Regarding the Pain of Others (Part 1 of 2): Romeo Castellucci's Schwanengesang D744

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No one can comprehend the pain of another, and no one can comprehend the joy of another. One is always going towards another, but is never going beside another. — Franz Schubert, Journal 1824

How do we know the pain of another? It is a question tangled in the roots of the theater, since Aristotle first hailed that peculiar word *catharsis* and sent countless others off to describe the shape of that unwieldy lodestone anchoring the tragic. A purging, they say, a release. But who gets to feel that relief we have heard so much about? There is the famous story, also from Aristotle, of the actor Polus playing Electra and mourning over the urn she thinks contains the ashes of her lost brother Orestes. Polus filled the vessel with the remains of his own dead son, his lamentations gathering fictional force from actual loss. Who are we to say that the actor's pain is less than ours or greater? And if someone is in pain in a theater is it real pain? Or, like a chair put onstage, does it, too, become something other than itself—a theatrical chair all dressed up in costume and set, a character playing its part?

These are big, big questions—old, old questions, too—and I will not pretend to answer them. Having spent the last few weeks between the Avignon Festival and the Edinburgh Festival, two of the largest and most historically-grounded theater festivals in the world (both founded in 1947 and both occupying medieval cities), I raise them in an attempt to make some sense of a recent spate of work I have seen over here that has left me reeling. If one of the basic impulses behind the theatrical event is the desire to experience empathy, to understand how another feels, then these pieces expose the gap between that desire and any possibility of meeting. As Schubert put it so long ago in my awkward translation above, *one is always going towards another, but is never going beside another.*

Talya Kingston, who is also here in Scotland for the festival, has written some on the work at Edinburgh that asks its audiences to bear witness to testimony. In my
brief writing here and in the second part of this posting, I will offer some words on work I have seen here at Avignon that addressed similar questions, but from radically different angles.

Today I want to write through a piece staged for one night by the internationally-acclaimed director Romeo Castellucci of the Italian experimental theater company Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Because of the nature of the event and the particular talents involved, it is doubtful the piece, Schwanengesang D744, will be staged again. I want to write through the performance not only because it captures an essential feature of the director's work, but because it gets at how we might regard the pain of others in the theater and elsewhere.
The 19th century Opéra-Théâtre is the only classical theatrical space used by the festival—velvet seats, private boxes, and an ornate proscenium tell us this theater carries with it the trappings of tradition and history. But what we encounter here is not a play, it is a concert. A pianist in the pit, and the soprano Kerstin Avermo offering us a series of Lieder by Schubert. These songs of sorrow, Swan Songs, are poems set to music and Avermo sings them with conviction, but without the visible gestures we expect of an actor. This would be fine were we in the concert hall, but this is the theater and on this bare stage, empty all the way to the naked back wall, everything is splayed open to our attention. Soon she begins to recede, as if the words of mourning she sang were casting her in a role, or as if they came from a genuine and deeply private expression. She falters, must ask the pianist to begin again, and eventually pulls away from us, until she is facing the upstage wall of the theater and pressing herself against it, hoping to melt away from our insistent look, her arms raised against the surface in a gesture of supplication. She is dressed in black against the black, almost disappearing against its scratched surface.

A woman in white enters and watches from downstage. As the singer performs a series of stylized gestures in time to her final song, the woman in white mimics the physical action. When the singer leaves the stage, this woman in white (visibility incarnate) finally turns to see us watching her. She is distressed and
she is horrified—she does not want to be seen in what appears to be a moment of extreme vulnerability. Is it her own anguish or has it been learned by the performer like the movements she imitates, a script as it were? If the music infected the singer, has the singer infected this next woman?

“What are you looking at?” She demands us with a ragged fury.

“I am not an actor.” She cries and cries again. It becomes a refrain for her, repeated over and over as comfort and ward.

But if the program is correct, this is the great French actress Valerie Dreville and her mastery of the arts of acting make this a profoundly ambivalent proposition. Her viciousness and wild abandon is such that I begin to think perhaps this isn’t the actress, but a surrogate, someone I am far away from knowing. The singer sang with such artistry, but if there is virtuosity at play here, it displays its perfection in an unaesthetic and unseemly heap of jagged breaths and gasps. Her accusation echoes the famous Magritte painting of a pipe, captioned with the words “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” (this is not a pipe), another game played at the dead end of representation. It feels as if I have intruded on a private experience, happened upon someone suffering but in a position where I cannot offer any solace, where I may in fact be the cause of the suffering. In other words, it feels
like I am in the theater, that strange place where, as the philosopher Stanley Cavell has reckoned, I am relieved of the everyday pressure of reacting in an ethically appropriate manner. I should look away. I should leave her in peace. But she is an actress, right? Her suffering is not her own. The audience has been waiting for the signature Castellucci moment, where the expectations of the form will be shattered with some miraculous rupture. In Paris, a car falling from the rafters of the stage and just when the fact of that impossible event became apparent—a real car?—two more such cars following in close succession. Or a real live tank breaching the theater and turning its turret to scan the audience, or a pack of real attack dogs bounding across the boards to take down the director himself. This commitment to the spectacularly unrepresentable, the intrusion of the excessively real, has drawn out the crowds at the festival to cheer or harangue, so the restlessness in the audience is palpable here.

Now it comes. A sound like the air splitting asunder (the sound artist Scott Gibbons, a regular collaborator, seems to work at an atomic level) and an accompanying blackout, with a sudden blare of white light flooding every crevice of the stage. Flashes of sound and cracks of light, in the midst of which we can just make out the woman.

She is on her knees sobbing.

Blackout.

She is clawing at the stage.

Blackout.

She has pulled the very ground up, some long black dress, curtain, veil, all about her.

Blackout.

She has changed. Her head is now—what?—a bull with pronged horns.
Blackout.

No, she is herself again. Herself alone.

It flickers by so fast it seems a hallucination, like Dionysus appearing as a bull briefly in the eyes of the Bacchae's Pentheus, before the hero is sacrificed (himself mistaken as an animal) to the god of tragedy. This woman, standing up there before the forceful gaze of this audience, returned to that ancient task of the actor.

It flickers by so fast it cannot help feeling somewhat anticlimactic when compared with the crashing cars or barking dogs, urban legends of the stage. Here, it is as if Castellucci has placed his work in quotation marks and winnowed the spectacular of nearly all content; all that remains is the back and forth of seen and unseen, scene and obscene, black singer and white actor. In an episode from his eleven-part rumination on tragedy, the *Tragedia Endogonidia* Cycle (2002-2004), a similar blackout had been pierced by words written in the briefest flash of light, scripture telling us not to look. An impossible demand that cuts to the marrow of the theater (from *theatron* or “place for looking”) and reduces its task to the minimal doubling of black and white, of not looking and seeing too much.

The structure is common to Castellucci’s other smaller chamber pieces: the performance establishes a world in a kind of stasis that gathers tension over time; it suddenly releases a surge of energy rupturing the theater and then returns us to the place of origin changed, altered. Beginning, middle, end. When the lights are back, the actress takes up that sequence of gestures again, owning them now as a graceful dance of iconic poses from a classical painting I cannot quite recall. She is a performer now, though something lingers at the edges of her face as she looks out over our heads. It is something I can only move towards knowing, but never travel alongside.

Note: Romeo Castellucci will be presenting his performance *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* at the Philadelphia Fringe Festival from September
12-14.
Photos by Christophe Raynaud de Lage.
- See more at: http://howlround.com/regarding-the-pain-of-others-part-1-of-2-romeo-castelluccis-schwanengesang-d744#sthash.qxnRWKNA.dpuf