

**Eugenio Barba**

## **FAME AND HUNGER**

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I don't remember where I heard it for the first time - the anecdote of the two worn-out actors, yet not satiated by their craft. They were coming out of the theatre where they had just performed, commenting on the show, the reactions of the audience and the duration of the applause. They grumbled about the drawbacks of their work. "Every evening - one said - I am gripped by the fear that my voice will abandon me. I am there, in front of the public, I open my mouth and nothing comes out, not a sound. A nightmare. It's an awful job, ours". "What is indeed awful - replied the other - is to be a king and nobleman on the stage every evening, and then go home and not have a bite to eat."

The dream of enjoying fame and the need to escape poverty: for centuries the life of the theatre has flowed between these two banks, receiving energy and solidity from both.

Fame? Hunger?

The two banks are not an alternative. Opposite, yet substantially identical, the one is complementary to the other.

Therefore Georg Büchner decided in 1836 to start his comedy *Leonce and Lena* with a rapid preamble in Italian. In his mother tongue, *ruf* and *hunger* were words that could not be confused, each firm in its conceptual difference. The same with the English *fame* and *hunger*; the French *renommée* and *faim*, the Spanish *fama* and *hambre*. Instead, the two words *fama* and *fame*, as well as distinguishing themselves by their meaning, also overlap each other in their form. They point out rather different things but can be confused by their sound, and only the final vowel differentiates them. The Italian language reveals that opposites can in this case encounter, intertwine, separate and reflect each other in an endless game as when, in thrilling comedies, twins meet and recognise each other, not knowing whether it is reality or illusion.

Just before his play starts, when the curtain has not yet revealed the garden and the bench on which prince Leonce is stretched out in existential boredom, Büchner imagined two brief cues in Italian flying over the heads of the spectators, like two disconnected notes opening a symphony:

- *E la fama?*

- *E la fame?*

Two isolated questions as two obvious observations or the opening of a conflict. Büchner had thought that the voices of two famous playwrights should pronounce these cues:

Vittorio Alfieri and Carlo Gozzi. The first had given Tragedy to Italy; the second had lavished on Europe the buffo enchantment of his theatre Fables, populated by the masks of Commedia dell'Arte. Büchner's materialistic and revolutionary taste was not for the Italian *teatro buffo*. He was probably attracted by the opposition that the Italian language allowed through two words which could be confused because of their sound. *Hunger* was a central concept for Büchner, not only for the arts, but also for the spirit of revolt. During the months when he was writing *Leonce and Lena* he affirmed in a letter to a friend that hunger was the only revolutionary element in the society of his time. Hunger was a real *goddess of freedom*.

Perhaps, only when translated into Rumanian, the opposition and the complementarity between fame and hunger can achieve an effect similar to that of Italian:

- *Și faima?*

- *Și foamea?*

According to Büchner's indications, these two words were to be pronounced loudly as the rest of a prologue which didn't concern the play's plot, but its metaphysics where the material and the immaterial blend. Readers and critics find it difficult to imagine how the author intended to stage this diminutive dialogue exempted from its duty to dialogue: just two questions, without any link to a premise or a conclusion.

As a playwright, Georg Büchner could concoct what he wanted: there was no risk of his play reaching the stage. He wrote it for money in 1836, in the hope of winning the prize in a contest to which his manuscript was not even admitted since it was sent in too late. Subsequently, neither he nor anyone else considered staging *Leonce and Lena*. Rebels performed it in Munich sixty years later. It happened in 1895 at the Intimes Theater of Max Halbe, a main exponent of naturalism, associated with Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne and inspired by André Antoine's Théâtre Libre. The director, Ernst von Wolzogen, was in no doubt and eliminated the microscopic dispute of the preamble. The two questions remained suspended, like two isolated tolls of a submerged bell.

For theatre professionals, the struggle against hunger - the need to sell the fleeting products of their craftsmanship - is the other face of the search for both fame and artistic excellence. Fame and artistic excellence are both remunerative elements in show business. At the same time these qualities are seriously threatened by the market's own laws. Not only by the compromises imposed by the purchase/sale, but above all by the mighty subterranean power of a primordial economic law: the *law* in which the bad coin almost always succeeds in permanently eliminating the good one. Gold and silver keep on imposing themselves on our memory and imagination rather than copper and pinchbeck coins. But in market practices, the latter dominates. In the context of an artistic commerce based on ephemeral products, this law turns nourishment into poison and poison into nourishment. In spite of theatre people's wishful thinking, the search for good quality and that for good commerce are closely linked yet in total contrast, locked in a struggle that allows neither victory nor defeat, like that of Jacob and the angel.

The double supremacy of the "bad" yet rapidly circulating coin, and of the "good" coin tenaciously rooted in the spectators' memory, corresponds to what distinguishes *celebrity*

from *greatness* in a person. But we should not consider this antagonism from a moralistic point of view, as if on one side there was the “evil” of fashion and the market, and on the other the “good” of art. It is a complementary opposition as that of the two sisters in the Bible, Martha and Mary, the one attracted by the essential, the other hard-working and carrying out useful yet apparently insignificant activities. Each of the two sisters reproached the other, but without the other they could not exist.

The two sisters’ collaboration full of tension and attrition functions as a basic rhythm for the theatre understood as Art and Craft. It is a struggle that resembles a dance in which the opposites detach from and cling to each other. As the French alexandrine verse creates the substratum of plays as different as those of Racine and Molière, so the rhythm *hunger/fame* doesn’t permit the definitive choice of one or the other road. These are questioning thorny roads that cause a continuous jumping from one to the other, from an impassioned embrace to a deadly blow. A succession of waves on which we have to know how to sail, riding both their complementarity and their radical opposition. Knowing how to ride them is also an art like that of navigation: an art that invents routes not forms.

Fame? Hunger? These two questions representing two different obsessions seem to indicate an alternative. But this is not true. They imply two different actions: something to *escape from* and something to *aspire to*. The well-off artists and aristocrats of the past centuries aspired to literary and scientific fame as their ancestors aspired to the glory of weapons. In the same years, actors often told how their work was crucial for them to escape hunger, poverty, exploitation and humiliation. They suggested all this with funny and exotic scenes and anecdotes which entertained the spectators, because the poor and the hungry always appear exotic for the well-off with a full stomach, both the poor who live across the sea or those in the same city. The actors were used to ridiculing the difficulties and the shame from which they escaped or tried to escape through their job. The hunger which for Büchner was a *goddess of freedom* and the people’s guide to revolution as in the painting of Delacroix, for them was only a cruel stepmother. In order to free themselves from her claws they mounted the stage to perform a starving Harlequin. As did many poor courageous women who, to avoid a destiny of prostitution, enacted on stage coquettes, procuresses and fatuous or loose women.

Hunger and fame don't point out a dilemma or an alternative. Hunger is the gunpowder. Fame is the point reached by the bullet. In the twentieth century, in the fortunate places where repletion reigned and art was so acknowledged as to become an aim in itself, *hunger* became the name of an inner personal and social need. Artaud even compared this need to the need for bread. In the the sixties, the years of the economic boom and socialist torpor, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski rediscovered their own hunger for theatre as a rejection of the pretences of human behaviour. Preceding them, the young German sculptor Peter Schumann, who experienced art exhibitions as a Vanity Fair, invented a theatre of huge sculptures in movement, devoted to bread and the great myths of rebellion - the Bread and Puppet Theatre.

Fame? Hunger? The two enigmatic questions of that rebellious German playwright who died of typhus at the age of 23, unfold into a series of harmonics: from personal and social ransom, to spiritual hunger; from inner necessity pushing us to do theatre, to the

astuteness indispensable for earning our bread; from the dream of beauty, to rebellion against beauty. In this way, from contrast to contrast, from chord to chord they address each of us, actor or director. These two questions don't resemble the song of a mermaid with a thrilling beginning which ends in folly and death. On the contrary, our awareness of them, when we glimpse them, is a moon on the rim of the horizon.

What attracted me first and then bound me to the theatre? It was not a precocious passion like that which illuminated the adolescence of many actors, directors and spectators whom I have known. The recurrent meanness and decadence of this so-called art don't depress me or arouse my indignation. Towards the powerful theatres capable of success or artistic exploits, I don't nourish the natural jealousies that punctuate true love stories. For the theatre I feel an intellectual curiosity without the complications of love.

What I love with passion and tenderness is a remote islet, sufficiently marginal to allow me freedom. It is a small community with only a few individuals, unconcerned with expansion, governed in its own way and trying to put into practice a few dreams which are considered unrealisable. Besides my own islet, I care for a few others, some fertile, some dusty, with which I feel I share something that I could call the *essential*. Or more simply, a similar past: a path dictated by a mysterious hunger, different for each of us and often difficult to formulate.

.As an adult, when I entered theatre to confront the problems of my condition as an emigrant, I chose the road of a scholastic apprenticeship. I wanted a diploma which could give me the alibi of a professional identity and a status. Almost at once, the circumstances diverted me towards a minority corner. Thus I ended among dissidents and I recognised in them a country.

How come I remained there in that corner of dissident theatre? What bound me to the point of considering abandoning it unthinkable? A certain rebellious spirit, not doubt. But the rebellious spirit alone doesn't last if it doesn't experience rebellion as self-respect and a particular sense of freedom. Nor does the passion last, which comes and goes, and is not the soil in which a centenary oak tree can grow.

Theatre was for me like landing, of necessity rather than choice, on an islet where Nature and even History can at times spin backwards. Events which seem impossible become real. Here the houses have rooms with doors devised as those by Marcel Duchamp, which close when you open them, and in order to open them again you have to start by closing them. Thus they capture you in their game. The desire to understand always becomes a new seduction, and each answer which opens up before you, at the same time shuts you out. The path changes constantly, it unfolds with contrasts, double negations, as if driven by the teeth of a cogwheel: a gear whose aim is not to reach a destination, but to prolong and transmit a motion.

Including my apprenticeship, I bear on my shoulders more than fifty years of theatre craft. The hands which hold the rudder are firm. But unsafe as always are the waters that my companions and I have to cross. Despite the accumulated experience, the realised deed and the many performances, after rejoicing over the successes and deciphering their dangers, I cannot deceive myself that I have overcome the eddies of ignorance. I cannot say that I have

finally found a route whose clear and repeatable trajectory could be transmitted as the map a good path. It would be ideal if this was possible - at least in the fifth act of my career. But the clear line of a path which takes you far doesn't exist.

In the sea, paths are only imaginary. Therefore navigation never ceases to fascinate for its surprises. Yet it doesn't become less dangerous.

The secrets of the craft can be useful stories for those who want to listen to them in an attempt to devise their own teaching, each in his or her own way. But they become like the song of the mermaids if they give the illusion that they are a programme which can be learned and a behaviour which can be reproduced. The lengthy calms and the paralysing waves of *not-knowing-what-to-do* cannot be avoided. In the beginning they intimidated us, threatening to wreck our tiny theatre. Although today my companions and I have less fear, the threat is no less. With time we have discovered that the only way to remain a floating island is to keep on rowing.

However, if you think that my words want to depict a distressing and tormented image of work in the theatre, marked only by sacrifice and tiredness, hazard and anxiety, I beg you to change your mind. When I think about theatre, I speak above all of joy, privileges and freedom. I like to boast that I and my companions from Odin Teatret have conquered our particular *difference* which allows us to be only partly at the mercy of History and its present market.

A privilege - unstable like all privileges. For this privilege, also in the dark, it is an honour not to give up rowing. For fame and with appetite, not forgetting Sisyphus.

Translation from the Italian by Judy Barba