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ANGELANIMAL LOST TECHNIQUES FOR THE SPECTATOR

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How many sensations make up anguish? To give me courage, I try to map them out while the pickup advances in a weary hiccup of jolts and braking. The streets are a carpet of holes and puddles, wrapped in the stench from the open sewers, and above all darkness. The city seems boundless, without illumination, no lamp-posts, bright shop windows or glowing neon signs. Anxiety seizes me: insecurity, a desire to be elsewhere, to recognise something which might reassure me. A thick black fog: this is Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, after sunset. Feeble lights allow me to imagine windows and buildings. I glimpse the passers-by as threatening shadows, ready to attack me. A bright flash escapes from a shack, a group of people moves among candles and friendly electric light bulbs. "A house of saints" the driver informs me, a veneration place for Voodoo *loas*.

What sort of details do we need to identify us with a situation from the past? The darkness of Port-au-Prince lets my senses bring back to life theatre from the time of *Commedia dell'Arte*: an excess of lights in a murky world, like a church or an aristocratic house. The spectators moved through dark streets, through the dust, the stagnant water, the mud, the stench of excrement and litter and the fear of ambushing thugs. They reached the trembling brightness of hundreds of candles that united both rich and poor, infused an elementary sensual pleasure, tearing them away from the grayness and inducing the collapse of norms.

I have also lived a similar situation as a spectator: a feeling of comfort, vitality, well-being. I momentarily forgot the terror that accompanied me: the presence of cancer, like a shadow, following the footsteps of a beloved person. Bewildered, I observe a photo that Taiwan's director Stan Lai shows me: the crowded hall of the National Theatre of Taipei, more than a thousand spectators, each with a protective white mask on their face. It is 2002, at the height of the SARS epidemic, when the whole social life of Taipei is crippled and people avoid taking public transport, cinemas are closed and restaurants empty. Yet his Performance Workshop's show overcomes the fear of contagion, and people crowd to watch it. What is the appeal or the peremptoriness of this performance that makes the spectators forget their survival instinct?

It is impossible not to think about the endemic plague and its daily victims at the time of the professional theatre's birth in Europe. In Elisabethan London, when the number of deaths from epidemics was more than twenty-five a week, the authorities closed the theatres for weeks and months. Epidemics, together with bigots, were the theatre's enemies. It was the plague that closed Shakespeare's theatre in 1593 and obliged him to earn his bread writing the poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* dedicated to the Duke of Southampton.

Once I felt as if I was back in the past as a spectator in the 16th century. I sat amongst an audience which enjoyed the endless waiting for the performance to begin. People chatted, shouted witticisms to far seated friends, moved from one side to the other of the room. It was a social kaleidoscope: men and women of all ages and social backgrounds, gangs of youngsters and families with children and infants who slept or cried in their mothers' or sisters' arms. Crowds of boys competed in selling ice cream, soft drinks, seeds and peanuts, photos of actors and above all actresses. I was immersed in an atmosphere of constant chitchat. Suddenly music invaded the space, and half a dozen blond girls, in tight sparkling costumes began a provocative dance. (They come from the ex-Soviet republics - my accompanying Egyptian friend tells me - they have studied classical ballet in Russia, Ukraine, Bielorussia, and are kept by whoever can afford it). This sexy ballet

was interrupted by the protagonists' entrance. The play, crammed with allusions to political and current events, was regularly interrupted by the girls' dance in new and more titillating costumes. The scenes referred to contemporary facts, yet always in an elusive way: satire and indirect criticism (a corrupt police officer who, in the end, was punished), solidarity with their Arabic brothers (an actor waves a Palestinian flag to the delight of the audience), a good dose of nationalism (we stem from the Pharaohs and we will relive their greatness, shouts a character from the top of a pyramid) and the grand finale with the ballerinas scurrying about among heroes and villains.

The actors were frequently interrupted by comments from the audience. A spectator shouted a remark, the actor replied, and their impromptu dialogue could become part of the performance amid cackles of laughter. I was in a popular theatre of Cairo, light years away from the artistic experiments of Egyptian independent theatre groups. Here the Islamic University of El Azhar keeps a watchful eye on the whole country. It is the highest religious authority and, in the Muslim world, weighs up the least deviation from orthodoxy with inflexible judgment. Here the state censorship is officially called "artists' protection" and is intended to safeguard them from theological hurricanes.

I recognise in this situation a DNA component of the theatre from the past, today irremediably lost. I would like to make manifest this component, recreate it and describe it objectively without referring to personal anecdotes. I am aware in advance that my description will seem a stereotype or a fiction. Yet I want to try.

In the beginning were hunger and fear.

Those people who sold performances in the first hundred years of modern European theatre - the epoch of Shakespeare, Calderón, Lope de Vega and Marlowe, Molière and Commedia dell'Arte - literally risked starvation if their products did not attract paying spectators. Indigence was lurking if they didn't arouse an attachment and a dependence able to oppose the mark of infamy that the rigid conventions of the epoch, the laws against vagabondage and the clergies of different Christian sects impressed on the commerce of the stage.

It was an epoch of violence and suspicion, intolerance and shortage of resources. The authorities investigated the citizens' moral conduct, servants who ran away from their masters were imprisoned, wives accused of unfaithfulness were punished publicly. The material insecurity, the uncertainty of the future and the harsh relationships between gentry and servants marked the bodies which were often deformed by illness, and the souls crippled by vice. Noblemen and plebeians were decimated by pestilences and wars, terrified by sin and the threat of Heaven's justice. Life's load, like the force of gravity, crushed them. Only their dreams remained aloft.

In the beginning were hunger and fear, but also religious faith - the reason that goes beyond sheer survival. Faith gave comfort and aroused terror. Faith was armed yet welcoming, answering outrage with torture which, for the victim, often represented the glory of martyrdom. Wars were wrapped in religious cloaks. The internal wars among the intransigent Christian factions reproduced in Europe the clash between Christianity, Islam and paganism all over the planet. Within the single individual, equivalent struggles opposed the hope of Salvation to the terror of Damnation.

At that time, theatre was the celebration of perturbation and excitement. The actors addressed the animal and the angel in the spectators, goading that part of their reptilian brain in which the instincts of hunger, fear, sexuality and

faith nestle. Those who made performances that had to be sold, exploited the shiver of horror interwoven with the quiver of transgression and outrageous enjoyment, alternating scenes of humor and horror, religious exaltation and disorderly love, vulgarity and honour, betrayal and madness, infernal apparitions and celestial epiphanies.

The stages were full of trapdoors and their false skies were packed with machinery. From below, demons, corpses and ghosts ascended; from above, angels and gods descended. The damned

sank, the saved flew away. The spiritual dimension became an attraction on the stage and was embodied in daily experiences: prayer and blasphemy, the rigid orthodoxy of faith and the fury of heresy. Simulation and dissimulation were in equal measure in the chronicles and in the theatres: machiavellism, guilty and murdered loves, Jews dressed as Christians, heretics disguised as conformists, pious yet depraved believers, heroic and holy devotion. The rise and fall of kings and queens fired the people's imagination, both in the theatre of history and in the stories of the theatres. The burning of witches and executions were popular spectacles.

Theatre entertained the spectators' passions and instinctive impulses titillating repressed desires, illusions, anxieties and superstitions.

From those times and from those distant theatres a few imposing ruins have stranded on our beaches. Three figures, above all, were able to travel through time: Prince Hamlet, the aristocratic Don Juan and Doctor Faust. And Harlequin, who is just a mask. We visit these ruins - and many others - with respect and admiration. We bring them to life on our stages. We give them back words and actions. Historians, artists and scientists devote a large part of their life and dreams to them. They scrutinise these ruins, dissect and interpret them, make them topical or try to penetrate their past. But in front of these ruins, the nerves of the animal and the fervour of the angel are not longer affected by alarm or pleasure. The spectator's soul does not take flight, nor is it perturbed. Angelanimal sleeps.

Angelanimal is the name of a spectator. Or better, my way of naming a facet of the complex set of intellectual, emotional, critical, rational and instinctive reactions that compose the collective noun "spectator". It is the name that I give to the animal hiding in the depth of my brain as well as to the indissoluble angel that hovers as a shadow in the empty space above or under it. People of science could perhaps attribute to Angelanimal a precise abode in the macrocosm of our skull, between the reptilian and the limbic brain. I am not, however, a man of science, just an artisan, and Angelanimal interests me as an artisan.

Its name may appear strange, but it is not difficult to recognize it in its simplicity. It reacts, in spite of ourselves, for example, when we lean out in the void from a safe place, but at a great height. We feel a sudden knot in our belly. Not thoughts but nerves. Not consciousness but instinct. At the same time, wings of black crows flutter in our heads, flashes of dreams that we don't recognise, fantasies of suicide, unreasonable anxieties and appalling impulses: a small jump would be enough, a short endless apnea and we would be no more. Normally we do not allow these fleeting moments to emerge into our consciousness. But our Angelanimal, in those instants, awakes. In theatre, hardly ever.

We call them "states of mind". We could also say "states of body". Such primordial body-mind states are essential to provide *the experience of an experience* in theatre. Without them, a performance remains for me an embroidery of disembodied intelligence. These primordial states don't constitute the highest values in theatre, they are the ground from which these values grow and from which they branch out. If Angelanimal doesn't wake up, the most refined performance gives me the impression of a beautiful, intelligent child with feet of sand.

It happens that the spectators, in their appreciation and memories, may neglect these *primordial body-mind states*. But as a theatre craftsman, I don't want to ignore them. I want to care not only about the performance's aesthetical density and cultural finality, but also about the foundations of its organic nature.

Laughter, eroticism and fear have for centuries been the elementary ingredients of theatre spectacles, both of the many coarse and vulgar ones, as well as of the few that are spiritually sharp. Today it seems that the theatre can do without elementary ingredients, like an idealised body deprived of its genitalia. Like a body censored by the intelligence or the intelligentsia. It seems that the task to awaken Angelanimal once again - our shadow with wings but also with four legs - has

been delegated to other types of performance. The theatre has become purified. It has become a disinfected niche, intelligent and cultivated, even when it exhibits naked bodies and simulates copulation. I wonder: why, today, is theatre only intelligent? Why only cultured? Is a brain consisting of only the cortex still a brain or is it merely a monstrosity?

The shadow has wings. These are not presentable or decent: they have to do with animality. But they are nevertheless wings. Meyerhold affirmed that an actor is a bird which touches the sky with one wing and the earth with the other. It is up to me to find in my own work what he meant by this, and to coin my own words to explain it to myself.

For me, the director's craft sinks its roots in the desire to give a nervous system and a body-in-life to a reality which is not perceptible. One of the functions of this craftsmanship consists also in the ability to locate the different natures of the spectator, to know how to bring about a mutual dialogue between these natures, safeguarding their coarser sides and guaranteeing their autonomy and dignity. It is easy to react against a performance that privileges vulgarity. It is more difficult to admit how inert a performance is which aims only at the high levels of the intelligence and intellectual enjoyment.

We say "spectator" and we think of a unitary personality. It is not so: the spectator is always plural.

When I think about myself as a spectator, I recognise the simultaneous presence of many voices speaking in unison, some domineering, others for the most part silenced, buried under my cultural prejudices. The latter are the coarsest, but they too have their own wisdom.

A theatre performance speaks to the imagination and wit. Herein lies its value. It is true and it is not true. A performance should also speak to stupidity, to childish amazement, to a simple sensuality that appeals to our instincts, and to our impulse to raise one wing towards the sky, while the feathers of the other scratch ignoble graffiti on the dusty earth.

Ideally, it is as if four spectators were present at each of my performances. I have to convince and please each of them. I have written about them in an attempt to distinguish between them. They are four personifications of different tendencies of the senses and consciousness:

1) the child who perceives the actor's actions literally and is not seduced by abstractions, hidden meanings, metaphors and interpretative innovations. If Hamlet recites "to be or not to be", this child - aware only of the literality of the actions and not of the value of literature - sees only a man speaking alone at length without doing anything interesting;

2) the spectator who understands that s/he is not understanding, who does not share our language or our codes, but who, unwittingly, dances, infected by the actors' organic actions, by their stage presence and the pre-expressive glow of the performance. Even if this spectator doesn't grasp what the plot is about, s/he realises that the work is "well done", carefully detailed, sensing that the performance is saying something, although s/he doesn't know what;

3) the spectator who is the alter ego of the director and of each actor. This spectator is capable of recognizing in every detail a fragment of history brought to life. S/he is aware of the contents of the performance, of the meanings and the associations aroused by words and actions. Returning every evening, s/he sees the same performance as if it were new, as if the well known situations were unknown, pregnant with unforeseen questions and unexpected enigmas;

4) the fourth spectator, mute, invisible and omniscient, laughs silently at the Maya veil of the performance. S/he notices that which no eye can see: what the actor does with the left hand while the other spectators see only the right hand. This spectator judges the actor's commitment hidden in the performance's folds and penetrates its secrets, as if every thing and every body were limpid glass.

I could add other spectators: the blind one, for whom I have to make the whole performance visible through his/her ears. Or the deaf spectator who should be able to hear with his/her eyes. Or one of the so-called "wild men" from the tribe which was discovered about fifty years ago in New Guinea. Watching my performance, this "wild man" should be convinced that what he is seeing

corresponds to the actions that he too accomplishes with his people, when they gather in one of those ceremonies set in an extra-daily space/time. All these spectators fill my artisan's imagination, steer it and keep it in check.

But Angelanimal is different. I was forced to think about it by three ancient yet familiar figures still anchored to our theatres: Hamlet, Faust and Don Juan. In recent years, the never accidental accidents of the profession forced me to confront them. I had always avoided them. Now they take revenge and smile. But they tell me nothing.

There has been a time in which Angelanimal awoke because of their stories, when it saw, among the deep shades of the graves, a funeral monument which nodded, spoke and accepted an invitation to supper on the edge of Hell. Or when on a castle's ramparts, against an icy sky, it imagined a ghost rising from the sea, a restless soul, who had died without having time to repent and be absolved from his sins. Or when it contemplated the way in which a wise old man closed his countless books, cut a vein in his wrist making the blood squirt and dipped his pen to sign the contract to sell his soul to a pleasing and slimy devil.

The moving statue, the hell, the devil and the ghost that accompany Don Juan, Faust and Hamlet, move our intellect and lend themselves to intelligent interpretations and topical representations. Modernity has left their greatness intact. It has only castrated it. They don't frighten us anymore. I speak of the primordial unintelligent fear which collides with a darkness that cannot be pierced. They no longer terrify the animal which hides in the depths of my brain, or the angel that, as a shadow, hovers in the empty spaces above or under it.

There has been a time in which the notion of sin, of judgment after death, of punishment in hell, of restless souls startled Angelanimal in the spectators' heart and guts, arousing the trepidation of danger, outrage and blasphemy. Today nobody believes *physically* in all of this, not even those who believe in it *spiritually*. It is not an ideological and philosophical problem, nor one of cultural anthropology. For me it is a dilemma of the craft.

I imagine that Jean Genet alluded to these theatrical primordial elements, when he said, with words that I summarise here: Start by building theatres in your cemeteries. Just imagine what it would be to go out, at night, from a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, among the small lights and the silence of the graves.

Once Don Juan provoked laughter and repugnance, stirred up perverse fantasies and aroused trepidation when a Man of Stone pushed him into the abyss reducing him to a lump of endless pain, after so much craving for joy. The Man of Stone could be a clumsy statue or an actor whose face was made up with white lead, but the just and omniscient power of Heaven seemed to implode in them. Faked fire, false thunder, pretended despair: but Angelanimal recognised to what all those pretenses alluded. Something pulled on the nerves. A black wing disturbed the safety of the thoughts.

Today those pretenses have become precious aesthetical forms and admirable conceptual interpretations.

I don't believe in the mystery of the statue or in the devil. Hell is in the world that I know, not in the Beyond. It is not a mystery, it is history. Ghosts don't frighten me, I often speak of them and they are useful metaphorical tools. I like to imagine them and I am not afraid to meet them on my road.

I don't believe in them and I know that my spectators don't believe either. We are too shrewd to allow ourselves to be perturbed by these sumptuous ruins from the past. Our present day theatre has become so intelligent and cultured that it prevents Angelanimal from awakening.

But if I make theatre, it is also to feed Angelanimal and give free play to Disorder, to the irruption of a bewildering energy in the orderly cultural banquet. Perhaps, if for a short while, the whole performance cracked, lost control, its balance and its head, then Angelanimal would find the space to get up on its legs and stretch its wings.

I don't make theatre to provoke the spectators. I hope myself to be provoked by my work, like the carpenter Geppetto, Pinocchio's "father", who becomes aware that the wood he carved into a puppet is answering him and he feels scrutinised by eyes that he has sculpted.

In theatre, I have always confronted stories and figures who asked questions which were essential to me and for which I had no answers. I could only venture among them, trying to open a path. In recent years I have been pushed toward classical monuments which I admire but which don't threaten me.

Obsessively I ask these monuments the childish, yet for me substantial question that has accompanied me along all of my theatrical experience: what have you to tell me? They don't want to tell me anything, just beautiful and intelligent interpretations. Nothing more.

I wonder if Hamlet, Don Juan and Faust whom I continually meet on my professional path - and whom I have so often avoided - are simply noble literary ruins of a defunct theatre, invulnerable and incapable of hurting. Or if they embody the conquest of the useless, which is theatre.

But their monumental stability suggests a collapse.

I know that I must build structures, conventions and walls around them without giving up. I must patiently await the irruption of Disorder, of a sudden force that will topple these three great figures, twisting their stories which have so often been seen and anticipated, thus distorting the landscape where the spectators and I know how to find our bearings.

That which collapses doesn't ask questions. We ask ourselves questions, awoken by our wordless fear.

Angelman is silent. It is waiting for Disorder.

Translation: Judy Barba