Romeo Castellucci: The Four Seasons Restaurant

Daniel Sack, University of Massachusetts - Amherst
We Are Told to Look at the Thing That Is Not There: Daniel Sack on “The Four Seasons Restaurant”

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Daniel Sack is an assistant professor at University of Massachusetts – Amherst, where his research focuses on experimental performance and live art in the 20th and 21st centuries. For the 2014 Presented Fringe, FringeArts commissioned him to reflect on the U.S. premiere of The Four Seasons Restaurant. Here is his piece:
Mark Rothko’s extraordinary murals that he painted in 1959 for a commission with the Four Seasons restaurant depict a series of fields in dark red or maroon, nearly black, many inset with rectangles mimicking the canvas’s edge. Frames within frames, they recall, perhaps, the proscenium of a theater or the rich red of a curtain on a stage abstracted of all content. They are like afterimages on the eye, written in some dark blood-like coagulate of time. Occasional pillars that stand on the canvases act as figures briefly shadowing an empty stage. The theater appears to disappear.

The paintings never appeared at their intended site—Rothko refused to have them exhibited at a restaurant so dedicated to the excessive consumption of capital—and they never appear in Romeo Castellucci’s performance The Four Seasons Restaurant. Instead, we are told to look at the thing that is not there, to see the artistic act as an apocalyptic event where creation couples with decreation. It has been said that this interweaving of appearance and disappearance is a peculiar characteristic of living. We know our life through its passing. So, too, in the theater—that strangely antiquarian art still caught up in a fleeting live moment shared between spectator and event—here we are, in the words of the late Herbert Blau, watching someone die in front of our eyes, dying together as it were.
But what if the only thing to see is the masking of the object we so crave to see, to know, to love? What is gained in this loss? In The Minister’s Black Veil, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1836 story that serves as a common root for the cycle of works to which The Four Seasons Restaurant belongs, the eponymous minister one day inexplicably dons a black veil that he refuses to have removed even after his death. His decision to retain possession of his appearance produces all kinds of manic responses in the eyes of his beholders. They imagine all kinds of powers—divine and demonic—in his obscured visage, project onto that black curtain their own imagined vision of whatever expression might be hiding beneath. So here the act of disappearing becomes a profoundly creative gesture. We might call it “art,” an art that the spectator produces.

The performance The Four Seasons Restaurant begins with the story of a satellite at the far reaches of imagined distance, a recording that relays the sound of a black hole discovered in the Perseus galaxy some 250 million light years away. This is a record of the end of sight and matter, taking away the paintings and all else. Originally a document outside our range of hearing, the noise has been transposed into an audible register, its hazy rough cackles and deep throbs cast huge and terrifying. The sublime depths of the universe speak a glossolalia that
contains whole worlds of diversity. Not the black of negation, but of creation.

The young women that come forward to the edge of the playing space and look out at the audience are another kind of satellite around the black hole’s open mouth. They are “actors” learning to translate this other abyss—the great open maw of the proscenium theater—into a form that might be communicated. Their action, a decision to cut short their voice in the most material of ways, is visceral and unbearable. The mad visionary theater-maker Antonin Artaud wrote with terror about the everyday act of speech not only because sound cannot stand still or it would cease to be, not only because it must always leave us, but also because the speaker does not possess the word “I” he or she temporarily claims from a common language. In order to appear in speech, one’s peculiar singularity must disappear behind the uniform word “I”. Artaud would be proud of these uniformly dressed disciples. They have willed their separation from speech, forestalling the incision between speaker and spoken word with a cut of their own devising. One might say that they have refused the fruit of knowledge, refused even to sit at the restaurant, and instead suspended themselves in a pre- (or post-) lingual state.

It seems a linguistic and social suicide, irrevocable, but however gut-
wrenchingly realistic, it is a theatrical game played in a place of training the body, a gymnasium. And so when they do the seemingly impossible and speak again, we can only be so surprised. The young women perform a version of The Death of Empedocles, the unfinished trauerspiel (mourning play) that the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin wrote between 1798 and 1799. Exiled from his city in Sicily because his influence threatened its politicians, the ancient philosopher Empedocles turned his back on society even as his people begged him to lead them. Like Rothko, like Hawthorne’s minister, he decided to retain possession of himself for himself rather than for a public. Seeking to join with infinite Nature, the philosopher threw himself into the depths of Mount Etna, his suicide born of a desire to transcend his human form. Supposedly, his bronzed sandal was spit back out, either mocking his ambitions or proving his apotheosis to his disciples. Something always remains from our departures, an echo across the distance, a shadow on a canvas, a small bit of flesh.

In Hölderlin’s play the philosopher is a poet who repeatedly mourns his distance from a natural world that once felt immediate. In this way, it belongs in conversation with the contemporaneous poetry of Wordsworth and the English Romantics. Yet Castellucci’s performance is not simply longing for untrammeled sublimity. The young women all wear
Amish dresses; like anchorites of old, or Empedocles shunning the city for the mountains, they mark their separation from the contemporary world. But theirs is not a hermitage of isolated individuals so much as a mass joined together against the idea of the single subject. They perform the play as if it were a collective ritual handed down for generations. They all take turns rehearsing the parts, mimicking the gestures like understudies preparing for when they will be called up. At times, they switch roles, never entirely inside their part. And, as the play progresses, the women’s voices, too, become divorced from their particular bodies, seeming to issue the costume itself, as if the part spoke on their behalf. Such communal gatherings and ritual actions before the sublime may occasionally take place in theaters, in churches, and in political rallies—all sites that can turn sinister, where armbands and flags might be distributed, guns slung across shoulders, pistols brandished in honor of whatever transcendent divinity or demon. In other words, the theater is a dangerous place, perhaps most of all in those moments when it leaves us speechless, when it retains its potential to say or do many things at once.

It ends as it begins, with a kind of seething instrument for disappearance: not the sound of a black hole swallowing worlds whole, but the theater itself alighting on its potential to hide many
worlds within its own black hole. Recall that “Apocalypse”—that word we use to describe the time between ending and beginning—derives from the Greek word for “unveiling”. This means that every time a curtain opens in a theater, our mundane world ends and another begins. Rothko’s paintings suspend such a curtain in the process of unveiling, in the transition to blackout where we can only just see an image taking leave of us. And in the final moments of The Four Seasons Restaurant we encounter a similarly suspended oscillation between appearance and disappearance, the theater performing a veiling and unveiling at once, without settling on a scene or sense.

What do we see in these churning folds of the curtain, these flashes of light? Worlds flicker past so fast that you may think yourself dreaming, hallucinating alone in your particular corner of perception. Castellucci has said that the theater of the future is the theater of the spectator, meaning that it concerns itself with what it means to be a spectator. Just as the villagers in Hawthorne’s story project all manner of spirits onto the veil of their minister, so the spectator in Castellucci’s theater sees herself or himself reflected in these constantly changing scenes. You see your potential to see, to create, to destroy, for better and for worse.

—Daniel Sack
The Four Seasons Restaurant
September 11-13, 8:00 pm
23rd Street Armory
22 S. 23rd Street
$39, tickets here

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