

The Transcendental Stage

“Art is not the imitation of life,
but life is the imitation of a transcendental principle
with which art puts us back in connection.”

A. Artaud

For the “primitive” person (synonymous, for the purposes of this paper, with a religious person) the world is divided into two kinds of spaces--the “illusory” space and the “real” space. The illusory space corresponds to mundane reality. It is a space under the influence of time, where everything is ephemeral, changing and elusive. It is a profane space. The real space, on the other hand, is a transcendental space, where time is suspended and truth perceived. This is the space of the divinities; it is a sacred space free from the pressure of time. This is the only true space, where life is real, full of meanings and sensations, while the profane space is a chaotic and illusory surrounding. The “primitive” person aims to escape from the profane/illusory space and reach the sacred/real space. Religious ceremonies and rituals allow the “primitive” person to establish contact with the sacred space. In this space, he or she is connected with something bigger than him or her: the divinities. In the ritual act, time is suspended in a perpetual beginning of the world moment, and by enacting or retelling the deeds of divinities, the partakers can again participate in the creation of the world. The profane space, being ephemeral, can deteriorate and thus the “primitives” have to regenerate it by retelling or reenacting the creation of the world. In the sacred space they renew the cosmogony in order to prevent the other space from becoming rotten. These two spaces are actually glued together and we will see again that often opposites are the two faces of the same coin.

The modern person, or secular person, however, doesn’t consider the world divided into two spaces. He or she doesn’t believe in a transcendental space where the creation of the world is repeated. The only real space is the one surrounding him or her. [Nevertheless, even if the modern person refutes the belief of the sacred space, he or she is the result of what came before and thus he or she inherited patterns and reproduces

them in new forms. In fact the secular person still has the need of “evading”, having a “break”. Watching films, attending theater plays or reading novels are ways of being projected somewhere else and in a certain sense to be regenerated]

Ritual and Theater

In the book “Performance Theory,” Schechner relates how an indigenous tribe from a village of Papa New Guinea showed their ritual dance to tourists in exchange for money. The performers were no longer doing the dance as a form of ritual but simply showing it, and thus transporting the dance into the realm of representation. The transition from “doing” to “showing”, from “invoking” to “representing the invocation” probably marks the birth of theater. When the ritual is transformed into a theatrical event, a division appears between performers and spectators. We may conclude that it is a shift from a state of trance to a state of consciousness, both for the performers and the audience.

It is possible to detect a similar shift in some Swiss carnivals. During that festivity, villagers of remote valleys wear enormous and hideous cow or goat spirit masks, however the original meaning of such transformation is gone. For example, in the Loetschenthal valley, the men used to wear huge scary wooden masks, to cover their bodies with cow furs and to carry heavy bells. Dressed in this manner they became the “Tschaggatta.” And as such, they acquired symbolic powers. A century ago, hordes of “Tschaggatta” would have walked through the villages and punished those who didn’t respect the unwritten laws of the community. They were also believed to have had the power to scare away both winter and death, thus allowing spring to be born again. But nowadays the villagers don’t invest the Tschaggatta with the same meaning and the “performers” do not engage in their ritual in the same spirit--they simply wear their “costumes” to show an ancient practice and pose for pictures for tourists amused by a “wild” Swiss tradition. Nevertheless even if the content is drained from the old ritual, the form (wearing a Tschaggatta outfit during the carnival) is still an act of unification and affirmation of the community.

Another example would be the *kuda kepang* (“horses made of braided bambu”) a Javanese theater form based on trance. While the rituals of being possessed was declining in Java, a new form of popular entertainment (paradoxically based on the performance of being possessed) appeared. The audience paid for a theatrical trance consciously displayed as a show by professional mediums, who are blurring the threshold between living the experience and acting out the experience.

Rituals and religious ceremonies are meant to connect with the sacred space, but what happens when they are theatricalized? Can we still consider them as a transcendental experiences? Shall we consider them as fake experiences--not the “truthful” truth of the sacred but a lie of the truth? Moreover, what happens to the space inside the ritual, which is a special space, separated from the profane and in contact with the sacred? Is it still a transcendental space? Can theater offer a transcendental connection similar to that of ritual, or is theater simply unable to do so.

In the following pages I will examine three theatrical styles which I consider the roots of western theater: folktales, Greek tragedy and Commedia dell’arte, and I will investigate whether they possess a transcendental principle that would allow them to go over the trivial considerations and to pretend to present something bigger than human, something sacred.

The folktale

The folktale goes to the essence of theater--no additional visual effects are necessary, no scenery, no special lights. Moreover the audience encircles the storyteller isolating him or her from the actual, everyday surroundings. In this particular space, the storyteller unfolds without flurries the thread of the plot and captivates the audience by projecting them into an ancestral time. With the simplest of means, a folk tale can draw in and even disconcert an audience. How is it possible that folktales, with their “simple” and direct story, can still disconcert people? I think that it is because a folktale conceals archaic meanings that, even if the spectators don’t recognize them, they can still feel them.

The folktale takes place in the past. Unlike the theater, it is presented as a story that is not happening in the present moment, but happened in an immemorial time. This is similar to the myths of cosmogony, where the gods at the beginning of time, an immemorial time, created the world. Folktales do not relate the creation of the world but they mythologize the society or tribe and the landscape in which they appeared. For that reason, folktales do not tell anecdotes, but have as their content fundamental aspects of the human condition-- dealing with both individual experience and the individual's relation to community. Among the fundamental elements of the folktale it is possible to recognize the mystery of life and death and all the rites of passage that a person has to go through. Folktales crystallize in a symbolic and hidden way powerful keys to help the listener. The storyteller resembles a healing shaman who is telling his/her recent journey to a sick person. In fact, the shaman, who has the capacity to be in connection with the other worlds, reaches the underworld or the sky realm by flying and meets dead spirits and asks their help to cure a sick person, or to solve a problem of the community.

In one of the versions of the folktale "Little Thumb," the hero begins his quest by riding a horse (being small enough to ride in the horse's ear). The horse brings the hero far from his house to an unknown place. The horse is a positive figure, like a totem animal helping the shaman. Far from the house our hero is eaten by a cow. In the belly of the cow, Little Thumb "dies" in a symbolic way. It is a rite of initiation, similar to those rituals where the child, before becoming a man, has to go and stay in a dark and terrifying cavern. The child goes back to mother earth in order to "resurrect" some days later with a changed status. When finally Little Thumb surmounts the permanence in the cow's guts, he demonstrates that he is a man and manages to save his ill mother.

In the folktale the quest is the kernel; the hero has to leave the familiar to venture into the unknown where seemingly insurmountable challenges await him. He has to accomplish the journey like the shaman engaged in magical flight in order to evolve and reach a higher level of knowledge.

In another folktale, a man with a yellow bed dreamt for three consecutive nights that at the gates of a faraway city there was a palm and under the palm there was a treasure. Despite the attempts of his friends to dissuade him, the man decided to leave and find the treasure. Finally, after a long journey he found the palm at the gates of the city. But lying at the base of the palm was a guard. The man decided to wait, but unfortunately, the guard seemed to be glued to that palm. Tired of this endless waiting, the man spoke to the guard, explained the dream and asked permission to dig under the tree. The guard laughed and answered that for three years he had been dreaming of a treasure hidden under a yellow bed, but he had not been foolish enough to believe such a dream and undertake such a dangerous trip. The man recognized the bed of the guard's dream and went back home where he indeed found a treasure hidden under his own bed.

The man had to leave home in order to discover the treasure that was lying beneath him. He had to step outside his reality in order to understand and appreciate it. And when he was "outside," far from home, he had to meet a threatening figure, a guard, who indirectly helped him.

In the Slavic folktale "the obscure language" the shamanistic aspect is even more visible. A young shepherd saved a snake caught in a circle of fire. The snake thanked his savior and brought him to a cavern where the father of the snake gave the young man the power to understand the languages of animals. With this power the young man listened to the animals and thus gained the ability to predict coming events. He overcame the fear of the uncertain future and brought wealth to his family.

The folktale is a connection with basic elements of life; it is a transcendental mirror which allows us to understand our life and fellow humans. This connection can work because the folktale is based on a true exchange between the storyteller and an actively participating audience. The folktale is simple enough to stimulate the imagination of the listener to "fill the blanks." If a folktale is presented with a scenery, lights and costumes, everything is given to the spectators, who passively consume the performance rather than actively engaging in bringing the story

internally alive through imagination. In a visually fleshed out performance a folktale loses its evocative power and becomes banal.

Greek Tragedy

Often productions of Greek tragedies concentrate on the text and its utterance, demoting the chorus (which is supposed to embody the wisdom of the elders or the vision of the perfect spectator) to a static mass, and thus reducing it to a part of the “scenery” in which the heroes move. This approach erases the primal function of the chorus which is to represent the tragic in a particular incarnation, often as a chorus of ecstatic satyrs as Nietzsche writes, but surely as a group of dancers or singers. The chorus as dancers carries a special significance as dance is a collective surrender. The dancers are “taken” into another psychological state, they let their bodies assume other movements besides those dictated by everyday behavior, and under the influence of rhythms, they “forget” their normal, daily selves. The chorus demonstrates the process of “opening” the self to another personality, space, and to the sacred.

This kind of transporting role of dance exists in other cultures as well. In some traditions, dance permitted people to calm the dead or restore the cosmogony. Native Americans would dance after killing buffaloes in order to ask their forgiveness and to give them life again. In the Japanese mythology, the dance of the goddess Uzume prevented the eclipse of the sun and placated the possible rage of dead spirits.

It is only in the IV century B.C. that the poet Thespis innovated the tragic representations by introducing a person who answered to the chorus. This person (the ancestor of the hero) was identifiable as separate from the chorus because he had a white face covered with plaster which was an expedient used outside theater representations to evoke the spirits of dead. Roberto Tessari quoting Kerényi defines hypocrite, “hypokrisis”, which is understood as an actor, or a person pretending to be someone else, as the emergence of a truth coming from the depth. That would mean the person is answering to the chorus under the inspiration of something superior.

Aristophanes in his play “The Frogs” made Euripides mock Aeschylus for being awkwardly archaic and unrefined:

EURIPIDES

(...) He'd bring some single mourner on, seated and veiled,
'twould be
Achilles, say, or Niobe
-the face you could not see-
An empty show of tragic woe, who uttered not one thing.
(...) Then in the Chorus came, and rattled off a string four
continuous lyric odes: the mourner never stirred.
(...) That was his quackery, don't you see, to set the audience
guessing
When Niobe would speak; meanwhile, the drama was
progressing.
(...) So when he had humbugged thus awhile, and now his
wretched play
Was halfway through, a dozen words, great wild-bull words,
he'd say,
Fierce Bugaboos, with bristling crests, and shaggy eyebrows
too,
Which not a soul could understand.

This description of the central character with a covered face and grumbling incomprehensible words seems to confirm the idea of the spirit of a dead person emerging from the chorus.

Ismail Kadare, a contemporary Albanian writer, compared Aeschylus' Greek tragedies with tribal traditions of his native country. He explains that in response to the successive domination of the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire and then the oppressive Communist regime, the indigenous population retrenched itself behind strong communal tribal laws--the same laws which can be found in the Greek tragedies. Kadare writes that it is as though time never passed in Albania. In fact, in Greek tragedy old "laws" are debated and compared with the change of time and the appearance of new laws brought in by the cities. But history never allowed the Albanian population to have such debate and evolution. So, if the organization of Albanian society is like that in which Greek tragedy was born, Kadare conjectures that by observing his native traditions he can find which ritual could have generated tragedy; and he sees its source in the funeral. In the ritual of the funeral, a group of women have the burden to cry and lament the

person's death. Such lamentations create a boundary around the dead and define the sacred space of the ceremony; they create an invisible wall between the secular space and the transcendental space where the person whose spirit is reaching the realm of the dead resides. Kadare concludes the transition to tragedy would be the return of the dead.

Nietzsche, who refers to Schiller, emphasizes the role of the chorus as a line of demarcation. The chorus of the Greek tragedy is a moving wall which defines the space of the tragic representation. The language, the poetry of tragedy, is different from the language of everyday life and it serves to mark clearly the space of tragedy. Moreover, in the Athenian theater the audience almost encircled the stage reinforcing the boundary around the tragic space of the performance. However, even though the audience can be a cocoon for the tragic performance, it is the chorus that has to keep the active role of division in order to protect and allow the emblematic figure of the hero (who was originally a revenant or a ghost) to undergo through the fate and sacrifice him/herself for the wealth of the community. Thus, only if the separation is clear is it possible to create a particular place in contact with a transcendental principle.

Commedia dell'Arte: carnival and masks

In his study of Francois Rabelais' work, Mikhail Bakhtin examined the popular culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and found an incredible tension between the official culture and the popular culture of that time. The official, serious and austere culture represented and justified the oppressive hierarchy of society in which kings rule, with the complicity of the church, over a subjugated population. But these rulers, aware of the danger of enforcing a continual submission, allowed certain activities to take place in which the roles of the rulers and the oppressed were reversed for short period of time—carnival time. During carnival, the rulers disappeared and the fools or other people at the bottom of the social ladder became kings. In the explosive festivity of carnival,

the folk were temporarily liberated. Carnival became a moment of abolition of distinctions and a time for rejecting a severe God. Everything could be mocked, and through the laughter all boundaries were abolished, creating the sense of an utopian equality. Furthermore, flesh and all the body parts, especially the reproductive ones, were celebrated and exposed. The obscene aspect of the feast was an echo of ancient pagan rituals of fertility that the Christian church had been unable to suppress or eradicate. Through this exuberance of food, flesh and life, all fears of illness, aridity, misery and death were overcome. Death and Devils, the menacing guardians of the underworld, participated in the carnival and they were fellows of mockery and tricks. During this exulting moment, a transcendental moment of joy, the society could express what was repressed and so could regenerate itself, while still letting the official order reestablish itself at the end of it.

Among the different figures of the carnival, the jesters and the Commedia dell'Arte characters were the preeminent representatives of it. The jester or the fool, who is both at the bottom of the social ladder and outside the social order altogether, can observe the ridiculous struggles for success, and can see how human beings lose their humanity while attempting to climb the ladder. Being at the bottom, the fool is not afraid of losing anything, so he or she can say the truth. In that way, the fool is the ultimate human being, the most truthful and human. And so, carnival is an explosive outpouring of humanity. During carnival the shield of social conventions is torn off, people shed their fear and can be what they always wished to be.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the fool is very explicit toward the king (I,4):

KING LEAR

Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL

**All thy other titles thou hast given away; that
thou wast born with.**

(...)

**Prithee, nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach
thy fool to lie: I would fain learn to lie.**

As I said previously, often the opposites are interconnected and they belong to the same whole. It seems surprising that kings and fools would go hand by hand, but not.

For instance, in the Swiss village of Einsiedeln during the Monday that precedes Ash Wednesday, a striking procession takes place led by a chorus of masked creatures who are half ironsmith and half devil-goat. This composite figure is puzzling; the body wears the garb of an ironsmith (who in the past was the keeper of the fire while the rest of the villagers were in the fields) while the head sports a devilish mask resembling a goat with its tongue hanging out. This archetype of a divine creature showing its tongue appears in many culture around the world and there are various interpretations of its symbolism. Some say that it is meant to be frightening. Levi-Strauss said it signifies the kiss of knowledge, meaning that through the tongue the wisdom of the wilderness realm is tasted.

These menacing creatures don't restrict themselves to scaring the public. Behind them follows a chorus of cow bell holders walking in unison and creating a boisterous ringing noise. Then, closing the procession, a disorganized group of jesters mock the parade and the public. After the sublime, the disrespectful diverts those present. They divert in two senses of the word: they amuse and disconcert. The function of these jesters is the same as that of trickster divinities--to disorient human beings. And paradoxically the disrespectful element is still part of the "serious" sacred activity; it is not a humorous appendix that closes the event. An image of a god, or its embodiment in signs, can attract the intense attention of the believer, who could confuse the illusory image of the divinity with the true divinity, and consider the image (the representation of it and thus the illusion of it) as real. The truth and the sacred reside behind the veil of illusionary reality. The tricksters and jesters, by disorienting us, allow us to see through the veil of illusion and remind us that what is really important is not tangible.

In some ways, *Commedia dell'Arte* functioned like the jester. It combined a pitiless derision of society with the popular culture's celebration of the body and used humor to express what normally was not allowed to be said. The origin of *Commedia dell'Arte* is not clear. The first contract proving the existence of a *Commedia dell'Arte* company dates back to 1545, but it is impossible to find what

generated this theater style. It is a fusion of elements from Sacred Representations, Latin comedy, minstrels, acrobats, storytellers, etc.. Eugenio Barba defines Commedia dell'Arte as a gathering of liminal artists, people considered parasites and not recognized at all, who combined their different skills and created this impressive theater style which permitted them to survive and eventually to become a central axle of culture.

Over time, in the practice of Commedia dell'Arte a cast of emblematic or stock characters emerged to represent certain human types. They portray deliciously the miseries of the old greedy rich (Pantalone), the ignorant pedant (Dottore), the bombastic and coward liar (Capitano), the naïve lovers (Gli Innamorati) and the stupid servant (Zanni).

Of all the characters of the Commedia dell'Arte, Arlecchino is the most emblematic one, though he was not present at the beginning of the Commedia dell'Arte. He probably first appeared in Paris in 1585 where the Italian actor, Tristano Martinelli, created this character, defining him as leader of the comedians. It is assumed that Arlecchino is a cross between a servant (Zanni) and a supernatural figure. The name Arlecchino may come from the French devil, Hellequin, or from the legendary man called Arlech who lived in a wood in the south of France or from the Nordic devil Hellking. In addition, the red pimple on the front of his mask could be the remnants of a horn, or as some assert, an atavistic third eye belonging to a divinity. In any case, all the speculations point to the notion that Arlecchino doesn't belong to society-- he is an outsider, a demon, a divinity or both. In the hierarchy of Commedia, he is placed at the bottom, as a servant, but it does not bother him since he doesn't respect anything or anybody. This allows him to do and say anything, even pee and defecate on stage. He was totally obscene ("ob"- "scene", going in the opposite direction of the stage), meaning bringing on stage what is not performable. Later on, this wild creature was tamed and became inoffensive. Goldoni "killed" him definitively by erasing his disturbing attitude and keeping only the comical aspect.

An essential element of the Commedia dell'Arte is the mask, with each stock character wearing a different mask, particular to and identifying his or her character. This expedient may be a heritage from the Latin comedy, the Fabule

Atellane, which relied on typological masks to visually define the characters. The Commedia performances took place in the open markets, where the actors had to compete with surrounding noise. Moreover in Italy, at that time, each region, and even each town, had a different dialect. It would have been difficult for the travelling companies to learn the language of each town were they stopped, so the actors had to find a visual way to convey the story. The mask with its feature, which codifies the movements of the actor, was an expedient that allowed the audience to immediately recognize each character. The shape of the mask, which models also the actor's bodily posture and voice, isn't fortuitous but reveals physically the inner psychology of the character. By covering the face of the actor, the mask paradoxically reveals the concealed nature of the character. But I don't think that this practical motive explains completely the mysterious reason for the use of masks in the Commedia dell'Arte. We may have more chance to find an illumination in the ctonic world.

The Commedia dell'Arte is debtor also to Sacred Representations where the only masked character was the Devil. In this context the mask was an artifice to materialize what was intangible for humans: the divine entity. Through the mask a person could establish a contact with supernatural forces belonging to the realm sky or to the underworld. The mask is a opening between this world and the other world, between real and unreal, between life and death. Masks were used to cover the face of the dead, and they were also used to recall the dead or to call the spirit of the dead. For example, in Basel, Switzerland, the masks used during the carnival are named "Larven", larva, meaning a disembodied spirit, a ghost.

Furthermore, the "devils" were sacred guardians of the ctonic world, the realm of the dead, who, by lying in the earth, could interfere positively or negatively with the regeneration of nature. These guardians were thus invoked during carnival to grant fertility for the year. Later Christianity, in its attempt to modify pagan cosmogony to fit its constructs, changed them to the Devil and the underworld to Hell. In that light the Commedia dell'Arte is a troupe of devilish characters mocking, criticizing and thus regenerating, human behaviors.

The mask requires a particular kind of acting; in fact, the actor has to abnegate him/herself and let the mask “speak” through him/her. The mask carries a supernatural quality and the actor is the channel of its expression. If the actor is really connected with the mask, he/she can feel the strong excitement and effervescent energy that acting with the mask can provide. It is a state close to delirium or trance. In fact, the mask, if it is correctly used, opens a transcendental connection.

Conclusion: A creative theater seeking mystery

Tadeusz Kantor asserts that theater uncovers the passage from the “other side” to our life, and that in front of the audience, the actor assumes the condition of the dead.

He postulates that some theatrical styles draw from events that surpass the human, resulting in an uncanny complicity between theater and the realm of death. It was as if theater sprang from the necessity to question life by invoking other worlds which in turn become mirrors helping us to better understand who are we and the mystery of life and death. Hamlet is the paramount example of this process. The appearance of the spirit of his father at the opening disconcerts Hamlet, who afterward questions himself and ponders about life. This father-Hamlet relationship is a transposition of the theater-audience relationship, where the spirit of the father is the hero (a revenant for Greek tragedy, a demon for Commedia dell’Arte, a shaman for folktales) and Hamlet is the audience.

In the passage from ritual to theater the mysterious transcendental principle becomes weaker. In the ritual the connection with other spaces (and the perpetuation of that connection) is assured by the group and by the ritual itself, while in theater it is only the actors who are responsible for keeping alive this connection. But without this transcendental principle, theater is devoid of its unfathomable impact on us, generating only flat and insipid performances that, instead of leading us creatively to other worlds, to other visions, to magic mirrors of ourselves, leave us stranded, passively, in a trivial existence.

I'm not proposing the reintroduction of religious practices or shamanistic trance in theater, but rather advocating to infuse the theater with a creative vitality instead of imitating everyday reality on stage. My interest in exploring these other traditions come from a desire to show the invisible which is behind the reality and to act out what is not known, letting the imagination of the audience fly with this foolhardy attempt to express what goes beyond us.

In the beginning of this paper I was wondering if theatricalized rituals, and by extent, theater should be considered as fake experiences of the truth, not the "truthful" truth of the sacred but a lie of the truth. I would like to answer by telling an Indian folktale.

A man wanted to find the Truth, so he started searching for it. After years and years of wandering, he finally reached a cavern where the Truth was hidden. He entered and he saw the naked back of a voluptuous young woman. The man asked: "Are you the Truth?" "Yes" answered the woman without turning her head. "For a long time I have wished to talk to you. Tell me what should I say to the my fellow humans!" The woman turned her head revealing an ugly, old deformed face and she said: "Tell them that I am beautiful!"

Truth and lie are interconnected, and only the Truth would have been unbearable for humans. In this case, the lie becomes also an experience of truth, like theater can also be an experience of the sacred mystery of life and death.

Davide Giovanzana
Helsinki, September 2004

Bibliography

Bakhtine, Mikhaïl, *L'oeuvre de Francois Rabelais*, Gallimard, 1970.

Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Princeton, 1949.

- Eliade, Mircea, *Le sacré et le profane*, Gallimard, 1965.
- Halifax, Joan, *Shaman, the wounded healer*, Crossroad, 1982.
- Kadaré, Ismail, *Eschyle ou le grand perdant*, Fayard, 1988.
- Nietzsche, Friederich, *The Birth of Tragedy*, The Modern Library, 1927.
- Sartori, Donato, *Le maschere nell'antichità*, Villa Pacchiani, 2003
- Schechner, Richard, *Performance theory*, Routledge, 1988.
- Tessari, Roberto, *Teatro e Antropologia*, Carocci, 2004.