

Published in Total Theatre, Summer 2008, 'Being There'. Reflections on performing in Castellucci's *Inferno* at 'Spill Festival 2008'.

Having for some years now turned my interest in performance into a job, I often find myself longing for the open pleasure of discovery and relaxed anonymity offered by early experiences in theatre and performance. Volunteering as an "extra" (in Italian: *figurante*) in Romeo Castellucci's 'Inferno' was just this kind of experience. The atmosphere amongst us extras, about 60 in total, was that of a holiday from performance-as-work: for a week we managed to leave behind any sense of personal artistic ambition (and consequent status anxiety) and instead enjoyed falling and rolling on the floor of the Barbican Theatre, curious to learn about this Italian company on its visit to the UK.

On the first of three rehearsal days Castellucci greeted us and said why he considered the extras to be an integral part of the show, as opposed to a mere ornamental presence: in Dante's poem *Inferno*, he explained, hell is described as a mass of people, huddled together. I couldn't help thinking of London (having just moved there) and the weeks I'd spent walking around the city, a vague sense of foreboding growing stronger the more I kept crashing into other people. With Castellucci, Hell has little to do with the literary description of an Italian 13th century poet: Hell is a thing of the present, and anyone living in a Western city in the 21st century knows its tortures.

Perhaps it was Castellucci's introductory statement which immediately drew me into this piece and made me feel somewhat responsible for it; I wouldn't have expected this given that in the past I'd been quick to dismiss his work as theatrical trickery of dubious relevance to our times. And indeed trickery, and a certain age-old idea of theatre, is at the very heart of it. Standing in the wings during the show at the Barbican, it became apparent how strong the separation is between the stage and the backstage areas: between what you see and what you don't see. The audience watches a world of slow moving actions, beings, and haunting images, but what happens in the wings is a separate performance in its own right: unseen by spectators there are several loud cues ("Go! Go! Go!"), choreographed signals, rope pulling, and – during those few scenes that don't involve the sudden appearance of a grand piano or a white horse – a relaxed chatting which is perfectly covered up by the show's ominous musical score. This is theatre as the precise art of inserting and removing things from a framed black space; and although the works are conceived by Castellucci himself in his notebook, it is his performing company (and family) who, like a circus troupe from another time, skilfully activate that visual machine from back stage.

Once the show was over on the opening night, we all went to celebrate in the Barbican Green Room; looking around, I couldn't help noticing that the main stars of the show weren't there: Apollo the white horse, the 10 German Shepherds, and the 6 toddlers weren't drinking to a successful première of *Inferno*.