

COLLOQUIUM OF TAMPERE

Utopia and Critical Thinking

in the Creative Process



LES SOLITAIRES INTEMPESTIFS

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ELENI PAPALEXIOU

*The Body as Dramatic Material
in the Theatre of Romeo Castellucci*

Handicapped, ill, beyond norms or “different” are qualifications readily used to identify actors whose bodies lie on the margin of the standardised aesthetics of their time. Under-represented, they are frequently limited to secondary roles, on account of their contrast value. The theatre reflects society as a whole since the atypical figures are denied access to important roles in the performance by a lack of positive consideration of their specificity. Regarding the conventional theatre, in which the text and psychology often play a dominant part, the “uncommon” bodies are often given caricatural roles. Opposed to that type of theatre, the theatre group Societas Raffaello Sanzio and stage director Romeo Castellucci propose a theatre where the body does not act as a marginal presence. There, the handicapped or sick, deformed body is not seen as a pathological predicament; it is treated as the material of dramaturgy in itself.

When Castellucci casts his actors, he is purely interested in their physical attributes. For him, selecting an actor means choosing a body marked by life experience. He ignores its capacity to move and speak; he examines only the qualities, natural or acquired, of that body. To cite an example, in his direction of *Oresteia* (*Oresteia*, 1995), his Apollo evokes the perfection of the Greek statues, but with one main difference, this man has no arms. Thanks to this other characteristic, he is thus able to convey another symbol, that of lacking. In fact, Apollo, who is the instigator of the homicide, is also the one who is lacking something essential, namely, the means¹. He has no arms; thus we realise that he does not possess the power to accomplish his act. Consequently, he needs, so to speak, Oreste's helping hand. Castellucci's motive for the choice here is purely dramaturgic. The actor's body already has this particular form before his entrance onto the stage. Seen from this angle, the intervention of the director is limited; because the actor does not need any theatrical education. The actor needs only to keep on inhabiting his/her body in an authentic way, for these are the immanent qualities it possesses. For Castellucci; the body is raw material, which he prefers to keep in its essential state; he actually refuses to use it as modelling clay, to misrepresent its attributes.

This special and surprising dramaturgy of the body proposed by Castellucci does not only reflect

1. Romeo Castellucci's interview with Eleni Papalexioiu (Cesena, Italy, March 2009), in Eleni Papalexioiu, *When words turn to matter. The theatre of Romeo Castellucci*. Athens, Plethron 2009, p. 110.

the meaning carried by it; it is also based on a more general theorisation of the dramatic art by the director. He, in fact, rejects everything that relates to imitation. Castellucci does not aim to present a biography, nor analyse the characters. Resting on the Platonic conception of art, he attempts, instead, to create a set of aesthetics, which reject mimesis. He mistrusts the traditional schools of dramatic art, for he believes that they deprive actors of their spontaneity and potential to improvise, thus, transforming them into a sort of marionette who responds to the manipulations of its master. Consequently, the creativity of the actor is limited to an exercise of style, and to an interminable production of words².

Castellucci's struggle against the incessant flow of speech by the actor clearly appears in his version of Shakespeare's *Giulio Cesare* (*Julius Caesar*, 1997), in which an actor who has had a tracheotomy incarnates Anthony. In this play, we see another actor introducing an endoscope in his nose in order to enable us to travel on the inside of his body. Through this conception of the director, the eye of the spectator enters into another space, which could not be seen without this special apparatus. At the same time, at the front of the stage, Anthony, the dumb man makes his speech. The hoarse and distorted voice of Anthony resists the corrupt essence of the speech in a heroic encounter, an internal struggle. Anthony's castrated voice resists the corrupt speech that is given by the very same Anthony. Through the voice of this

2. Romeo Castellucci, "L'iconoclastia della scena e il ritorno del corpo: la potenza carnale del teatro", in Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci, Chiara Guidi, *Epoepa della polvere: il teatro della Societas Raffaello Sanzio 1992-1999*, Milan, Ubulibri 2001, p. 87.

actor, reduced almost to silence and simply capable of emitting some gurgling noises, we understand the titanic struggle of the voice against the word. The imprisoned and reprimanded voice actually expresses anger and indignation, because, at the same time, it succumbs to the charms of speech. In this *mise en scène*, it is this voice that the spectators are meant to hear, and not Anthony's broken speech, the rhetoric of the word giving way to the rhetoric of the body, the latter becoming the vector of authentic speech.

Castellucci radically objects to the theories of Stanislavski; according to which the actor must provoke emotions in the spectator. In *Julius Caesar* this experience materialises on the inside of the actor's body. The use of the endoscope allows the spectators to observe the topography of the larynx, its muscles and the mucous membranes, which produce the words. The spectators not only see the inside of the body in this exploration of the throat, but they also see another image taking form, the female genitalia, because the vocal cords have a shape which evidently evokes it. Thus there is some kind of obscenity in being a witness to this scene; the close-up of this larynx, which dilates and contracts, and the simultaneous gargling, is pornographic – an image rich in references, which, according to Castellucci, also contains an ironic commentary on the apparent virile rhetorical power of politicians³. On the one hand, we see the throat of a dumb politician; on the other, in the muscular movements of his vocal chords, we discover the carnal birth of speech.

3. Romeo Castellucci, "Il pellegrino della materia", *ibid.*, p. 277.

In a very original way, this astuteness of the director allows us, for once, to see an aspect of the actor which is not external, but internal. Consequently, the insertion of the endoscope in the throat is a rhetorical gesture, which literally shows the emotional situation of the actor⁴: this particular body reveals it to us its anger of being voiceless. Castellucci's direction forces us to penetrate into the prism of this rhetorical impotence, the angles of which are, firstly, the will to express oneself, secondly, the effort to form and articulate words, and finally, the words which, after all, have not been uttered in the way that was intended.

By these means the Societas Raffaello Sanzio completely rejects the imitation of reality in art, because this reality is deceptive⁵. In *Julius Caesar*, Castellucci evokes the problem of imitative representation by placing a tombstone on the body of an anoxic actress who is incarnating Cassius. On the stone there is inscribed the phrase 'Ceci n'est pas un acteur' ('This is not an actor'), referring to the famous painting by Magritte, *La Trahison des images*, under which featured the phrase 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe'). Thanks to this staging, we find a double refusal: on the one hand, there is the refusal of her role as an actress (in other words, that which represents her attributes as an actress), and, on the other hand, the refusal of her death as an actress. The body appears as a concrete reality, not as an abstract notion. The reality engraved in the skeletal body of the character is all the pain that is

4. *Ibid.*

5. Claudia Castellucci, "La sindrome di Platone nel teatro delle operazioni", *ibid.*, p. 288.

concentrated in her. The tombstone that is laid on her body seems to be a sign announcing her death. In fact, by refusing her role as an actress, she incarnates the real image of death; thus she is the opposite of the Stanislavskian actor, who is constantly pretending to be dying. Besides, the death that is prescribed in the text of Shakespeare never materialises on the stage, whereas the anorexic actress of Castellucci encases in her body a tangible reality, which she lets the spectator perceive; the death, of course, is not accomplished, but the body of the anorexic is a very close evocation for the spectator.

The attack against the text and the flow of speech of the stage is accentuated in the same play by the presence of the also anorexic body of Brutus. His body is light and weightless on the stage, thus symbolising the anorexia of the text. The act of Brutus falls into emptiness. What does the wasted body of Brutus symbolise? He has killed Caesar, and what happens then? Castellucci specifies:

Emptiness has become the problem of Brutus. Brutus has killed the very image of the world and now that he has surpassed the two questions of Hamlet "to be or not to be", there is nothing left for him except emptiness: to empty himself. Hence the anorexia⁶!

As a contrast to the anorexic characters, we discover in the *Oresteia* the hunger for power in the obese bodies of Clytemnestra and Electra. The same way as the masculine characters Orestes and Pylades, were

6. Romeo Castellucci, "Ceci n'est pas un acteur, considerazioni sull'attore in *Giulio Cesare*", *ibid.*, p. 220 (English translation by Merja Kaipainen) in Claudia Castellucci and Romeo Castellucci, *Les Pèlerins de la matière*, Besançon, Les Solitaires Intempestifs, 2001, p. 95.

extremely thin (thus reflecting their weakness and inaction), in the *Oresteia*, the obesity of the reigning women, their imposing curves symbolise the voluminous roles they play in the drama⁷. Electra turns out to be powerful and determined, while Orestes, who has lost weight, hesitates in committing matricide. In order to be able to strike he must set in motion a mechanical arm brandishing a knife at its end. It is not of his own free will that he kills his mother; he is pushed to it as a result of the “machination” invented by his sister.

For the role of Clytemnestra, Castellucci decides to opt for a really enormous person, a ‘whale’ of a woman. The director evokes the “abyssal creature” of Melville, who “with the backwash of each and every plunge” triumphs over the resistance of people and inexorably devours its victims⁸. In *Le Eumenidi* (*Eumenides*), the last part of the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra turns into a *mater scandalosa*. Castellucci reinvents Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*: the matriarchal order is established over the patriarchal order⁹. Through this opposite rereading of the play, the director restores Clytemnestra to her throne; he gives her all the power.

As we have seen above, Castellucci draws his inspiration from the classical plays, but also from the great religious texts, which gives his work a theological dimension. He uses their parables to convey

7. Romeo Castellucci, “Une *Orestie* italienne saisie par les arts plastiques”, *Le Monde*, 8 July 1997, p. 24.

8. Romeo Castellucci, “*Oresteia* (una commedia organica?), appunti di un clown”, in Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci, Chiara Guidi, *Epopea della polvere*, op. cit., p. 149.

9. Romeo Castellucci, “L’*Oresteia* attraverso lo specchio”, *ibid.*, p. 157.

notions which cannot be explained otherwise. Thus, concretely, the third part of *Genesis* (*Genesis*, 1999) deals with the theme of the assassination of Abel by his brother Cain¹⁰. It turns out that, in *Genesis*, Abel is the very first man to die. In the play Cain has an atrophied arm; this physical characteristic of the actor, with its strong symbolic weight, allows the director to show the metamorphosis of the character after the fratricide. According to Claudia Castellucci, this process is not an annulment of the form, but it marks a "real external metamorphosis"¹¹. When Cain assassinates his brother, he is, in fact, being punished. The arm then starts to atrophy; in this new state, it cannot any longer aspire to freedom. Cain, cursed by God, must wander endlessly like a fugitive¹². He cannot even free himself by means of death, because God forbids anyone from killing him¹³. Cain's body receives blows and suffers atrociously; all his life, but nevertheless he survives and stays alive. He should not be perceived as handicapped, but on the contrary, as a creature whose shape has altered. Castellucci comments as follows:

The characters who suffer are fully conscious; it is they who have knowledge. Their corporal shell has been through

10. "Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.' And while they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him". *Genesis* 4:8.

11. Claudia Castellucci, "La sindrome di Platone nel teatro delle operazioni", *art. cit.*, p. 292.

12. "And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth". *Genesis* 4:11-12.

13. "Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him". *Genesis* 4:13, 14, 15.

numerous transformations, so they will continue to change shape for as long as the suffering finds other forms¹⁴.

In *Purgatorio* (*Purgatory*, 2008), Castellucci is again interested in the metamorphosis of the body; in this case, it is the question of the rape of a child by his father, a scene which refers, this time, to the sacrifice of Isaac. Even if Castellucci's mistrust towards realism is a known fact, an attentive spectator of his plays can still be bothered by the "metamorphoses" of his stage writing. Let us consider the beginning of *Purgatory*. We see the everyday life of a family: the mother, who is preparing the meal; the son, who is playing in his room; and the father, who returns from work. All this happens in a naturalistic setting, to an almost routine rhythm. This routine is interrupted with the rape of the child. Although nothing is visible, we can hear the cries of the victim of torture. After that follows a very surprising scene, the forgiveness. The child indeed forgives his father, who suffers from the act which he has committed, but which he could not prevent from happening. We are confronted here with the mysteriousness of a drama where the tormentor is himself the victim of his act. Yet we may point out that, in this scene, there is a fundamental ambiguity and a true theological contradiction. Contrary to what happens in the biblical story, in *Purgatory* the sacrifice of the child materialises; the child is not spared. There is no providential angel to stay the father's hand, to prevent him from going through with the act.

14. According to Romeo Castellucci, in Manuèle Debrinay-Rizos, "Romeo Castellucci", *La Pensée de midi*, no. 2, Actes Sud, Septembre 2000, p. 99 (translation in English by Merja Kaipainen).

We may also take note of another major characteristic of the play: the suffering that comes after the act; which is inscribed as much in the body of the father as in that of the son. We are dealing with a joint transformation of corporal images. The body of the child grows bigger than that of the father, and, at that moment, the actor who incarnates the father has deformed hands. They both enter into a sort of epileptic dance, a state which tells the spectators that they are witnessing the surpassing of the limits of reality. The passage through this ecstatic dimension clearly allows the act to be surpassed. It becomes clear that the act can be transmuted. From the manner in which Castellucci stages this scene we understand that he does not present a pathological vision of the suffering; what retains his attention is not an act that stops the pain; it is, rather, a question of pain which transforms "into opportunity, energy, and which finally becomes an act of power¹⁵". As terrible and irreversible as it may sound, the act is part of a journey; it is not an abnormal event without the future; it is a link in a chain; it conceals its own revolution; it is inscribed in an organic logic where the bruised body contains its own antibodies. The body suffers, but it changes and is reborn.

It has been observed that to the very act of putting a person with a handicap on stage is enough to provoke numerous reactions. We often talk about instrumentalising, voyeurism, exploitation, and provocation; as it is suggestive of certain medieval practices in which the actual handicap is shown in order to make people shiver; practices that are unani-

15. *Ibid.*

mously condemned by contemporary ethics. One may think of *Freaks*, Tod Browning's film (1932), or, closer to our time, *Elephant Man* by David Lynch (1980); two works showing the cruelty of people who exploit the disadvantaged and make them spectacles at the fairground. Interesting as these works may be, the dominant perspective adopted by their director is that of ethics. The sight of a handicap arouses almost immediately feelings of guilt; this approach satisfies the right-minded side of each spectator. Films, especially, communicate messages, call for order that springs out of obligation, out of benevolence towards society's underprivileged. The *Elephant Man* just wants to be considered as an ordinary human being. In the theatre or cinema, atypical bodies are still often at the service of a discourse on the otherness seen as a handicap (i.e. the physical and/or psychological deficiency, in some cases) which is often didactic and filled with "good" sentiments. The theatre of Castellucci, however, is exempt from such moralistic considerations. On the contrary, he completely rethinks the approach to the handicapped body; all bodies are justified in being on stage.

Castellucci objects radically to the instrumentalisation of people who are handicapped, ill, or "beyond norms"; his actors are fully aware of what they are doing, and they freely participate in the project and understand its relevance. Their presence on the stage belongs to the dramaturgic mechanism, and, envisaged from this angle, the problem of exploitation does not occur. If, when seeing a body, our apprehension of its aesthetic character is rapid, it is, in fact, because our interpretative framework

naturally gives us a limited reading of the reality; we, thus, have a preconceived idea of what is beautiful or ugly, and this is well anchored in our brain; our vision is already highly programmed.

The theatre of images of Castellucci encounters and conflicts with this frame of reference of the spectator. Although every spectator is unique, there are apparently typical reactions which denote the existence of the canons of beauty common to our time and which explain how our contemporaries are placed in the relatively shared aesthetic scale. Thus slimness, just to take an example, is usually thought to be a standard we should approach, which connotes that obesity is neglect towards the prevailing social demands. In these circumstances, a person beyond the norms has either sunk into vice or is a pathological case, or both. Besides, in some languages like Greek, for example, the notion of “beauty” overlaps with the idea of “goodness”. *Καλός* (*Kalos*) means in fact “beautiful” and “good”. Therefore in these circumstances it is difficult to uncouple these notions, except through a sensorial shock. Castellucci, who has a very radical position in this matter, affirms that, “it is aesthetics which produce ethics”. The director explains his position well in a letter to Frie Leysen, the former director of *Kunstenfestivaldesarts* (Brussels), who expressed doubts concerning the presence of the handicapped on the stage:

It's with aesthetics that we traverse the body and wreck it with words. Aesthetics doesn't give answers; it “oversteps” each question by sending it back again. So it's not possible for me to identify *a priori* a set of ethics inherent to the work, which justifies it positively in the eyes of the world.

A work may be true but not just. I cannot recognise ethical justice – I shouldn't do it... really – because the core of the artistic problem is in essence aesthetic¹⁶.

For Castellucci, these aesthetics are characterised by a daring, strange and unexpected experience. It cannot take place in a moralising, homogenised setting, but somewhere where the spectator's consciousness transgresses its limits. Therefore, in opposition to the artificial beauty of the world of communication, Castellucci shows us the real beauty of the human body, which we often push back or ignore. He opts for "an aesthetic impact of sensation" that takes the spectators by surprise like "a wave or a shock" each time they discover a new form. The spectators are overwhelmed by a sensorial experience. It is not during the performance that they devote time to speculations; the analysis of the things they have seen takes place later. It is only after the play, that the meaning materialises in the spectator's brain.

Eleni Papalexioiu has a Ph.D from the Université de la Sorbonne – Paris 4 (Centre de recherches sur l'histoire du théâtre) and a Post-Graduate in Drama Studies from the Université Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle. She teaches Contemporary Theatre at the University of the Peloponnese (Nafplion, Greece) and Greek Classical Theatre at the Hellenic Open University. She has published *Romeo Castellucci, Societas Raffaello Sanzio: When the Words Turn to Matter* (Athens: Plethron editions, 2009, in Greek) and several papers and articles about the modern stage.

16. Romeo Castellucci "Etica ed Estetica", in Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci, Chiara Guidi, *Epoepa della polvere*, *op. cit.*, p. 306 (Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci, *Les Pèlerins de la matière*, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-183) (translation in English by Merja Kaipainen).