

Words for later

by Augusto Corrieri

Quartet (for Anna Akhmatova) is a show, but it is also an ongoing investigation into performance, questioning just how much theatre is about “giving” and “communicating” to an audience, seeking instead ways in which the audience, by the act of watching, are complicit in the making of the performance.

In the following pages I have tried to articulate some of the questions and concerns that have emerged through the gradual process of making this show. The first section, entitled ‘Words for later’, deals specifically with the process of making and showing *Quartet*. The second section, entitled ‘Further words for later’, deals with larger issues connected to performance.

Dartington, 15/11/2006

Words for later: on *Quartet*

Quartet has slowly come into being by showing it in slightly different versions and contexts.

Over the 10 months and more of making the piece, what has changed are not so much the components i.e. the materials, the text, or the movements, but rather the approach. It has gone from being a piece driven by speaking, by a casual, almost comedy-type feel, to one based on slow actions, stillness, and waiting.

The context has changed too. I first started showing it at cabaret-type platforms for emerging performance work: one has to reach out to the audience to some extent, to get the idea, movements, and words across. Now that it has shifted to a studio setting, the piece is allowed to exist without the need to project outwards so much.

The present effort is focused on bringing out the *situation* in which the show happens (which, of course, is always an unknown), more than the show itself. Every performance space (the stage and the auditorium) is already very full: there are thoughts and memories, attention and distraction, strangers and friends; there are conventions and expectations, rules and limits, preconceived ways of viewing. I would like the piece to allow all these things to sit alongside it, to guide it, to play a game of hide and seek. As if the show were merely a pretext to allow these other things to emerge for what they are. To simply be there, with the audience, watching this piece happen, moving one object, then another.

As it slowly enters the domain of a "proper" theatre setting, the piece tries to incorporate and play with the conventions of theatre e.g. the lights going up and down to signal beginnings and endings, giving more and more time to the still objects (the theatre prop, conventionally speaking, is at the lowest rank of importance on the stage).

I cannot think what it might have been like to make the piece in two months, in the privacy of a studio, and then perform it as a finished work. There certainly wouldn't have been this journey, which is still going on, from one way of presenting it to another. Every showing gives me a renewed access to the piece and its inner workings, and the chance to experiment with it, and reflect on where it is going. I am surprised because it wasn't how I had planned it, wishing, at the beginning, for the process to be over and done with in a couple of months at the most.

I also hadn't set out to make a piece *about* performance. Writers such as Borges and Calvino have written novels and stories about writing, about books and language. By doing this, they manage to focus the reader's attention on the act of reading itself: you pay attention not only to the story, but to the way in which you are reading it, and hence constructing it.

The performance's apparent self-indulgence, its referring mostly to its own development and materials, is born out of the same desire to focus the viewer's attention. By insisting on what's there, you invite the indeterminate: the possibility that, for example, a gesture may mean one thing or another. When you look closely, you don't just see things up-close, but rather you start to question what you see, and, through that doubt, you begin to ask questions about the nature of seeing: how much of what one sees is a real or an imagined event? How much of what one sees is merely projective, i.e. a result of what one brings to a situation, and not necessarily a description of the "true" state of affairs?

Some audience members have been saying how they would like to see the 4 parts of *Quartet* performed together, merely to understand if their guesses were right, if movements and words connect in the way they think they do; they have elaborated a mental, or "virtual", version of the show, parallel to its "actual" unfolding.

But the piece, despite brief instances in rehearsal, has never been performed as a whole, nor do I think it could be. I suspect (or rather, I hope) that the spectator's ghost versions of the show are just as real as the show itself. Private performances, or rather, solitary ones, difficult to describe to another.

Performance, then, as a piece of fiction: it never truly takes place, except in the minds of the spectators.

It remains unfulfilled, something that is yet to happen. It doesn't fully exhaust itself by appearing. And, hopefully, it cannot be consumed.

Further words for later: on performance

1. Intro

One of the strange qualities that seem to characterise performance is that it is constantly disappearing as it is happening: its emergence is constantly submerged, and lost. In order to deal with this loss, performance often waves bright flags and lights, in the attempt to *capture* the audience's attention, and fix the event into memory.

But what happens if performance attempts instead to downplay its spectacle, to slow down attention? Perhaps a different quality of attention is allowed to emerge.

To watch, to look, is an active "doing"; it is holding on and letting go, leaving and returning, finding out why we like a certain thing and not another, and challenging ourselves. When we watch a performance there are countless of these silent and invisible journeys taking place inside our minds.

As Paul Auster writes:

"Something happens. A body moves. Or else it does not move. And if it moves, something begins to happen. And even if it does not move, something begins to happen." ('White spaces')

2. Riverdance

My friend and colleague Peter Harrison recently made a solo performance which began with this anecdote:

"I'd like to tell you about an interview I once saw with Michael Flatley, the creator of Riverdance. He said that the first time he was with the original cast, they all looked at him and doubted whether he could lead the troupe: he knew he had to do something to gain their trust and respect. So he did a dance that no-one else in the room, no-one else in the world, could do, and after he'd finished he saw in their eyes how they now had respect for him."

The anecdote describes a moment of theatre in itself. There is someone standing in front of others, who are doubting him, unsure as to whether to trust him or not; and that person then does something that commands their respect: "he saw this in their eyes."

No doubt the dance he did must have been awe inspiring: that's precisely what the story tells us. But let's consider the moment before Flatley managed to impress his cast: that space of doubt, of not knowing what one is worth, not knowing if others will follow you; and the people there doubting Flatley, doubting the project, doubting their possible involvement in it, doubting themselves. It was this negotiation, this struggle, that really constituted a moment of theatre: if anything, the impressive dance put an end to it.

What would remain of the best selling show Riverdance if we were, paradoxically, to remove the dance from it?

There would be this: a row of performers, looking at us, wondering what the hell to do, waiting. They would suddenly find themselves empty handed, bearing not gifts for the audience, but simply the need to try and understand their own presence on stage, and that of the other people, watching them.

3. Bel & Muller

"The public almost cannot stand pauses in the theatre...Beckett; he gave exact lengths to the pauses because he knew that directors and actors are afraid of them. An actor is already scared stiff when he cannot move or say anything for only ten seconds. It's against the arrangement. There is an agreement, a rule: I pay and you work. The actor works, and I as a spectator pay. But I want him to sweat, this actor, for the money I'm paying him. If he doesn't do anything for a while, that means he's relaxing, the swine, on my money, and I won't have that." (Heiner Muller)

It is useful to remember the context: theatre, before anything else, is about itself. From the large opera house to the small pub theatre, these places are made up not only of bricks and walls, but of rules and assumptions about what constitutes theatre and what doesn't: what is visible/invisible, beginning/ending, interesting/boring, captivating/deadly. Every theatre space, even when it doesn't display red curtains or a proscenium arch stage, always invokes these traditional limits and frames: like ghosts, they haunt every performance piece; and everything that we call performance, whether it happens within an "actual" theatre space or not, is always measured against them.

The performance work of Jerome Bel summons and plays with these ghosts. In his pieces the oppressive command to work, to deliver, to 'give people what they want', is carefully examined, exposed, and dismantled. He does this through pause, through stillness and nothings, slow evolutions of thoughts and bodies; performers make slight adjustments, small gestures: they seem relaxed, as if waiting for the next thing to happen, unsure as to what the audience thinks, and always aware of the fact that the theatrical gaze is a two-way process. Riverdance without the dance.

Bel speaks of the desire to make a performance that is on the same level as the people watching it; theatre that doesn't seek to dominate its audience; that recognises the reality of theatrical presentation: namely, that we find ourselves, together and alone, in a space, complicit in the unfolding of a performance¹.

The performer as someone who stands there, waiting, simply being part of that situation: this is very different from dominating the audience by commanding their respect (which is what theatre traditionally demands, and what an audience expects of the performer: that he/she fill the space, capture them, etc). There is a question of responsibility: as the maker, I do not "leave it up to the audience": I do not *leave*. I am there, in the space, "present", but not in an authoritative way. Or at least not as the only author: I am in the space, breathing, thinking, feeling, like others. When you look in the eyes of audience members you don't see respect, you see them, looking at you. This is never easy, and shouldn't be made to be so. It is in this sense that the performers are on the same level as the audience: although different, both parties are equally locked in theatre's mechanism.

In Jerome Bel's works, the arrangement is destabilised; one's presence and gaze, one's reason for being there, *how* to be there: all these things are open to question.

There is a politics at work here: there is a challenge to the idea that a spectator is a consumer who, having paid the ticket price, acquires the right to be entertained and catered for, and who has the power to demand this from the performers. According to Bel, "spectators are not paying in order to consume something, but rather to work towards a definition of their own desire".

During every performance, something is actively sought; negotiated; bargained. The auditorium, without losing its boundary, can be a very active place, a site of solitary wanderings. Journeys on the spot.

¹ The resulting piece, 'The show must go on', is a daring performance that does very much by moving very little. But as Heiner Muller's quote reminds us, pause, the lack of "work", are not in the contract. 'The show must go on' has been greeted by audience members walking out, shouting at the performers, demanding ticket refunds, and even climbing on to the stage to stop the show from going on.

4. Bringing seagulls into the theatre

"There is poetry the moment we realise that we do not possess anything" John Cage

Performance has been moving outside conventional settings and into gallery spaces, shopping malls, car parks, lifts, basements, cupboards, beaches, skies and ravines. As well as searching for interesting sites to base the work on, there is often a desire to find new relationships between performance and its viewers: there is an insistence on finding the "reality" of performance – the way it affects the real world and vice-versa – which is often opposed to the "unreality" of a conventional theatre. (But already the ghosts have the upper hand...)

On the 23rd of September this year, artist Eitan Buchalter presented a piece entitled *Sea Fountain* at the live art and performance festival 'Fresh Fest', in Hastings. Eitan took an industrial quantity of chips from a local fish & chip shop and placed them in a non-working fountain located in the middle of a busy roundabout. His intention, if it is possible to speak definitively about this, was to see how the seagulls would react, if they would fly down and devour this incredible feast.

The piece started at 3.10 p.m., and I was stewarding for it. A small crowd of people watched Eitan place the chips in the fountain and then walk to a nearby pavement where he had set up a camera to film the event. He positioned himself, perhaps unintentionally, directly opposite the audience; between us stood the fountain of chips. So what he was capturing on camera was both the piece as well as its audience.

We waited for something to happen. The seagulls flew over and around the chips, but at a distance: you could tell by their gaze that they could smell the fried potatoes down below, but they seemed unwilling to do anything about it. They hovered, they came and went, and often there were none at all in sight. One audience member asked me: "Has he ever tried this? He should have, because then he would have known that it wouldn't work...". I didn't know. Everyone was waiting in anticipation for the seagulls to swoop down and devour the chips: this was, after all, the event that the piece itself seemed to promise². After 10 minutes it became apparent that this wasn't going to happen easily, and so most of the audience started to leave; the remaining few stayed for another 5 minutes. And then I was left alone. Strangely, although there was no one there to watch the piece, I felt that, by being a steward, I couldn't leave the piece unattended.

I was there for about 1 hour. And as always happens when you slow down and give something a chance, you begin to see things differently. I saw the seagulls, the way they hovered and made pit stops on lamp posts; there was the sea in the distance and I remembered I was in Hastings, a city I don't know; I watched the many people driving around the roundabout on a busy Saturday afternoon; I saw a large car drive around the chip fountain with two husky dogs in the back of it. And all the while I was aware of that which I couldn't see, right there under my nose so to speak, constantly escaping my gaze.

My attention on the "actual" piece came and went; but by staying in the same place, I began to notice just how much was happening there, and how little I had noticed before hand, when all I had done was walk through this place to get to another. I felt that the piece's indeterminacy, which had caused people to leave, had actually allowed me to slowly arrive to a previously undiscovered place, one which I could enter and find my own way through.

It took about 3 hours before the seagulls eventually eat their lot, by which point I was already stewarding for a different piece. How long did the seagull piece last then? 10 minutes? 15 minutes? 1 hour? 3 hours?

Of course it's not important to answer this. What the piece brought to light, though, was the role of the audience, a role that on that occasion was poorly played out. People made the quick assumption that the piece had failed, and so promptly left; short of paying the audience members, there was nothing the artist could have done to try and stop them from leaving.

Within the confines of a theatre space, however, people are less likely to leave. There is a politeness, a sense of cultural duty, that forces or invites people to stay, to sit through it,

² In her last book critic Susan Sontag wrote that "one of the characteristic features of modernity is that people like to feel they can anticipate their own experience." We like to know what will happen in advance, and our attendance at an event is very much about seeing happen that which we already know will happen.

even if they are not enjoying what they see. Even when nothing seems to be taking place. Therefore: if, paradoxically speaking, it were possible to re-stage the seagull piece inside a theatre space, people would probably stay and watch it. There is, after all, an agreement.

And perhaps it is possible to invite the seagulls into the theatre. Within its enclosed space, performance too can open itself to the indeterminate, to the sense of waiting-for-something-to-emerge, the slowing down of attention and perception. To stay put; to see just how much is happening precisely where you thought nothing was.

And just as the seagulls might not immediately swoop down and fulfil the audience's expectation, the theatre audience – performers included – might just have to change their way of looking. To understand differently just what it is that's taking place.

Loosening intention.

Making space where there previously wasn't any.

Inviting other players in the game.

5. Invisible contexts

Every performance work bears a relation to its context. By context I don't mean just a single place in time e.g. Plymouth, 2002, on which a particular work might be based. The context for artistic practice is something multiple and layered, made up, above all, of histories, of ways of thinking and being that come from before. Context is something difficult to see and recognise, almost invisible at times, yet that surrounds us all the time. When developing a work, one is constantly making choices, often not knowing why or how these choices come about, not knowing what to put our thoughts down to. And it is hard to unpack these contexts, these virtual surroundings, just as it is hard to unpack language in the attempt to understand the way in which it defines our lives.

I would like to describe, briefly, and in relation to performance, three of these rather invisible contexts; and to say something of the importance of pursuing them. The first context can be named "conventional theatre structures of representation"; the second is "the past of artistic experimentation"; and the third "the present (battle for performance to continue)".

- Conventional theatre structures of representation

Theatre is an institution, just as is literature, golf, and poker. It is a machinery, made of parts that are assigned a certain function. The way it is assembled is far from "natural" or "necessary": its structures are a mirror of our values, codes and conventions. For example the simple fact that the technicians are typically hidden from view says a lot about the hierarchies present not only in theatrical presentation, but also of those we carry around with us outside of the theatre: in order to value a product, all traces of the process involved in making it must be concealed from view.

It seems important to me to treat the situation of sitting in a theatre – with all its ghosts, conventions, assumptions, etc – as the material of the performance itself; as its context. As Jerome Bel explains:

"It's not easy to explain why I choose to deliberately work within the theatre. My artistic project consists of working on theatre's structures. If theatre still exists it's because it is a representation of the psychic, social, and political structures of our present society. There must be some parallels between the structure of theatre and the structure of the city, between the history of theatre and the history of mankind. Working within the theatre means you are able to bring to light the hidden complexities of our time."

These "hidden complexities" are far from surpassed: the fact that people, for example, have fought against racism, winning equal rights and privileges, doesn't pronounce the end of racism; and the fact that artists have and continue to nudge at the conventions of representation, doesn't mean that these are not functioning any longer. Here is an example I recently read about³.

³ Chapter 4 of André Lepecki's *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. The following description refers to a particular showing that took place at the Tate Modern in March 2003.

Spanish artist La Ribot performs many of her works in large gallery spaces, walking naked around the room whilst the audience sit scattered on the floor or stand wherever they can find room. There are no given or pre-established points in space for the audience or the performer to be, and so the audience and the performer literally are on the same plane, constantly negotiating each other's location. La Ribot picks up one of the many objects in the space and presents a brief performance piece, or *pieza*, with it; then she moves on to another object, and does another piece.

In the particular description I read, La Ribot included a piece that, oddly, required the audience to sit frontally in order for it to work visually: this is what happened:

"Two museum workers [arrived and] stood on opposite walls of the gallery and kept the audience behind an imaginary line running between them. The workers became living proxies of the proscenium arch, ensuring a proper point of view for the audience that could guarantee this particular *pieza's* proper visual success. As stand-ins for an absent architectural structure, the museum workers prevented the audience from crossing over the boundary they defined. They were the embodiment of the architectural imperative of the representational." (Lepecki)

The entrance of the two museum workers is what interests me the most: it speaks of just how little we have moved from traditional aesthetics, how firmly and deeply rooted are these ways of viewing and making theatre that privilege marked definitions and boundaries for audience and performers.

And performance works best not when it tries to simply overcome or ignore these limits, but rather when it seeks to expose them as tangible "live" agents, standing there next to you, making and shaping the event.

-The past of artistic experimentation

Just as theatre contains structures to be aware of, it also contains a history of those artists that have experimented with breaking the rules and that have ventured into new territories.

Recently I found myself re-reading about early 20th century approaches to performance as practiced by Futurists and Dadaists⁴. I was suddenly confronted by just how complex and extensive these works are, how their implications reach with ever greater urgency into the present: these works are far from finished, far from past.

I was then struck by the arrogance of our times, the belief we hold on to that what is happening now – in theatre, in performance, in art – is truly experimental. It seems to me that we are generally happy in ignoring performance's radical pasts; that, to some extent, we need this lack of knowledge in order to keep making the work that we do.

To remember past artistic experiments, to realise the ways in which present performance work is shadowed by what came before it, is an ethical act: it destabilises the current complacency which we find expressed in statements such as "it has all been done before" or in its mirror statement: "anything is possible". By revisiting performance's radical past, it becomes clear that both assertions are equally false.

- The present (battle for performance to continue)

The logic of commerce has taken on a viral form, unchecked, aggressive, and all pervasive. It encroaches on anything that might feed it, and dissipates anything that won't. In this context, the entertainment industry has the power of asserting itself as the main path maker for all cultural events and products. Artistic practice cannot survive within this kind of landscape.

We have gone so far as to now take it for granted that if a performance piece doesn't bow to the audience's demands, to a presumed general taste; if, in other words, it is not trying to "get" an audience, then the piece is essentially failing: the artists are condemned as self-indulgent and arrogant, they are said to be "not communicating".

To put it differently: we are shaping a place that has no longer any gaps or cracks in it,

⁴ See Roselee Goldsberg's *Performance Art: from Futurism to the Present*.

a place that leaves no room for the indeterminate; this is what the writer Baudrillard calls "integral reality", a saturated landscape whose coordinates are always within sight, perpetually present, blocking the way to other modes of being, and always out to swallow the possible into the immediacy of media representations. The anthropologist Marc Augé refers to our situation as one that has established "the tyranny of the perpetual present", an unrelenting visual brightness whose goal it is to nullify our relationship to the past, "to abolish any kind of distance, to elude the obstacles of time and space, to wash away the opaqueness of language, the mystery of words, the difficulty of relationships, the uncertainties of identity or the hesitations of thought."⁵ Reality reduced to a flat, clear, and unambiguous system of living.

If there is no space for the indeterminate; if time and space, as Augé writes, are seen as obstacles we must get rid of, it is no wonder that performance is not wanted on the map of the present.

Performance then becomes an act of resistance: by extending time, by attending to emergence, to the indeterminate, performance creates gaps and spaces, invites potential, and speaks back at the aggressive strategies of contemporary capitalism. And this is ultimately a kind of gift, not an antagonistic provocation: to make a performance that dwells in time and space is a gift which, although not easily consumable, is there for anyone to take.

It's not easy to create these kinds of moments, these gaps. It may feel like moving through a landscape made not of air, but of earth all around one; as in Argia, the imaginary city described by the writer Italo Calvino:

'What makes Argia different from other cities is that it has earth instead of air. The streets are completely filled with dirt, clay packs the rooms to the ceiling, on every stair another stairway is set in negative, over the roofs of the houses hang layers of rocky terrain like skies with clouds. We do not know if the inhabitants can move about the city, widening the worm tunnels and the crevices where roots twist: the dampness destroys people's bodies and makes them very weak; everyone is better off remaining still, prone; anyway, it is dark. From up here, nothing of Argia can be seen; some say: "It's down below there" and we can only believe them; the place is deserted. At night, putting your ear to the ground, you can sometimes hear a door slam.'

Performance is a door slamming underground

⁵ This quote can be read as a list of the elements that make up performance: distance, time, space, opaque language, mysterious words, uncertain identity, hesitant thought; and, according to Augé, these are the very things that our technologies of communication are out to abolish.

Appendix 1

The infernal city

In Italo Calvino's extraordinary book *Invisible Cities*, a traveller returns from his journey around the empire, full of stories that describe its cities and the way people live in them. He reports all this to the emperor, who grows sad about the direction in which things seem to be heading. In the very last passage of the book, the emperor laments:

"Everything is futile, if the final arrival point is nothing but the infernal city, and it's down there that we are being dragged, in an ever tighter spiral."

To this the traveller replies:

"The hell of the living is not something to come; if there is a hell, it's the one that is already here, the hell we live through and create every day by coming together. There are two ways of resisting this condition. The first comes easily to many: you accept hell and become part of it, to the point that you no longer see it. The second is dangerous and requires constant attention and learning: to look for and to recognise who and what, within that hell, is not hell; and to make it last, and to give it space."

Appendix 2

Heiner Muller, 1984.

"The theatre seems to have increasing difficulties in reaching wider audiences, larger sections of society, especially when it tries to interact with, or activate, its audiences. Where do you see reasons for this development and how should one cope with this danger of elitism?"

"The 'elitism', as you call it, this not being immediately accessible, can also have its advantages. For accessibility is often connected to commercialisation. Art becomes commercial at precisely the moment when its time is past. The tension between success and impact, which Brecht spoke of, is important in this respect [...]. As long as a thing works it is not successful, and when success is there then the impact is over. This is because there can only be an impact if, as for example in the theatre, the audience is split, brought home to its real situation. But that means there will be no agreement, no success. Success happens when everybody is cheering, in other words, when there is nothing more to say. For me theatre is a medium which still permits one to avoid that kind of success. In film that is difficult because of the money involved." (Heiner Muller, 1984.)

Sources

- Augé, Marc (2005) *Rovine e Macerie*, Roma: Bollati e Boringhieri.
- Auster, Paul (1998) 'White Spaces', *Selected Poems*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Baudrillard, Jean (2006) *Fragments*, London: Routledge.
- Calvino, Italo (1985) *Invisible Cities*, London: Picador.
- Etchells, Tim *More and more clever watching more and more stupid: some thoughts around rules, games and The show must go on* (Dance Theatre Journal).
- Goldsberg, Roselee (1996) *Performance Art: from Futurism to the Present*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Huxley, Michael and Witts, Noel (eds.) (1996) *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Lepecki, André (2006) *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, London: Routledge.
- Sontag, Susan (2004) *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Penguin.

www.freshfest.org

"Sunt lacrimae rerum"
"These are the tears of things"
Virgil, *Eneid*