of his speech, by the timbre of his voice, by how the sentences become a melody. I would like to implore the moment to stay: you are so beautiful ... Lingua Germanica.

Eigensinn, stubbornness, in the sense of doing something against all odds, was obviously at work on that fateful day many years ago when Peter Jankowsky – then a student at the Hermann Hesse-Senior High School in Berlin – recognized

2 Heinrich von Kleist (1810): *On the Marionette Theatre* (translated by Idris Parry); http://southerncroissreview.org/9/kleist.htm; 13.06.2015.

3 (ibid.)

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the art of acting as his true calling. In an autobiographical text entitled *Defeat and After*, he recalls his teenage years and an incident that would have an impact on his whole life: The drama group at his school had decided that a competition was needed to determine which of two candidates would be chosen to recite a particular poem. The choice was between him and a fellow student.

> I had lost when and where it counted, and I felt absolutely vanquished. But, strangely, not weakened, not discouraged. Rather the opposite: a surprisingly nourishing, forward-looking stubbornness arose in me out of my failure, a conviction that I had found what gave me the greatest satisfaction, perhaps even a sense of direction . . . I continued doing that which brought with it the joy of self-discovery time and again – serving the word, the poetic word, with the limited means at my command – voice, insight, imagination. Reading and reciting poems or stories became the red thread that has run through my entire life, perhaps even kept it from unravelling . . . The thread even helped me across the gulf between two countries, two cultures – two languages.[4]

From 1959 to 1962, Peter Jankowsky was a student at the Max Reinhardt School of Acting in Berlin and immediately after graduation took up his first acting position at a theatre in Hanover. He continued his career at theatres in Cuxhaven and, finally, Kiel, before deciding to change direction and withdraw from the professional theatre altogether. What motivated him to do so? From the perspective of Irish author Brian Lynch, a close friend of his, it may have been because Peter Jankowsky was too solitary for the theatre. Having worked with him on various projects, including the translation of texts by Paul Celan, Lynch became acutely aware of Peter's deep belief in the enabling power of loneliness.

On his travels through the Ireland of the 1950s and 60s, Peter Jankowsky fell in love with the island – just as Heinrich Böll had done. And it seems he was in the right place at the right time: in the early 1970s, the Goethe-Institute in Dublin offered him a job as a resident German language teacher, a position he gladly accepted and which left him sufficient leeway to pursue his specific interests in German literature and culture.

Considering the often controversial discussions about the relationship between pedagogy and theatre, the example of Peter Jankowsky is significant. Here we have a professional actor who did not distance himself from the field of pedagogy; on the contrary, he felt very much at home in it.

He continued to be active in his new professional environment until his retirement and always found ways to satisfy the return of his great hunger for the stage, something he did for the last time in May 2014, at a conference on *Performative Teaching, Learning and Research* in Cork. He suggested a solo-performance on one of the nights of the conference.

I doubted whether his idea, which was to perform the entire *Apology of Socrates* under the title *Life and/or Death – A Classic Case* at Cork's Granary

[4] Peter Jankowsky (2000): Myself / Passing By. Dublin: New Island Books, 55-56.

Theatre, would be at all viable in the context of the conference. But I sensed that he was passionate about appearing as Socrates, and about playing the role in which he had started his career as a reciter.

Even while planning the event, I had a slight presentiment of something, but it is only now, in retrospect, that I realise what that presentiment was about: with this performance (which closed with the words, *Well, now is the time to be off, I to die and you to live*) Peter Jankowsky consciously performed his valediction to life.

Luckily, there is a YouTube-video of his appearance, and, by chance, an Irish lady living in Germany came across it. When I let her know that three months after the event, Peter had suddenly passed away, she wrote back to say that this teacher who lived and breathed the theatre, was 'the best, most entertaining and most cunning teacher'

she ever had. And she added: 'On minute 9.30 of the video when talking about death, I felt, he was expressing his very own sentiments.'

Peter Jankowsky lived (obstinately) without a car, without internet, mobile phone or television. In his attempts to escape the overstimulation pervading our modern world, he succeeded in maintaining contact with his inner self. Is this a key-competency – maybe the key to an outstanding achievement in the world of theatre and pedagogy?

At the end of my walk down memory lane in the Kleistpark, I pass a couple of pillars which once carried a heavy load. Close by, there is a plaque bearing the inscription:

> In this building there met the infamous People's Court, which sentenced to death the members of the July 20, 1944 resistance to the Nazi regime.

It was not far from this park that Peter spent his war- and post-war years in Berlin. For RTÉ, the Irish State Broadcasting Company, he wrote and narrated deeply moving short stories about those days, thus winning himself his first real fanbase. His approach to presenting the history of his town and native country, reflected in the mirror of his personal experiences, was unique.

I am convinced that Peter would have been an ideal participant in any discussion about obstinacy. More than anyone, he would have been able to go beyond the personal to look at things from a higher level, from, for instance, the lofty perspective of the philosophy of history.

I imagine him turning the pages of his favourite Irish newspaper to discover a review of a relatively new book entitled *History and Obstinacy*, a translation of the German 1200-page original, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, co-authored by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. Immediately his mind would engage with the big issues: What does *obstinacy* really mean? Maybe the kind of resistance that has emerged in the course of our European history? Or, global history? Or, in the history of mankind? But, is *obstinacy* in fact the right translation?[5]

[5] Oskar Negt Alexander Kluge (1981): Geschichte und Eigensinn. Frankfurt/M.: Zweitausendundeins – Alexander Kluge Oskar Negt (2014): History and Obstinacy. New York: Zone Books (English Translation by Richard Langston).

My friend makes up his mind to carefully examine in the coming days what exactly Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge meant by the word 'Obstinacy'!? For me, Peter Jankowsky embodied obstinacy in an exemplary way, both in his professional career and in his attitude towards the whole of life.

An Irish saying:

Nothing can harm a good man, either in life or after death . . .

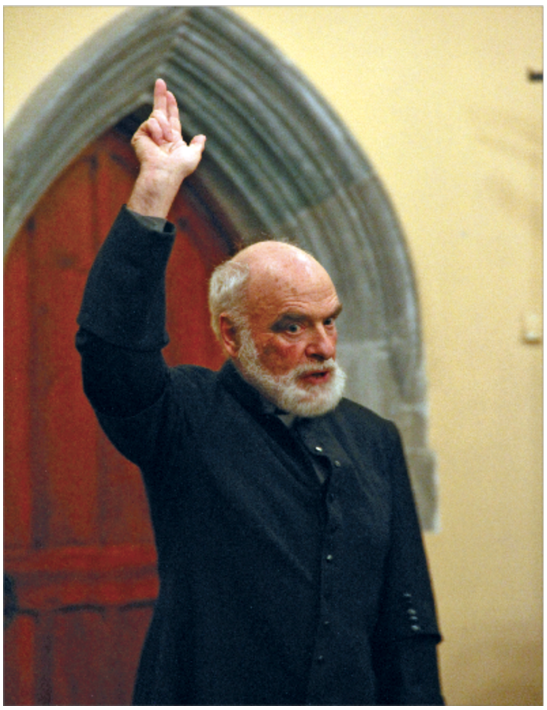


Figure 1: Manfred Schewe & Stephen Boyd (2012): *Welttheater*–übersetzen, adaptieren, inszenieren. *World Theatre*–translation, adaptation, production. Berlin, Strasburg (Um.), Milow: Schibri, 136.

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