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The time when the new light is born

Ewa Benesz's Paratheatre as a collective and individual performative process

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The subject of this report is the paratheatrical laboratory In the Act of Creating: Meeting with the Lentisk*, led by Ewa Benesz. The contribution provides insight into this work, focusing on the key elements that characterise it as both an individual and collective artistic process. Benesz is one of the most important representatives of paratheatre, a participatory artistic practice initiated in 1969 by Jerzy Grotowski as part of the activities of the Wrocław Laboratory Theatre. In the article, I offer my own testimony of the workshop held at Ca'Colmello in Italy in January 2020, focusing on the analogy between the transformation of the lentisk plant and the inner process of the performer. Each paratheatrical encounter is unique and unrepeatable: through improvised actions, the participants give life to an extemporary theatrical creation in the absence of an audience. The purpose of the report is to provide an account of the work that highlights its particular dramaturgical dimension, which is not fixed and is capable of generating, welcoming, and integrating the proposals of both group and individual performers.*

1 Introduction

In this contribution, I offer a fragment of my own testimony of the paratheatrical workshop *In the Act of Creating: Meeting with the Lentisk,* held at the laboratory-house *Ca'Colmello* located near Sassoleone (Bologna) in January 2020. It expresses my personal experience of the work and is therefore subjective and partial; it is based on my notes and the audio recordings made by Alfred Buchholz[1] during the workshop.

This report was presented in Italian, as part of the International Scenario Conference, *Presence in Performative Language Teaching, Learning and Research*, on May 10th, 2024 at Trinity College Dublin.

The workshop, subject of this paper, is developed and led by the Polish artist Ewa Benesz, pupil and collaborator of Jerzy Grotowski; it takes place over five days, always from 2nd to 6th January, coinciding with the Christian holiday of the Epiphany, and is open to anyone who

[1] Alfred Buchholz, a close collaborator of Benesz (2013, p. 69), is a biologist and made an essential contribution to the concrete elaboration of the work with the lentisk plant.

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wishes to participate, with no limits on age or experience. The participants come from a wide variety of backgrounds, mostly not working professionally in the theatre and arts field.

Each day of the workshop corresponds to a phase in the production of oil from the fruit of the lentisk plant. Lentisk are an evergreen shrub that grows wild in Sardinia, where Ewa resides. The fruits are small red berries that become black as they ripen.

The oil obtained is used during the last action of the workshop as fuel for lighting the lamps made by each participant.

There are no spectators. One of the fundamental points of paratheatrical research, initiated by Grotowski in '69 within the activities of the Wrocław Theatre Laboratory (The Grotowski Institute, 2024), is, in fact, the overcoming of the division between actors and spectators and the creation of the conditions for an authentic inter-human encounter.

The process of processing the lentisk oil has been conceived by Ewa as a dramaturgical device to initiate the improvisations of the group and single performers, and to articulate them in collective and individual creative processes.

We participants are involved in a common action not only with our minds but also with all our senses:

With our fingers we pluck the berries and clean them of residues.

With our feet we trample them to produce a must, which we then crush with a stone to obtain the liquid that will become oil through boiling.

During these operations we perceive the variety of colours (black, purple and red) and textures that the lentisk berries take on in the different stages of processing and we smell the scent of the hot must and freshly filtered oil.

The dramaturgical idea, inspired by alchemical principles, is that the transformation of the plant into light corresponds to a process of increasing receptivity on the part of the participants. A condition that Ewa describes as ‘feeling illuminated from within’ (Benesz, 2018) whereby light is equivalent to the creative impulse running through the performer.

Receptivity is one of the fundamental points of Grotowski’s investigation and refers to a particular experience of doubling that can manifest itself during the creative process, whereby the performer is 'passive in action and active in seeing' (Grotowski 1997, p. 378).

This testimony of mine refers to the third day of the workshop, during which the berries are tamped down with the feet. It is intended as a contribution to the documentation of the

paratheatrical work. The aim is to make perceptible not only my subjective experience but also the relational dynamic with the other performers.

All oral and written testimonies by workshop participants in the original are in Italian. I translated the testimonies to English with the help of Kieran Lilwall. I have decided not to quote the original fragments for reasons of ease of reading.

2 4th January 2020 - Pigeage of the Lentisk Berries

Today in the centre of the room there is a plastic basin covered with a white cloth, next to it some small, folded towels. Alfred intones the mantra *Samba Sada Shiva*, we chant for a long time, almost 20 minutes.

We stand up in a circle and Ewa hands a maraca to Blanche and says:

> Blanche, the rhythm of the heart, yours, and let's start with the steps.

Blanche places her right hand over her heart and holds the maraca in her left hand, listens for a few seconds to the pulsation of the heart until she begins to reproduce it rhythmically with the instrument. On this rhythm Ewa shows us the dance steps to be performed in a circle: in the starting position we have our legs slightly apart, our feet are firmly planted on the ground and as far apart as the width of the pelvis. Remaining in place, we bend our knees, rhythmically swaying our bodies backwards and forwards. Then we move around the space, maintaining the movement of the body and the rhythm without interruption. Other instruments join Blanche's maraca: Maribel takes a djembe drum and Ewa a large shamanic frame drum, the other participants play small percussion instruments of various types that they have brought with them. The rhythm becomes more and more insistent. The sound of these instruments is joined by voices of incitation, trills and calls. The circle dissolves. We distribute ourselves in the space and continue to dance, improvising. The dance reaches a peak of intensity and excitement, followed by a gradual slowing down until we find ourselves in a state of stillness. Ewa invites us to form the initial circle again, goes to the centre and lifts the cloth: the basin contains a soft purple mass. At night Alfred had boiled the berries, which we had cleaned together the previous day, and poured them into the basin before the start of the meeting.

Ewa returns to the circle and, pointing to the basin, repeats in an encouraging tone:

> Eia! Eia! Eia![2]

With this exhortation she invites us to begin the next action. We join her in a cheerful chorus.

[2] *Eia* is a typical Sardinian exclamation that can express exhortation or wonder.

Last night Ewa asked me if I could be the first one to get into the basin today. I said yes and told her that I wanted to do an action in which I could tell an old family secret that I have been thinking about a lot lately and that for me represented something unresolved. Ewa said to me: "Yes Irene, that's fine, that's what our work is for."

I enter the circle, take off my socks, and with my hands lift the skirt of my dress that would otherwise get soaked. Vincenzo holds out his arm and helps me enter the large container. I dip my feet into the boiled lentisk berries, soft and warm. I join the chorus of "Eia!" that is now directed towards me. I differentiate my voice from that of the others, sometimes making calls. For what seems like a very long time we all sing together, then I begin to sing an improvised tune on my own, without words, just a melody. Through singing I seek the presence of my voice. The others support me by singing along with me and give me a great sense of confidence. My melody becomes a kind of invocation.

There is silence, I can only hear the sounds of my companions' footsteps as they continue to dance in a circle around me. In a low voice I start to sing the melody of *Santa Lucia*[3].

Then, plucking up courage, I added the words:

> Sul mare luccica/ L'astro d'argento/ Placida è l'onda/ Prospero è il vento/ Venite all'agile/ Barchetta mia/ Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia.[4]

I stop singing and we remain silent for a few seconds. I say:

> This is the story of Filomena, who was Lucia's daughter and mother. Filomena was a girl in the 1920s. So, this story is almost a hundred years old. Well then: Filomena was the daughter of Donna Lucia and Don Antonio, and Don Antonio had the most beautiful shoe shop in Pescara, in Piazza Salotto.

As I speak, I try to resist the temptation to close my eyes, I want to tell the story to my companions. I am moved to see the attention in the eyes of the others; it seems to me that I have never had so much attention in my life.

I continue the story:

> Filomena was a girl who liked reading books and especially novels; she did very well at school. She attended the Scuola Magistrale[5], which was an appropriate school for a girl from a well-to-do and respectable family.

[3] *Santa Lucia* is a traditional Neapolitan song that was translated into Italian during the *Risorgimento*. The song is very popular in Scandinavian countries where it is sung with a different text for the Feast of Saint Lucia.
[4] "On the sea glitters/ The silver star/ Placid is the wave/ Prosperous is the wind/ Come to my nimble little boat! / Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia." (translation by IM)
[5] "Scuola Magistrale" was a secondary school for training primary school teachers and was attended almost exclusively by women.

> Filomena was very talented in mathematics, so much so that her teacher decided to talk to her parents: "Let Filomena study at university because she is really good at mathematics!" So, what happened? The men of the family... they were all notables... they gathered... Don Antonio's relatives... all the uncles... and they sat down at the table: "What shall we do? There's no university in Pescara. Can Filomena go to Rome?"

Addressing my companions directly:

> Can Filomena go to Rome? No, she cannot. How could she go alone? Even if we put her with the nuns... and then what? A girl from a good family can't go to Rome. So, Filomena finishes her schooling and Don Antonio and Donna Lucia make her get married. To whom? To Don Peppe's son. He was a very prominent businessman in the Sangro valley. In fact, he had two cement factories [Pause]. Don Peppe's son's name was Armando. And he was a nice young man and a bit gabrieldannunziano[6]. He was, in fact, from Pescara like Gabriele D'Annunzio. And so Filomena married Armando. He was nice, but he made her suffer [Pause]. They had five children: Giuseppe, called Peppino, Antonio, Lucia, Evelina and Mariella. But that's when the trouble started... When Peppino was born, he was taken with forceps and...

Here my voice breaks but I continue:

> So he was epileptic. But it was a secret.

I stop because I feel like crying, I start to stomp hard on the lentisk berries to get my courage up. I think that if I can't speak, I can try to continue the action by singing. With my mouth closed, I hum the melody of *Santa Lucia*. Ewa, followed by everyone else, joins me. I feel supported by the group and resume singing the the words of the song. Then I say:

> So, Filomena, who liked to read so much, made this fioretto[7]: "In order to take care of my children, I will not read any more until they are older and no longer need me." And so, she took care of her children. Then there was the war and Armando was the podestà[8] of the village where they lived, called Bomba. He was a Fascist and when the Allies arrived, they put him in a prison camp. So, he wasn't home for a year. He returned. Business was bad and they were in debt. So she, the daughter of Don Antonio with the most beautiful shoe shop in Pescara, had no money left and she used the black

[6] The adjective *gabrieldannunziano* goes back to a line from Guido Gozzano's poem "L'altro". Gabriele D'Annunzio was an iconic poet for Italian Fascism, famous for his hedonistic lifestyle and heroic attitudes. The adjective is used by Gozzano (1980, p. 309) in an ironic sense: "Instead of making me gozzano/ a bit of a fool, but raw,/ make me gabreildannunziano:/ it would have been much worse!" [The English translation is mine].

[7] *Fioretto* in Italian means: sacrifice, abstinence, act of renunciation done voluntarily out of devotion. The name comes from the offering of a flower on the altar, for the Madonna or a saint.

[8] In the fascist era, *podestà* was the name given to the mayor of a town with full executive and legislative powers.

> shirts of the fascists to make kitchen aprons. She was a very devout person and offered all her sufferings to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

I resume humming the melody of *Santa Lucia* with my mouth closed. Then I continue singing with the words and the others join in. I hear Ewa singing the same song with the Polish words. I continue the story:

> Armando as a young man was a bit of a gabrieldannunziano, he used to sleep with other women and Filomena caught syphilis from her husband. Slowly she lost her sight and... this was a big secret.

I pause, look at the others and put a finger in front of my mouth as if to ask them to keep the secret. I take my finger from my mouth and say:

> And now it is no longer a secret, because you know it.

I cry quietly. Ewa starts singing the *Santa Lucia* song with the Polish text and her voice sustains me. The others join in, singing in Italian. I feel protected by the group's singing as if it were a warm cloak enveloping me. I calm down and sing along with everyone else. I cannot concentrate on the story to be told nor on the words of the song because I am too agitated, but I think it is important that I do not stop now. From a distant place in my memory, I am reminded of a sentence from a story my grandmother Filomena used to tell me when I was little, and which has always frightened me: "To wait and not come is a thing to die from". In a slightly ghostly tone, I whisper this phrase to others, just as my grandmother did to me.

I don't remember the details of the story; I only have a very general idea: an evil witch casts a spell on the knights who dare to cross the forest where she lives. To punish them for their audacity, the witch turns them into trees. In the enchanted forest, amidst the rustling of the leaves, one sometimes hears the whisper: "To wait and not come is a thing to die from". This is the lament of the tree-knights, who are waiting anxiously for someone to release the spell.

I whisper the sentence three times and the others repeat it with me. I pause and turn directly to the others and say:

> The spells can be broken. It's just that you must not be loyal to these spells. You must not.

I start blowing with my voice as if to make the sound of the wind. I continue to blow louder and louder and Alfred joins me with the flute. Then I sing the whole *Santa Lucia* song while looking at the other participants who sing softly with me. I feel supported by their singing. With each verse of the song, it is as if something is getting lighter and lighter inside me. Valeria knows all the words by heart; she smiles and accompanies me phrase by phrase: I almost feel like I'm taking a journey with her in the 'little boat' on the calm sea of Naples lit up by the

stars. We sing four verses; it is a challenge to remember all the words and we laugh happily when we have finished.

I am about to get out of the basin and a participant holds out their arm for me to lean on. I lift one of my feet and immediately another person kneels next to it and with one of the towels, patiently cleans it of the residual lentisk must. I place the partially cleaned foot in a basin full of water next to the basin, lift it up and another participant dries it with a new towel. I place the foot, now completely clean, on the floor and lift the other, which receives the same treatment. This process is repeated for each participant as they are helped in and out of the basin - their feet cleaned and dried by the others.

At the end of the meeting Ewa says:

> I now feel that we are working, working without waiting for any results. Work, work, and then a moment of grace comes by itself. [Pause] I have to tell you the main rule: the voice of the protagonist who is inside [the basin] cannot be covered by the voices of the others. It means that if someone starts [the action] in the centre, we are all around like a fire. Fire is like this: when you light a fire, first a flame comes out and nothing; then a second flame and nothing; then two flames come out and pause; then ba-ba-bam: two more flames. Until the fire explodes. And we are like this heat, like this hot ash: the wood ready to burn for the person in the middle. We can never be stronger than them in voice or movement. [Pause] Because otherwise, we do not help them. It is clear that each of us wants to help with all our strength, but sometimes we help so strongly; we want to help like a mother who does not allow her child to walk alone. Do you understand? Here we have to be very careful: when I sing, I also hear the voices of the others, and only for a moment can I sing louder. [Pause] It's curious, but when I hear the voices of others, I don't get tired. This is very important because we are like D'Artagnan, Athos, Aramis and Porthos: all for one and one for all. Only in this way can we all take responsibility. I thank you because I feel that we are working. Good, good, it is good to work.

3 Conclusions

The absence of spectators, as I wrote at the beginning of this paper, is one of the fundamental aspects of paratheatre; there is in fact no final event to show the audience. In the laboratory led by Ewa, a feeling of mutual trust and belonging to a temporary community is fostered between the participants, meeting after meeting. Transcribing this experience, I was strongly struck by the role that the group's support played in the development of my action. I had the feeling that, thanks to the attentive presence of others, dormant images and sounds within me briefly burst into life, like the flame of the lamp we light on the last day of work.

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