

## Electricity in Hell

*Notes on the work of Romeo Castellucci, and praise for Italy*

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(Footnotes are both in the text and at the end of the article)

*The Greed of Dionysus* was the theme of the 1991 4<sup>th</sup> *Myth and Theatre Festival*, at la Chartreuse de Villeneuve lez Avignon, in Southern France. Its star performance: *Gilgamesh*, by the Italian theatre company *Societas Raffaello Sanzio*. When I first saw this piece in Modena, the previous year, I knew from the very first moments this was *the* performance for Dionysus. It remains the most stunning and radical piece of theatre I have ever seen. Those who were 'greedy' for Dionysus had their fill: everyone at the festival was stunned by this 'epiphany', from archetypalists and mythology specialists to performing artists - most of whom were well acquainted with, or themselves involved in avant-garde theatre. Most had seen, for instance, *La Fura del Baus* drive motorbikes through the audience at full speed, throwing meat and Catalan firecrackers at everyone...

Obviously the so-called God of theatre, also known as "the temple-shaker", did not turn up quite within the predictions of the avant-garde consensus and other, unexpected boundaries were being transgressed. Reactions ranged from superlatives, like mine, to violent outrage. There was also a lot of confusion about just how to react. One interesting area of explanation many turned to (or took refuge in) was by describing the events as an "initiatory experience" - which begged the question: what was being initiated, i.e. what was being revealed, and what was being defiled?

### 'The Dog Show'

After the festival presentation, I was literally aggressed by a theatre colleague: "how dare you invite such a performance!" This person actually said that I had made her eat shit. After the journey from Italy and the harassment of official veterinary examinations, one of the two mastiffs on stage, a huge black male, was particularly bad tempered and agitated that night: he victimized the female bitch, constantly climbed onto and humped the actor playing *Gilgamesh*, and also had diarrhea... Some thought the animals had been trained or drugged, such was the level of what could be called *imaginal serendipity*: the relevance acquired by any incident on stage, triggering either intellectual delight or, as in this colleague's case,

paranoid defenses - as if everything had been done to provoke offence. The disparity between the dogs, for instance, the brutal dominance of the male one that particular evening, set fire to commentaries on the relationship between Gilgamesh and the Goddess Inana, and, of course, on sexual politics.

*Gilgamesh* was performed in a small room, painted Pompeian red, in the ruins of the Saint André Fort on the hill above the *La Chartreuse* precinct. The moonlit evening was actually framed as an initiatory ritual: limited to 40, the spectators were led up the hill by torch light. Men and women were separated on arrival: the men sat stage-right, the women to the left. There was no electricity - only two sets of massive gas blowers (imagine the heat and sound!). On stage: two naked young male actors (Gilgamesh and Enkidu) performed most of the rituals. Half-way through the performance, Inana was unveiled, seating at the back with mud and water falling onto her also naked body: a very fat and voluptuous woman with flowing red hair who never moved through the performance. Besides the two dogs, there was also a python in the performing area. It was an impeccably pure and powerful visual ritual with hardly any words, but disrupted by the animals. The balance between the hieratic liturgy enacting Gilgamesh's descent, and animal chaos, was in itself a masterpiece.

### **Lady Serendipity**

Before entering into speculations as to what actually was at the heart of the scandal, some thoughts on "imaginal serendipity", and "*quality of incidence*", something I consider to be at the core of imaginal poetics: it has to do with the way incidents '*incide*' - i.e. 'cut in' with pertinent commentaries and insight, the way *co-incidences* are induced, the way they stir associations and spark off semantic synchronicities, while at the same time achieving an '*incisive*' sense of personal address (the French would say "*ça me regarde*" - "it looks at me", therefore I feel personally concerned). Incidence is what creates sense within the craft of poetical assemblage (*poiesis, bricolage, dramaturgical montage*). Incidents also come with an implicit sense of drama: the spirit of an incident quickens the components of an event, brings them to life, and makes them unique. It keeps us (actors and audience) alert, it questions us, it reveals the present as spontaneous. It also brings in the mercurial detectives, and calls in the witnesses (accidents are a part of incidents). Pertinence (and the wit of impertinence) - how incidents *bring and make sense* - is what weaves the (mantic) matrix that makes images matter (and therefore, in my view, what makes good theatre).

Today, some ten years later, Romeo Castellucci, the director of *Societtas Raffaello Sanzio*, is the darling sensation of avant-garde theatre, the ultimate *enfant terrible*, and it is amazing to see how this charming, open and warm young man still provokes the most incredibly strong reactions. With *Genesi / From the Museum of Sleep*, the *Societtas Raffaello Sanzio* latest production, electricity has arrived in Hell; and it makes full use of it, with lighting effects, sound tracks, microphones, and a unique collection of pneumatic robots and mechanical paraphernalia. On the other hand, the setting where I saw this production was today's standard auditorium for contemporary theatre: a huge frontal aquarium-like stage, flanked by massive loudspeakers, overhung by rows and rows of projectors, and capable of seating hundreds of spectators. The night I saw *Genesi*, the auditorium was half-empty... quite a let-down after the red-room experience! Performing in such a conventional environment inevitably brings up comparisons with today's 'big-game' spectacles, (grand visuals and loud music), calling up such classic imagistic references as *Sankai Yuko* and their *butho* underworld pageants of glamorized horror, or Pina Bausch's passionate hang-over choreographies, or even the dusty ghosts of the late master himself, Tadeuz Kantor - not to mention today's proliferation of multi-media experiments.

### **Human Semaphores**

Castellucci's work side-steps these comparisons, mainly because he does not use or refer to the usual artistic criteria with which most of us gage a performance today. For instance - and I will elaborate on this later - there is no acting to speak of in his shows, or actors in the conventional sense of the word. In some instances, the acting could even be called amateur: the performers (often non-professionals) execute 'semaphoric' activities: hieratically signifying gestures and postures, usually quite stiff - but always cunningly cryptic. There is hardly any metaphorical acting to speak of, that is, acting as representational craft, invoking subjective emotional fiction; nor is there a sense of movement involving the esthetics of dance. The quality of presence is elsewhere. It is also 'otherworldly': aloof, detached from any sense of 'show' in the acting. It comes through in the application, in the earnest, even humble execution of the symbolic missions assigned to the actors/performers - to the inch, it is true! - by the director's vision. Included in this "quality of presence" is the fact that Castellucci often engages persons with physical 'deformities': obesity, anorexia, malformations (*hors-norme* is the French politically correct euphemism). In *Genesi*, Adam is the most amazing contortionist I have ever seen: at one point, in his relatively brief appearance, he seemed able to fan out and detach his ribs (a joke on Adam's rib?). Eve is a woman in her sixties with an ablated breast, performing, like most of the actors, stark naked.

The *déjà-vu* labels that could come up from what may sound like scabrous descriptions, do not stick here: they simply slide off Castellucci's work. This is not cynical, sensational, or candid anti-theatre posturing: a conceptual director deflating the passion of theatre with deadpan tactics or with amateurs. Nor is this an enterprise in deconstruction (or stabbing in the back) of the poetics of theatrical fiction. "Provocation", a ubiquitous term in commentaries on Castellucci's work, is only a by-product, one which is deftly used - after all, he is a man of theatre. The fact of the matter is that I have rarely seen such deontological integrity in theatre: theme, title, intellectual reflection, philosophical intentions and performed results achieve unique coherence, yield exceptionally challenging paradoxes. Is not that the aim of art?

### **Genesis / Auschwitz**

*Genesi* (from the Bible's Pentateuch first book) is over three hours long, presented in three acts, with intervals. The first act takes place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian laboratory of Marie Curie. It is 'gothic' in its labyrinthine allusions to the genesis of modern science: Frankenstein is not far away! Marie Curie has just discovered radium. Lucifer (the "carrier of light") makes a sinister appearance in this miraculous laboratory, where we get to see through bodies... Adam emerges as the phenomenal contortionist, and Eve wakes up in a maze of painful life-threads in the form of an extraordinary weaving machine. With *Auschwitz* looming as the title of the second act, the 'genetics' of this deranged laboratory-museum bring up ominous foreshadowings of the scientific deliriums of the Nazis extermination camps.

"Auschwitz is the extreme consequence, and un-imaginable, of man's Genesis", writes Castellucci in a finely crafted two-page address to the spectator. Elaborating on how he was "forced to confront" the opposition between the Eden of Genesis and our 20th century extermination camps, he quotes Primo Levi, and Artaud, whose voice one hears on the sound track, repeating over and over: "Je ne délire pas! Je ne suis pas fou!" ("I am not in delirium! I am not mad!") - a question we can all ask when contemplating Holocaust film footage. Castellucci gives away the keys to his strategy: "Dear spectator... I had to mask the horror under a lamb's skin. Only thus will it manage to infiltrate your home. The (second) act's very title forces me to do so. Please forgive me." (My literal translations).

So, what images does he actually come up with for *Auschwitz*? Well, *coup de théâtre!* We are invited into a white *féerie*, a fairy-tale-like world, performed by his own six children, aged 3 to 13, and as close to Fellini as I've seen these "sulphurous Italians" - as the French newspapers labeled them. There are some pointed references to Lewis Carroll, and only a series of

minor clues betraying the nightmare hidden in the agenda. Do the children all fall asleep in dreamland, or are they gassed? They do have a shower towards the end. Even without the programme notes, one can pick up some of the touches perturbing the angelical kindergarten - The children are 'at play' and totally silent, the only sound being an old 30's fox-trot tune in the background; and one can barely imagine the "final solution" belying the cute Santa Klaus-like ritual, with toy trains, a small china tea set, feather snow and cushion clouds; like the "un-imaginable" difficulty, during the war years, of even considering the possibility of the existence of the gas-chambers and cremation ovens.

Castellucci sets up parallels between the Biblical God, Hitler, and the artist as creator-demiurge, questioning the notion of artistic genesis, and its destructive shadows. The fact that he is open about these comparisons, that he includes himself as artist, giving away, with apparent candor, the intellectual premises of his imaginal processes (like a Faustian *artifex* revealing his secrets), is one of the things that triggers violent reactions and the talk of "ultimate *hubris*", of "arrogant provocation". Seemingly unperturbed, innocently perplexed even, he sets up the triangulation: God, Hitler, Castellucci - and then delivers a *mise-en-scène* with his own children on stage! *Il faut le faire!*

### Quality in Image

A critical component of image, and one of the main factors that gives it quality, is the scope of its references (cultural, political, psychological, etc.), and the complexity with which these references are linked and held together. In this sense, Castellucci's work achieves rare imaginal probity, a pithiness that is both intellectual and sensual. It delivers the sort of artistic coherence I have referred to as "quality of paradox": images, compact with extraordinary internal tensions, multi-layered and 'multi-binding' in their references. It achieves that elusive and exquisite artistic balance between simplicity and complexity; (complexity is not necessarily complicated). There are moments of baroque clutter and "super-abundance" - but more often than not, totally limpid and simple, as in the third act where the duo between Abel and Cain, is in the sense, a gem.

Earlier I described the acting in *Genesis* as "semaphoric", "hieratic" and spoke of "symbolic missions" and "cryptic gestures", all of which suggest a forcible translation of ideas into iconic posturing and pictograms. The entire piece could be described as a sequence of recondite *tableaux vivants*: the sort of hieroglyphic puzzles, allegorical references, effigy-like pictures, and divinatory set-pieces that are usually seen as stifling to the performing life of image - i.e. to its quality.

Symbolic attitudes tend to sidetrack theatre into ceremonial and ritual, often imposing an injunction for reverence on the spectator. This happens too often when the word "archetype" is invoked by artists. I tend to flee if I see "archetypes" in a programme: I fear being trapped in a pious surrogate of religion. Lively image-work incorporates its own antidote: iconoclasm, humor. It achieves fictional life as unique, alive, particular (even peculiar). It works on idiosyncrasy; it seeks and respects the unique characteristics of its actors and objects. It achieves "character", very much in the sense in which James Hillman uses it in his recent book *The Force of Character*. Character shows up as 'saltiness' in performance, as articulate if prickly creatures who will not be symbolized or classified into archetypal typologies. Salt comes through as a rather bitter-tasting intelligence, as a grounding sense of presence that does not sublimate easily into religious affect or ethnological fervor -or the 'shamanic' mixture of both. The dog shit mentioned at the beginning of this article was theological salt - it certainly did away with piety, and its comfort!<sup>1</sup> [\[Footnote 1: The wife of the Italian consul in Marseille jumped up at this point \(five minutes into the show\) and told her husband across the room they were leaving. The performance was sponsored by the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs: the consul was presiding over a prestigious cultural event! His letter of apologies a few days later was a political gem of contradictions!\]](#)

## Gage, Guile and Gamble

The iconic conflict between the high-seriousness of cultural symbols and renegade brats and freaks is part of the exhilarating contradictions in Castellucci's work. His creative procedures, demultiplied by his own programme notes, both *are* and *play at being* ideogrammatic. On the one hand, he exposes a set of syntactic rules through which ideas are to be converted into images. He is systematic, with a semiologist's panache, and one cannot help thinking of fellow Italians Umberto Eco or Carlo Ginsburg. He sets up a magnificent, *ex-cathedra* demonstration: firstly, an intellectual equation is proposed: the titles of the performance and of each of the three acts. Then a resolution is laid out in the programme notes, and finally a solution is enacted on stage: we have a resolved syllogism! But, this procedure is also *virtual* (earlier I used the word "mantic"): it is a gamble, a *simile*, a *pseudo*, an exuberant *inventio*; it is provocative bluff, mercurial hocus-pocus. It carries the performer's guile and gamble: its engagement<sup>2</sup>. [Footnote 2 - The word "engagement" implies a commitment, a supposedly calculated gamble (usually with a promise to marry!): one pledges a "gage", puts down a pawn. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of "gage" is: "Something of value deposited to ensure the performance of some action, and liable to forfeiture in case of non-performance."] Ethics and esthetics are openly at stake, live. When the dice are thrown, and the artist, as mantic fisherman, trawls in the nets (i.e. commits and delivers the performance), does he pull in live fish, or a clutter of symbolic junk and archaistic references?

Castellucci's performances are wonderfully programmed and committed. One gets the feeling that it could not be otherwise. He is a master tactician at tracking down and cornering serendipity, at making it yield images which are provocatively coherent with his intellectual agenda - an imaginal dramaturg. Compared to his enterprise, much of today's image-based theatre seems pale and pious, rarely venturing beyond devotional amplification. Castellucci does something like extract the square root of an archetype: his re-enactments of myth come with a radical twist or mutation - and through a reductive lens (using "reductive" as in the alchemical *reductio*: going radically for the quintessence).

The speculative aspects of such proceedings (*reductio*, mutation, gamble, mantics) are based on *play*; i.e. if what you do does not 'play', then there is no play, only flat didacticism. Castellucci is a virtuoso at dramatic juggling with syntax (dramaturgy), with the way ideas, words, and gestures, are drawn into the vortex of performance and constellate meaning. He draws us into virtual ideograms, into meaning games. And, in the case of *Genesis*, it happens to be an utterly serious game since he is tampering with Auschwitz and God the Father!<sup>3</sup> [Footnote 3 - There is an interesting synchronicity between Castellucci's *Auschwitz* and Roberto Benigni's recent film *La Vita e Bella*, dealing also with the Holocaust, and using children. The film received top international awards and was a huge commercial success. It was also fiercely criticized by many intellectuals, saying basically that Benigni's move was too unconscious - blunting, or even redeeming the horror through a fairytale-like game. These same critics would probably rally to Castellucci's dispassionate ritual. I personally stand for the validity and high risk of both moves - and thank Italy for giving us both!]

These iconographic 'games' are played in the shadow of rather colossal myth - it takes *chutzpah* to tackle the cultural monumentality of *Genesis*<sup>4</sup>. [Footnote 4 - This dauntless cultural audacity recalls the painter Anselm Kiefer's tack on Hitler and the Holocaust. See, *Anselm Kiefer - After the Catastrophe*, by Rafael Lopez-Pedraza, Thames and Hudson - London, 1996 - a book I described as "Serious with the biggest capital "S" I can imagine".] Castellucci's artistry is acute, biting, uncompromising, and cruel - including the connotations acquired since Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*. I even feel like calling it "brutal" (exquisitely so, in its radical iconoclasm). The aim is to respond to myths with images that will achieve intrinsic, (or even contrary) mythical stature, that instigate reflections that face up to the crushing shadows of these myths, especially

when they are being sentimentalized, or turned towards religious fundamentalism. In terms of the “devotional” danger of amplification, sometimes the pitfalls in the artistic use of mythology come from untempered enthusiasm. Enthusiasts, mythologically speaking, are fanatics, possessed by a *theus* (“*en-theus*”): their performances can be awesome to behold, like a passing *thiasos* entranced by its own version of sectarian catharsis. The problem is that real violence can erupt if one puts into question their idols, their one-sided *iconodulia*<sup>5</sup>. [Footnote 5 - In a recent article on *Pantheatre's* forthcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I say how much I have learnt from Pan - the ‘godfather’ of my work; including learning to distrust him: “Getting to know a god or goddess means discovering and coming to terms not only with their shadows (which can be the rather flattering and pompous side of “depth theologies”), but also their *lacunae* (their holes - a very different tack to “holism”!) their incompleteness. It means entering and staying within mythological imagination, where “nobody's perfect”! Otherwise one elaborates idols and ideologies, or worse, monotheistic religions: mythology is banned in the very first commandment!]

### **Verismo**

Historical references to Italian mannerism and especially to *verismo* come to mind when watching Castellucci's work, in the dramatic use and exposure (some would say “exploitation”) of ‘reality’ on stage. For instance the use of non-actors. If one follows the analogy with *verismo*, I would say that he uses it at its most discerning, with Caravaggio-like vitality. Caravaggio's use of models, picked up off the street, dressed up and clearly ‘parachuted’ into mythological tableaux - exposing and playing on their gaucheness and so-called cultural ignorance - constituted one of the most astonishing, and, at the time, scandalous updates of mythological iconography; consider for instance the lascivious adolescents in his *Bacchus* and in his *Narcissus*<sup>6</sup>. [Footnote 6 - Velasquez was another image-maker who forayed into this territory where mythology is betrayed through the use of reality. Though in his case, his social status (his non-aristocratic complexes) in a puritanical Catholic entourage, combined with a genius for painterly lucidity, yielded a particularly underhand form of betrayal. His “Mars” (with a camel on the helmet!) is one of the most vicious attacks on mythological iconography I know of: *verismo as desecration*.] Similarly, Castellucci's *verismo* is learned, astute and searing; it therefore also carries its intrinsic dose of scandal. Above all, it is *ingenious*, in the acceptation that Baroque traditions gave to the notion: the manner in which a concept (*concetto*) is transposed into image - the visionary device of an ‘ingeneer’ (an ‘in-genius engineer’).

The ethos of Castellucci's work can feel very Saturnian - serious, oh so serious! - though one does notice the eternal child at play in the controls room: he pulls all the strings, like the Wizard of Oz! The work can also be disturbingly morbid - not unlike Caravaggio, though without his somewhat depraved sexuality, and the constant Eros-Thanatos interplay of his paintings (and of his life). Here another historical comparison comes to mind, one that takes us further back into Italian history, and this is in Castellucci's deployment of *fascinorum*, of *monstrum* (which etymologically comes from *mostrare*, and “showing the unshowable”), and could be linked back to the Roman circus, to the deeper necessities underlying the horror of gladiatorial ‘performances’. One cannot write off these phenomena with the usual indignant reactions that say that the Roman circus was a crass, demagogic pandering to the lowest appetites of a decadent society, a society that had blunted (or never acquired) the poetical capacity to enjoy fiction, and therefore needed “the shock of the real”. Gladiators and early-Christian martyrs ‘performed’ side by side, very often as volunteers. There was clearly a necessity being acted out in the arena, one which catalyzed and inflamed massive anxieties: it was a spectacular and momentous forum where a whole society confronted and worked out its deepest existential questions - the value of human life, fate, death, sacrifice - not unlike the phenomenon of tragedy had done four centuries earlier in Athens.

Yet, the Roman circus, *strictu senso*, was *not theatre*. Seneca's tragedies, (which were being performed during the same historical period) were theatre, theatre as defined precisely by the tradition of Athenian tragedy: a spoken debate based on

story and on a discursive, narrative confrontation with myth and cultural memory. In the circus, a different logos, logic and necessity emerges, and we enter directly into the specular and spectacular arena of *imagines agentes*, of fascinating (even if repulsive) images, of death-defying prowesses and deadly competition - with their freakish correlatives of grotesque, underworld clowns. On all these counts it is also fascinating to watch the borderline positions of Castellucci. The third act of *Genesi* presents Cain and Abel: two men are on stage, naked and very similar - they could be twins. They perform a simple, slow, evocative duet, in a spirit of intimacy and calm innocence (no gestural expressionism), during which Cain strangles Abel. The whole act is surrounded by something like 'tender violence'. The impact of the transparent nudity and simple narrative is stunningly amplified by the fact that one discovers a few minutes into the scene that Cain has a deformed foreshortened arm, with which, of course, he later strangles his brother.

One of the most extreme cases of *verismo* as 'reality iconoclasm' - the denial and destruction of the conventions of fiction through the use of the real in theatre - that I have encountered, concerned a Danish actress who joined a theatre research project I directed. She had been involved for years in the most radical fringe of punk underground performances in Northern Germany, testing the boundaries of the humanly bearable, reaching into 'real' hurt and mutilation as artistic statements. She had come to the realization that the ultimate performance in this logic would involve immolation, suicide. She needed to reassess fiction. Yet she was *ethically* incapable of acting, such was the contempt and revulsion she felt towards any form of make-believe. Her attempts at sustained theatrical gestures - because she could not hold and stay with any form of fiction - would converge into concrete intensity, numbing psychotic attitudes, and rituals of violence - literally unbearable extremes. Her discourse combined fierce political rebellion against what she saw as the comforting notion of fiction (escapism), with an idealistic, anarchistic quest for "truth"<sup>7</sup>. [Footnote 7 - This person had stumbled onto my work - which in many ways is the opposite of where she came from - through an interesting misunderstanding. She had been attracted by my past connection with the voice work of the *Roy Hart Theatre*, where indeed she could have found a correlative middle ground, or at least, a philosophical echo. Roy Hart would speak of the voice as "the royal (physical) road to the soul", hence as a form of bypassing artifice and reaching those 20<sup>th</sup> century fundamentals like "truth", "self" or "consciousness". Some of the *Roy Hart Theatre* performances in the late 60s had this uncompromising, revolutionary zeal: a banner went up at one point saying "language is dead, long live the voice"! Violence, though, in the guise of extreme vocal feats, was highly ritualized and was meant to be transformed (made "conscious") through the very act of singing. There was, like in much of the late 60s' arts and politics, a utopic search for 'new' or 'higher' forms of consciousness: performing became a conquest and a celebration of consciousness. Imagination rarely entered the picture: the key words were to do with a transcendental sense of truth - in Roy Hart's case, very much including the dark side. See "Dark Voices - The Genesis of the *Roy Hart Theatre*", by Noah Pikes - Spring Publications, 1999; or my, "Dis-membering Dionysus", in *Spring Journal*, 1984.]

### Painters of Image

Castellucci comes from, and works within a visual, pictorial approach to theatre - and here I must own up to partial sympathies, to do with my own background in painting and sculpture. There are clear parallels between Castellucci's work and recent figuration movements in the plastic arts (painting, performance and installation art) - in particular the work of painters like Anselm Kiefer<sup>8</sup> [Footnote 8 - See above, footnote 4], Gérard Garouste, Enzo Cucci, Francesco Clemente, who all use themes and/or iconography linked to mythology, or at least to an atavistic sense of figuration, with myth-like narratives and motifs. They are heuristic masters of the elaboration of cryptograms and figurative ellipses, of setting up correspondences between images and concepts, thriving in the mythographic interface, in the interplay of myth-like affinities and incongruities.

This mythographic interface has been the bread and butter of Surrealism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the use of oneiric mechanisms of association and disassociation. The painters mentioned form part of the exuberant painterly come-back of figuration in the late 70s and 80s, following on the failure of the proclaimed modernist apocalypse, when abstraction and conceptualism kept announcing the end of painting. A figure one inevitably confronts at the origins of this imagistic tradition is Giorgio de Chirico (another Italian!), one of the most ambivalent and double-edged 'fathers' of surrealism, of "metaphysical" figuration, as he originally called it. In many ways, he opened the cubist way to surrealism, to the freedom to celebrate image in its own terms, something which has been an integral part of most 20<sup>th</sup> century figuration. In the programme notes for *Genesi*, Castellucci obliquely acknowledges this filiation: "I confess that "Schechina" (the last Sephirot) and Max Klinger are the two fundamental words". The German painter Max Klinger, a founder of Symbolism, was, "together with Arnold Böcklin, one of the maestros who led Giorgio de Chirico towards Metaphysics" (from the programme notes of a Max Klinger retrospective in Ferrara, 1996).

Castellucci transposes these mythographic processes into theatre - (of course, he is not the first!). Two elements within the tradition of theatre resist this move. The first is story as linear narrative in literary theatre: the formal legacy of Greek tragedy - Euripides, "the inventor of soap opera", as Professor Charles Boer once put it - where the play, the plot, the text and its discourse come first and are paramount. Theatre is staging dialogue-based narrative literature, giving it some (but not too much) body and voice. Today, except for a few fanatics (on both sides), there is reciprocal tolerance and interchange between the proponents of a physical and imagistic theatre, and those perpetuating the literary tradition. My own work, which I call "choreographic theatre" cuts into this edge: I love text, and language is, as it were, the crowning of the work. I depart here from Castellucci's approach. Choreographic theatre includes language, but after a relentless fight against textual tyranny, in order to avert the kind of domination that binds acting to proclamation, illustration, demonstration, a fight to 'dislodge' theatre from literature and bring it to the floor as a partner in image, not its ruler. The aim is a dance of images and ideas, of physical moves and spoken words, of text and context - "choreographic", in this sense.

### **The Narcissism of Subjectivity**

The second fulcrum of resistance to a mythographic approach to theatre comes from one of the most firmly entrenched humanistic paradigms in modern traditions in theatre, art and psychotherapy, what I will call *the narcissism of subjectivity*. It implies that the ultimate value in a performance is inside the performer; that the performer, as human subject, is the subject and object of the performance, the embodiment of fiction. Theatre, ideas, characters, plots, images, emotions are funneled through the subject and re-emerge as re-lived, re-presented, per-formed subjective expression. The key words in this subjective implosion are "identity" and "expression". Identification implies the introspective conjunction of subjects: finding the character (the literary subject) in one's self. This process of identification is considered to be the core of performed fiction, with its logical corollary: self-expression. The obvious danger in this therapeutic drift, under the protection of that massive contemporary totem called "the self", is that personal catharsis swallows all meaning. What is performed is not so much meaning but 'meaningfulness': a display of personal sensitivity. Art becomes a humanistic personal achievement, linked to psychological concepts such as individuation. The performer is considered the depository, the embodiment of values worth displaying: a higher achiever. It is this subjectivity that we are actually being called to contemplate in the performance, not the ideas, not the myth, not what I would call the objective image. What comes across is the performer as:

a/ the depository of beauty: perfected bodies, amazing voices - each with his or her own (usually fundamentalist) esthetic canons.

b/ the depository of intelligence and cultured sensitivity. I have been heard to say that "I hate 'intelligent' actors", because

they let me see that they know their text beforehand, and that they are 'giving me the book', handing down an interpretation, delivering a lesson in how things should be done, said, and felt. Theatre turns into didactics; there is no sense of imaginal adventure. I, as spectator, am not invited to imagine, to share in the dreaming, the risk, and the discovery. I ingest. The performer hands down a form, per-forms for me. I would go as far as to say that there is a usurpation of imagination, and that this 'subjecting' of culture to personally lived "high art" is one of the main reasons why people turn away from theatre and prefer to stay home and read the play (or watch TV). [Footnote 9 - I am not including in this critique the notion of "entertainment", often derided as hollow consumerism: entertainment, in the tradition of comedy, delights, refreshes and sharpens wits. If anything I am attacking the modern understanding of tragedy.]

c/ most important of all, the performer as the depository of emotion, within a humanistic definition of emotion as something not only human, but actually inside humans ("my emotions"); emotion as confined to subjects, to identities<sup>9</sup>. [Footnote 10 - I elaborate on the notion of "objective emotion" in *The Angels' Hideout*, an article published in *Journal for Performance Research*, 1999, UK.] In Castellucci's work the performers seem to almost push you away from emotional identification - they certainly do not call pathos towards them selves. They can appear to be cut off from emotional involvement - mechanized even. I see this as an aggressive bias against the narcissism of subjectivity, as Castellucci's way of going at the mythical dimensions of image<sup>10</sup>. [Footnote 11: Here again, I am not saying that Castellucci is the first to formulate and act on this rebellion. Much contemporary theatre grapples with the paradigms of cultural elitism (sometimes by being crassly insensitive, or ugly!). There is a new wave of dancer-choreographers in France, for instance, who perform anything but dance - precisely because of the French tendency towards precious mannerism in the history of dance. In Britain, the reaction goes for what I call "brutish Cromwellian Protestantism": a cure of intellectual hooliganism, following the 70s stand of playwright and actor Steven Berkoff.]

The question goes well beyond a matter of excellence and craft, where, as a performer, I refine and groom my body as my working tool. It transposes a humanistic, self-centered model to theatre, with implications of spiritual progress (finding and being true to one's self) and of personal therapy. In this sense Castellucci's work is a radical cure, bringing us back to an imaginal dimension of theatre (he often calls it "pre-tragic"), where bodies, voices, musics, objects (and in my case, texts) are all elements in the reality of imagination. Theatre as an underworld democracy of objectified images.

### A Coda

A coda, to pay tribute to three artists - two of them, again, Italian: Carmelo Bene, artist, actor, director, little known outside Italy, who personified the revolutionary spirit of 1968 in an absolutely brilliant manner - its anarchistic freedom, and above all its iconoclastic humor (he did a memorable *Hamlet Omelette*). He was the antidote to the ethno-religious heaviness of many of the period's groups. Castellucci, within his own somewhat saturnine brand of humor, carries Bene's fire. The other Italian artist who must be mentioned in this context is well known and well documented for his contribution to a libertarian spirit: Pier Paolo Pasolini. Finally a tribute to one of my own masters, the French dancer, choreographer and teacher: Dominique Dupuy, whose eagle gaze, sharp tongue, ruthless claws and laconic ambivalence initiated me to narcissism: narcissism as all-round generosity and pleasure, as a fundamental if complex tool to use, in the service of image.

### FOOTNOTES

Footnote 1: The wife of the Italian consul in Marseille jumped up at this point (five minutes into the show) and told her husband across the room they were leaving. The performance was sponsored by the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and the consul was presiding over a prestigious cultural event! His letter of apologies a few days later was a political gem of contradictions!

Footnote 2 - The word "engagement" implies a commitment, a supposedly calculated gamble (usually with a promise to marry!): one pledges a "gage", puts down a pawn. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of "gage" is: "Something of value deposited to ensure the performance of some action, and liable to forfeiture in case of non-performance."

Footnote 3 - There is an interesting synchronicity between Castellucci's *Auschwitz* and Roberto Benigni's recent film *La Vita e Bella*, dealing also with the Holocaust, and using children. The film received top international awards and

was a huge commercial success. It was also fiercely criticized by many intellectuals, saying basically that Benigni's move was too unconscious - blunting, or even redeeming the horror through a fairytale-like game. These same critics would probably rally to Castellucci's dispassionate ritual. I personally stand for the validity and high risk of both moves - and thank Italy for giving us both!

- Footnote 4 - This dauntless cultural audacity recalls the painter Anselm Kiefer's tack on Hitler and the Holocaust. See, *Anselm Kiefer - After the Catastrophe*, by Rafael Lopez-Pedraza, Thames and Hudson - London, 1996 - a book I described as "Serious with the biggest capital S I can imagine".
- Footnote 5 - In a recent article on *Pantheatre's* forthcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I say how much I have learnt from Pan - the 'godfather' of my work; including learning to distrust him. "Getting to know a god or goddess means discovering and coming to terms not only with their shadows (which can be the rather flattering and pompous side of "depth theologies"), but also their *lacunae* (their holes - a very different tack to "holism"!)" their incompleteness. It means entering and staying within mythological imagination, where "nobody's perfect!" Otherwise one elaborates idols and ideologies, or worse, monotheistic religions: mythology is banned in the very first commandment!
- Footnote 6 - Velasquez was another image-maker who forayed into this territory where mythology is betrayed through the use of reality. Though in the case of Velasquez, his social status (his non-aristocratic complexes) in a puritanical catholic entourage, combined with a genius painterly lucidity, yielded a particularly caustic and underhand form of betrayal. His "Mars" (with a camel on the helmet!) is one of the most vicious attacks on mythological iconography I know of: *verismo* as desecration.
- Footnote 7 - This person had stumbled onto my work - which in many ways is the opposite of where she came from - through an interesting misunderstanding. She had been attracted by my past connection with the voice work of the *Roy Hart Theatre*, where indeed she could have found a correlative middle ground, or at least, a philosophical echo. Roy Hart would speak of the voice as "the royal (physical) road to the soul", hence as a form of bypassing artifice and reaching those 20<sup>th</sup> century fundamentals like "truth", "self" or "consciousness". Some of the *Roy Hart Theatre* performances in the late 60s had this uncompromising, revolutionary zeal: a banner went up at one point saying "language is dead, long live the voice"! Violence, though, in the guise of extreme vocal feats, was highly ritualized and was meant to be transformed (made "conscious") through the very act of singing. There was, like in much of the late 60s' arts and politics, a utopic search for 'new' or 'higher' forms of consciousness: performing became a conquest and a celebration of consciousness. Imagination rarely entered the picture: the key words were to do with a transcendental sense of truth - in Roy Hart's case, very much including the dark side. See "Dark Voices - The Genesis of the *Roy Hart Theatre*", by Noah Pikes - Spring Publications, 1999; or my, "Dis-membering Dionysus", in *Spring Journal*, 1984.
- Footnote 8 - See above, footnote 4.
- Footnote 9 - I am not including in this critique the notion of "entertainment", often derided as hollow consumerism: entertainment, in the tradition of comedy, delights, refreshes and sharpens wits. If anything I am attacking the modern understanding of tragedy.
- Footnote 10 - I elaborate on the notion of "objective emotion" in, *The Angels' Hideout*, an article published in *Journal for Performance Research*, 1999, UK.
- Footnote 11- Here again, I am not saying that Castellucci is the first to formulate and act on this rebellion. Much of contemporary theatre grapples with the paradigms of cultural elitism (sometimes by being crassly insensitive, or ugly!). There is a new wave of dancer-choreographers in France, for instance, who perform anything but dance - precisely because of the French tendency towards precious mannerism in the history of dance. In Britain, the reaction goes for what I call "brutish Cromwellian Protestantism": a cure of intellectual hooliganism, following the 70s stand of playwright and actor Steven Berkoff.