

8. THE CORPOREALITY OF THE ACTOR / DANCER IN POST POSTMODERN THEATRE ASPECTS

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Abstract: *Undergone spectacular changes within post-dramatic theatre, the understanding of what means the **dancer corporeality** supports a spectacular reversal. From vital dance, expansive, based on movement pushed to flight and float, it reaches the tendency of transforming the actor-dancer into an object of contemplation, other than the traditional one. It comes to a statutory body that leaves the viewer to admire the attitude and noble picture. In post-postmodern theatre, the companies promoting new physicality in Dance art enjoy great interest. There are so-called "living sculptures", which certifies the specific inclination of the new postdramatic theater to metamorphose living body in an organic theatrical body.*

Key words: *theatre, dance, movement, corporeality*

The aestheticians of our days take a special interest in companies promoting in art **the new corporeality** – statuary-like with unexpected visual effects. The aesthetics of Neoclassicism used to see the actor/dancer as **a talking picture**, which was supposed to imitate the gesture and noble attitudes of the Greek tragedy. This tendency gives rise to a certain statuary quality of the body, enabling the viewer to admire the noble posture and attitude, likewise those images on Greek vessels and antique sculptures. The direction is completely in contrast with the vitalist, effusive, dynamic one whose model was, undoubtedly, Isadora Duncan.

Dancing can be perceived as a kinetic sculpture. Unlike the thing the sculptor engages in, the choreographer arduously uses the living shapes of the dancer's body to compose the so-called **postures**, conceived as brief harmonious movements connoting the feeling of flying, floating, fear or ecstasy. What the choreographer manages to elaborate lasts for one second and then decomposes itself in other movements, for it to finally recreate the initial motion.

After undergoing spectacular transformations in postdramatic theatre, we could say that the comprehension of what corporeality means shifts in a spectacular way. Starting from the vitalist dance, based on motion pushed towards flying and floating, the tendency is to transform the actor/dancer into some sort of object of contemplation, different from the traditional one.

The Japanese choreographer, originally a sculptor, Saburo Teshigawara (a supporter of unrealistically harmonious sculptural shapes) conveniently uses in *Mirror and Music* (2009), the strange effects (on a similarly hallucinatory music) of the dancers' bodies which, reduplicated by the game of the mirrors, shift into identities difficult to decipher. The bodies of the performers are graceful, flexible, and expressive; their hands create and recreate sculptural shapes in the air where their graceful but precise movements mould. Momentary

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sculptures, their bodies sway like willow branches (an innovative motion used with predilection by this company). The media technique, raised to the level of authentic art, serves the performance by giving the impression that the image of the dancer, framed by the rectangle of the mirror, looks towards the model-which-looks in the mirror. At the beginning and at the end of the performance, on the diagonal of the scene, two lighted candles watch over in some tiny mirrors, proving to be the bodies of the dancers-performers, symmetrically caught between the mirror frameworks. The anxiety caused by the *performance* comes from the contrast between the beauty of the motion and the technical-musical accompaniment unfavourable to the harmonious development of the corporeality, suggesting the confinement of bodies within the space of the mirrors.

The famous company *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* equally performs living sculptures, being specialized in statuary performances, inspired from the fundamental myths of the humanity. Extremely appreciated by the connoisseurs, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (1995) was full of images, treated like quotes from the great modern sculptors, with unnaturally elongated figures, reminding of Giacometti, while everything was enshrouded in the impression of inferno populated by deformed bodies and still... almost beautiful in their deformity.¹⁹¹

There is an inclination (specific to the new postdramatic theatre) to metamorphose the living body into an agonizing theatrical body of a humanity threatened by suffering and destruction.

According to H.T. Lehmann, there is a tendency to shock the audience, to make it snap out of apathy, by putting on scene the deformed, grotesque body, a view difficult to stand, especially when the masters – the Castelucci brothers – turn those bodies into still statues, exposed to the audience's view.

In other performances, such as *Divina Commedia* (2008), the corporal expressivity reaches moments of sublime by making the living statues stand stone-still, as replies-quotes detached from the plastic imaginary dedicated to Dante's creation.

Closer to us, over the past years, Mihai Mălaimare, director of *Masca* Theatre and his company have brought their peculiar *performances* to the attention of the inhabitants of Bucharest, in subway stations, public parks, at rush hours for the occasional spectators around. Many viewers linger in front of the living "exhibits" covered with the folds of some white cloths.

Daria Dimiu underlines the essence of this kind of theatre, a *Living Museum*, which meets the viewers halfway: seven cubes put in a straight line act as pedestals for seven actors draped in creamy cloths, with their heads and hands painted in white, standing stone-still against the background of a seraphic music (Vivaldi's *Spring*) while "the folds are waving, short tails are fluttering, creating a strange effect between the expected fixity and the fluidity given by the moment".¹⁹² The corporeality of the living statues protect the real bodies of the

¹⁹¹ See H.-T. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 289-291

¹⁹² Daria Dimiu, *Mască și matcă*, in "Teatrul azi", 2010, No.. 11-12; 22

performers from the more than curious looks of some spectators, with the fine body-attached coating but equally detached by the waving folds of the cloth.

The recent "performances of living statues" of Masca Theatre, *A Lost Letter* and *A Stormy Night*, directed by Mihai Mălaimare, equally conquer the audience and the most exigent Caragiale specialists, through the unpredictable transposition, artistically flawless, in living statues of the essence of the well-known characters. The critic Constantin Paiu explains his on site impression: "a proposition coming from Commedia dell'Arte, anchored in an equally broad and original comprehension, which extracts the strong essences of the Caragiale-like sarcastic contemplation and gracefully converts them into living pictures"¹⁹³.

The non-movement itself contains the promise of movement, possible at any time – even if the latter is consumed so slowly that it can hardly be perceived by the viewers. They are not completely convinced that the actors really move and that what they see is not in fact an optical illusion.

Robert Wilson, the Texan who got into the American theatre with vast knowledge of architecture, plastic arts and media, took his countrymen by surprise – actually scandalized many of them – with theatrical experiments, mostly due to the visual practice and culture, creating an original form of "theatre of images".

One of the revolutionizing heads of the scenic performance is the so-called *slow motion*.

In the middle of some actions (apparently) accidentally gathered on scene (but in fact architecturally thought, with great precision to the last detail), the slow motion gives the impression that the performers move only on some commands exterior to them, like some mechanically activated puppets: "in Wilson's theatre, as H.T. Lehmann says, mysterious powers seem to move the characters just like magic, without any motivation, purpose or connection that we can understand"¹⁹⁴.

The impression becomes even more shocking, against the background of a mandatory lighting (lighting trajectories previously drawn) like a destiny which must be strictly followed.

By slowing down the motions, the director achieves the effect he wants: a tension of waiting is created in the viewer's perception, which maintains in fact the state of relative time, expanded according to the whim and feeling of the receiving subject. Nowadays, it is not surprising at all the fact that, chronometrically, Robert Wilson's first performances would last for six hours (*Deafman Glance*, 1971 or *Einstein on the Beach*, 1976) and that the Prologue to *Deafman Glance* lasted no less than 25 minutes, consumed in an absolute silence, defying the primacy of word in theatre.

The slow motion of the performers (professional and amateurs all together) connotes, through the power of suggestion, the oneiric unrealistic world; everything takes place really slowly, like in a dream often interrupted by

¹⁹³ Constantin Paiu, *Umorul la el acasa*, in "Teatrul azi", no.12, 102-102

¹⁹⁴ H.-T. Lehmann, op. cit., 100

awakenings. Those who move on well-established trajectories, by standing stone-still in their intent of motion resemble some living statues, virtually movable. The latest reviews of the performances directed by Wilson suggest that he hired a famous Japanese choreographer, Suzushi Hanayagi, which had a solid grounding in the Kabuki and Nô theatrical styles. He prepared the company, so that for example, in Heiner Müller's *Quartet*, the performers acquired the same confidence, flexibility and elegance as the Japanese actors-dancers.

In his ballet, conceived on Debussy's music, *Le martyre de Saint Sebastien* (1988), Wilson deviates from Fokine's choreography of 1911, made for Ida Rubinstein and decomposes every intent of motion of the protagonist (the French ballet dancer Jean-Cristophe Paré), giving the overwhelming impression of *gestural sculpture*. The body becomes even more visible as every movement or intention of movement is slower, shifting the viewer's attention and sensoriality towards details enhanced by the kinetic effort. The unsurpassed mastery of the media procedures of lighting technique and art creates frameworks, bright framings which bring the sequence of movements closer to the quality of the *living* pictures.

The physical body, exposed to viewing, keeps its practical condition, but gradually, we come to notice its peculiarity to change into **something else** than what our senses want to suggest.

References

1. Daria Dimiu, *Mască și matcă*, in "Teatrul azi", 2010, No.. 11-12; 22
2. Constantin Paiu, *Umorul la el acasa*, in "Teatrul azi", no.12, 102-102
3. H.-T. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 289-291