
ENGLISH

(Editorial.)

How does theatre approach violence? From what perspective, using what parameters, can it tackle its representation? Representing violence to help transform reality? Could that be the solution – an ethical and political response – for creators who work in contexts where human rights are violated with impunity? And in those where they aren't?

A few weeks ago in the course of an agreeable discussion at the Obrador, Michel-Marc Bouchard, the distinguished Quebec playwright, claimed that violence was inherent to theatre reality. And he insisted on the need for it. But if you really think about it, as Mark Ravenhill also points out, contemporary drama, with Harold Pinter, Edward Bond and Sarah Kane at the forefront, is decidedly violent. Why? Is it a fashion? It is obvious that we should mistrust violence when it becomes a fashion, or when it only aims to stimulate morbidity and increase box office takings. But a violent text cannot be sidelined without putting the brake on a natural response to the world we live in. Perhaps by representing violence we make a pathetic attempt to reconstruct and contextualize – assimilate and understand – our chaotic and bloody world. Terrible. Probably – and here we reconcile ourselves with the ancient value of catharsis – we experience and purge panic and compassion, and in this way accede to a rediscovered political dimension that has an eye on the theatre of the future.

On the other hand, “Is it really possible”, asks Gino Luque in one of

the articles in the Dossier, “to portray an experience of physical pain through language (verbal or corporal), one which eludes interpretation by means of some conceptual exercise? What right does a playwright, a director or an actor have to appropriate an experience of suffering which is alien to them and use it as the basis for the creation of an aesthetic product?” Furthermore, what codes are needed to portray violence realistically onstage? One solution is not to pretend. To contribute personal suffering directly – as proposed by Angélica Liddell, to recover, through sacrifice, not only one's identity, but also one's freedom. To sacrifice one's own body in order to return society the violence which society brings to bear on us.

All in all, these are a few articles that serve for reflection. We have a lot of questions and hardly any answers. Some personal experiences and a theatre text, *Què va passar Wanouelè?* (What happened Wanouelè?), with an introductory note by its director, Carles Alfaro. That's it. A small chink of light – or at least we hope so – in the immeasurable gloom of an aesthetic experience that troubles our consciences and confronts them with contradiction and anguish.

With the interviews by PAUSA with the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Harold Pinter, and the English director, Katie Mitchell (associate of the Royal National Theatre in London), we take a look at contemporary theatre in the United Kingdom. A look that is complemented by the publication of a brief text by one of the rising stars of British playwriting, Jason Hall (who participated at the Obrador last summer). In the rest of the usual sections, as a way of looking back at the last Dossier, we would like to

draw attention to Esteve Miralles's solid proposal evaluating the use of Catalan in theatre. Some brief “notes on creative freedom and artistic quality”, which provide working guidelines and a source of reflection when it comes to editing – writing – a theatre text in Catalonia and in Catalan. To be recommended.

Have a good read.

(Dossier.)**Violence & Theatre****STANDING THE ABYSS:
THEATRE, MEMORY AND
VIOLENCE****Gino Luque Bedregal**

Theatre, since its beginnings, has constituted a privileged arena where a community can confront matters related to public life and its participants, and which even questions the values and certainties on which that community is constructed (or imagined) as such. Hence, theatre has always been an activity that involves the audience in an experience that is not only aesthetic, but also ethical and political. Nevertheless, the question that needs to be asked is what theatre can do, accustomed as it is to portraying human suffering, when violence abandons the field of fiction and becomes a real day-to-day situation or, worse still, becomes a systematic practice, whether instigated by the State or by subversive organisations; how to reappraise the ethical and political dimension of theatre in contexts where the violation of human rights is generalised and goes unpunished; and what happens when the perpetration of these crimes – as happens,

for example, in the case of forced disappearance, torture, arbitrary executions and massacres – defies the possibilities of mental representation and communication through language itself. The question is, then, whether it is possible or not to respond to violence through theatre and, if it is possible, how to go about it.

The above questions are not a purely theoretical exercise. On the contrary, they are undeniably topical in view of the systematic perpetration of all types of abuse and attacks against basic rights in different parts of the world. And in the face of this, the discussion about how theatre should handle violence becomes particularly relevant: what guidelines it should use for its representation; what its position is within the spectrum of symbolic practices that support or oppose it; what influence it has on the imagination of the victims; what ways it opens up for re-considering the causes and the consequences of the conflicts and also for reflecting on the moral, political and criminal liability of the people involved in the process of violence; and what its capacity for the transformation of reality amounts to. To this effect, the purpose of this essay is to reflect on how theatre can contribute to create an awareness of the causes and consequences of political violence, reconstruct the memory of this type of processes, develop ways of meeting the demands of society in the area of justice and imagine new perspectives for the growth of nations inside a democracy.

1. Theatre and the representation of political violence

The representation onstage of the drama of the victims in an armed conflict is highly complex. Speaking of the missing, as proposed by Gabriel Gatti, means making refer-

ence to individuals subjected to a regime of invisibility, facts denied, proofs silenced, bodies eradicated and spaces in a permanent state of emergency. And this implies having to represent objects that, by definition, are an absence. How does one represent, then, the blanks or what no longer exists (and with attempts made to suggest they never existed)? At this point language faces one of its limitations because it is forced to situate itself in the place where things are dissociated from the words that name them, because both the missing and the mortal victims are unapproachable figures using logical language, incomprehensible or only comprehensible in their lack of meaning. How does one give an account, then, of the void that defines them and how does one think about them without overriding their main and most terrible trait, their impossible representation?¹

The representation of the facts of violence is no less problematical, because it involves the portrayal of cruel, degrading, inhuman acts on the stage. This requires the creation of a code that allows the actors to convincingly represent how some terrible deed is committed, but without incurring in the reproduction of the violence they are trying to allude to. For this purpose it is necessary to create a type of theatre that, without moving in the realms of sordidness or becoming morbid, is not too far-removed for the sensitivity of an audience saturated with images of violence by the mass media nor so shocking that it (re)traumatizes the spectators. The justification for this exposure to painful experiences stems from the fact that while it's true that the traumatic details produce a disruption between the experience of those who suffer them and the possibility of understanding them, they also chal-

lenge us to find a new (and more productive) way of understanding these experiences and their repercussions on our lives.² The challenge, then, consists of, through the performance, making a set of facts, justifiably obscure on account of their traumatic nature, intelligible. This entails building a space with an adequate distance between the individual and the terrible facts, so that the spectators can face a collective trauma intensely but without feeling threatened, and so that the show can dialogue with these facts without becoming one more terrible fact. However, if the idea is to make known some story of violence which needs thinking about and acting on, the problem is how to represent the traumatic events and the painful experiences of real victims unknown to the audience, and perhaps even unknown to the playwrights themselves, without profaning their memory, or further violating their bodies or making their suffering into a spectacle. In other words, how is it possible, through a theatre performance, to restore the victims' identity and dignity, wrenched away by the violence committed on their bodies?

On the other hand, is it really possible to portray an experience of physical pain through language (verbal or corporal), one which eludes interpretation by means of some conceptual exercise? What right does a playwright, a director or an actor have to appropriate an experience of suffering which is alien to them and use it as the basis for the creation of an aesthetic product? Are these attempts explained by an irresponsible desire to fuel the modern fascination with violence, or a narcissistic desire on the part of the artist to highlight his superiority over the perpetrators of those brutal acts? Is it possible to

represent violence without subjecting the victims to exposure that degrades them even further? Conversely, doesn't the non-representation of violence perhaps only contribute to its legitimacy and perpetration? Isn't it only through denouncement, which implies necessarily some form of representation, that we can stop these crimes from going unpunished and being committed again? Aren't they, after all, stories that have something to do with the spectators? Isn't it the responsibility of the forces of resistance, among which we can include theatre, to make those missing persons visible in the public sphere and help them, through their fragmented nature or even through their absence, tell their stories? Without the portrayal of the said acts of violence, would the audience have access to these testaments and would it then be able to recognise its role and responsibilities in the story?

In reality, perhaps before trying to resolve whether it is licit or not to represent acts of violence, rather we should ask ourselves how to do it, which is a more useful approach from both the creative and analytical standpoints. Sustaining that a phenomenon should be confined by its ignominious nature, in this case the crimes of warped human beings, to a place of absolute exceptionality is not necessarily equivalent to renouncing the possibility of its portrayal. Rather this conviction, as Gatti observes, should induce us to search for a means of expression that is consistent with its exceptional nature.³ Therefore, it is more appropriate to use the approach adopted by Diana Taylor and ask oneself how to represent such violence; how to write about the victims (murdered, missing and maimed); how to give them meaning in their absence; how to act in response to these rep-

resentations that upset spectators, artists, activists and academics alike; and how to develop a story around the said victims despite the fact that they refuse to be named by means of conventional methods of representation?⁴ However, although it is productive, this reappraisal of the debate, which assumes the need to portray the horror, doesn't answer our initial question: what can theatre do, as a cultural activity, in the face of violence?

2. Theatre and memory

Any exercise in playwriting or production implies the re-presentation of a series of facts before a community, whether it be of readers or spectators. This, for its part, implies the introduction in a public space of those re-presented facts, whether these have their origins in the world of the imagination or have a connection with the real world. In this respect, insofar as any theatre exercise establishes a series of facts in a society's imagination, theatre may be regarded as a practice associated with the preservation of the historical memory, since any piece of theatre may document or bear witness to a historical moment or fact and determine how society interprets it. From this standpoint, theatre constitutes a tool for the construction, transmission and preservation of community memory.

The above, which may be considered a mechanism through which a society reinforces its bonds of identity, acquires an extraordinary ethical dimension in a context of exception such as a dictatorship or a civil war. Insofar as these de facto powers or antagonists try to assume the right to make their own version of the facts the official story, resituating – as theatre does – a series of facts when attempts have been made to erase them or manipulate their inter-

pretation constitutes an act of resistance combating the abuse of power, injustice and barbarity. Thus, the representation onstage of these acts of violence becomes, without this necessarily being the original or main goal, an act of denouncement and an action in the fight against the projects designed to obliterate or control the memories that characterise these states of emergency. In this sense, theatre activity may also be understood as a way of exercising democracy, because in a democratic society no power (not even that which emanates from the State) can forbid individuals from searching out and learning the truth about certain facts, and less still sanction those persons who do not accept a certain account acclaimed as the sole and official version.

On the other hand, the oral expression of a series of atrocities, in this case through a discourse that adopts the form of a theatre piece, already constitutes, in itself, a therapeutic exercise, because, as proposed by psychoanalysis, in order for individuals to overcome the consequences of a trauma, they must reconstruct the story of the traumatising event and communicate it to another party. Thus, on finding themselves obliged to verbalise those memories, the affected individuals can open up the necessary distance with regard to those facts in order to objectify them in a coherent discourse. And, at the same time, they can assign an order to their painful memories, which makes them more intelligible and, therefore, open to interpretation and to the possibility of giving them meaning. On the other hand, in view of the impact produced by the immediacy and sensation of the absence of mediation proposed by a theatre performance, placing the said traumatic events before the

same community affected by them restructures the said therapeutic effect, because the stage production functions as a sort of mirror where the community sees its crises reflected and also identifies the characters and the events presented in the story in the piece. In this way, the scope of the above mentioned therapeutic effect is no longer limited to the individuals who enunciate the discourse, but rather, on being reinforced by the intrinsic characteristics of the theatre communication circuit, is extended to the whole community of spectators.

In this sense, theatre can function not only as an instrument for denouncing past injustices, which may serve to recall the silenced acts of violence, but may also become a means by which the community acquires self-knowledge, because confronting us with our collective traumatic experiences allows us to give meaning, in retrospect, to our history. This epistemological exercise becomes even more necessary when the community has to contend with an object of learning which consists of a series of events marked by the arbitrary use of force and the abuse of basic rights. In these cases, understanding the injustice makes it possible to pass on from revealing the crime to establishing its origin and causes so that society can act on them, i.e., establishing the measures needed to prevent a repetition.⁵

Nevertheless, the need to recover the past indicates nothing as yet as regards where this recovered knowledge should be situated or what role it should play in the present. According to Tzvetan Todorov, individuals should not attribute those recovered memories a dominant place in their consciousness, but rather let them recede towards a pe-

ripheral position, where they become harmless.⁶ This action situates them in their true dimension, soothes the pain they produced and makes it possible to give them some sort of meaning. Likewise, Todorov points out that any recovered occurrence can be taken literally or given exemplary significance. In the former case, the event leads nowhere except back to itself. In the latter case, without denying its singularity, the event may be interpreted as a manifestation, among other possible ones, of a more general category of events, with which this memory is laid open to analogy and becomes a model for understanding new situations. This exercise reveals the liberating nature of exemplary memories and shows how the past can become a foundation for acting on the present. The literal use of the past, which makes the old event insurmountable, leads to the submission of the present to the past. Exemplary use, on the contrary, makes it possible to use the lessons of past injustices to fight against those that are occurring at the present time.⁷ Thus, the importance of convoking the memory of violent actions and verifying their topicality lies in the fact of using them as a basis for drawing lessons so that mistakes committed in the past are not repeated and for recognising the persistence of certain injustices. During this process, as Manuel Reyes Mate points out, the role of the persons who rescue the past from collective amnesia is fundamental, inasmuch as they are responsible for evaluating the validity of the injustice denounced and, in the case of its remaining unresolved, responsible for demanding a solution.⁸

3. Theatre and postmemory

The above line of argument, even if it establishes the need to recover a community's past of violence and

horror, and establish the relationship between theatre and historical memory, still does not resolve the problem of how theatre can confront violence. Neither does it clarify how the said events should be portrayed, nor how the artists involved in the theatre performance can draw closer to the victims' story (or, even, the victims themselves) in a respectful way that avoids any sensationalist exploitation of the circumstances. Less still, it doesn't explain how the performance can, in the attempt, avoid being reduced to a melancholic reminiscence aimed at soothing the guilty consciences of the survivors.

Marianne Hirsch, when studying the transmission of traumatic memories in families that experienced the Holocaust, introduced a concept which offers an alternative response to the aforementioned questions: postmemory. This alludes to the transmission of traumatic memories from one generation to the next, from the point of view of an individual who directly experienced or witnessed the traumatic events to someone else who didn't. The generation that carries out this recovery of the past has the possibility, on contextualising the images of violence from the standpoint of the present, of converting them into a tool for working on the emotional health of the individual and the group.⁹ It is an attempt to repair the course of life shattered by the trauma, which anchors individuals in the past and makes it impossible for them to develop a new life project. It is, then, a way of realising the main task of the survivor of a tragedy: to find new ways of integrating the traumatic events in the individual's existence.¹⁰

Although in Hirsch's original proposal postmemory describes the re-

lationship between the children of the survivors of collective traumas and their parents' experiences, it may allude, in a broader sense, to the inheritance and transmission of a cultural trauma in general. Later, by means of different forms of identification, adoption and projection, the traumatic memories are available to individuals who, in theory, have no ethnic or blood ties with the victims. Postmemory, therefore, is a type of intersubjective memory linked to cultural or collective traumas, through which people become the witnesses in retrospect to some event, because, on the one hand, they identify with the victim and adopt their traumatic experiences as if they had gone through them themselves, and, on the other hand, because they decide to inherit the memory of the said traumatic experiences and inscribe them in their own history, where they also find meaning and illuminate other events. Therefore it is an empathic relationship with the victim, which may be used to extract a model of ethics applicable in the present.

The use of postmemory is, then, an ethical and respectful way of approaching the traumatic past of other people without committing the frivolity of the simple appropriation of events that one can never fully understand inasmuch as not having experienced them personally. On extrapolating its implications to the field of theatre, postmemory becomes the most honest way available to creators, – but more so to the spectators –, of relating to a story of violence that they have not necessarily experienced directly, but which they are moved by and with which they identify.

4. The spectator-witness

The dynamics of postmemory in theatre imply, then, a special effort

on the part the spectators, but, in addition, oblige the show to generate certain strategies with the aim of creating, the show itself, a certain particular type of spectator who feels a commitment to what is depicted on stage, not only on an analytical level but, above all, on an ethical level. The show should be capable, therefore, of producing what Peggy Phelan denominates *spectator-witnesses*, a term that is intended to get round the passive connotation usually associated (mistakenly) with the role of the spectator and also to explore the possibilities of a new model of response to theatre. Phelan defines spectator-witnesses as spectators who witness an event in a fundamentally ethical way; they feel the weight of what they observe; and take a stance when faced with it.¹¹ However, being a spectator-witness is not equivalent to feeling compassion in the face of real or simulated suffering, because compassion is not exactly an ethical attitude, bearing in mind that it is not necessarily transformed later into action on reality. Being a spectator-witness demands the assumption of responsibility when faced with the revelation of uncomfortable truths that exceed the limits of the purely fictional. The fiction of theatre, then, when connected to Todorov's postulations on exemplary memory, trains us to know how to react in the face of reality, and becomes a space where we rehearse our obligations when coping with situations that demand a clearly-defined position and concrete action. In this way, the show itself eludes its ephemeral condition by creating a community of spectators, in the sense defined at the beginning of these reflections, and implicates the spectator in a political, ethical and aesthetic experience.

Converting the spectators in witnesses means, then, assigning an ethical side to their hermeneutic activity. Thus, authentic spectator-witnesses, as defined by Karine Schaefer, would be spectators whose system of moral judgement has been affected in such a way when confronted by a show that involves a political event and performed conserving its force, complexity and original ambiguity, that they are capable of questioning their ideas about the world and the way they assume their moral responsibilities.¹² To this end, the spectators should be confronted with a show that goes beyond the sphere of the purely fictional inasmuch as it allows them to draw analogies with events in their immediate reality and delegates responsibility to them. Thus, indifference to the production onstage is out of the question. And through this conception of theatre activity the performance becomes a way of preserving the collective memory, which allows us, in its turn, to review the past and the present from new perspectives, and also imagine, predict and rehearse the future.

¹ GATTI, Gabriel. "Las narrativas del detenido-desaparecido (o de los problemas de la representación ante las catástrofes sociales)". *Confines*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2006, p. 28.

² CARUTH, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 10.

³ GATTI, Gabriel. "Las narrativas del detenido-desaparecido (o de los problemas de la representación ante las catástrofes sociales)". *Confines*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2006, p. 28.

⁴ TAYLOR, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 147.

⁵ TODOROV, Tzvetan. *Memoria del mal, tentación del bien: indagación del siglo XXI*. Barcelona: Península, 2002, p. 151.

⁶ TODOROV, Tzvetan. *Los abusos de la memoria*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2000, p. 24.

⁷ TODOROV, Tzvetan. *Los abusos de la memoria*, p. 29-32.

⁸ REYES MATE, Manuel. *Memoria de Auschwitz: actualidad moral y política*. Madrid: Trotta, 2003, p. 27.

⁹ HIRSCH, Marianne. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory". *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2001, p. 8-9.

¹⁰ HIRSCH, Marianne. "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", p. 13.

¹¹ PHELAN, Peggy. "Performing Question, Producing Witnesses". In: ETCHELLS, Tim. *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment*. New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 9.

¹² SCHAEFER, Karine. "The Spectator as Witness? *Binlids* as Case Study". *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2003, p. 5-6.

ABRAHAM AND THE DRAMATIC SACRIFICE

Angélica Liddell

In times of collective deaths, individual sacrifice as an act of rebellion or barricade is necessary. Art, a private sacrifice in a public space, is our rebellion. Thanks to poetic sacrifice we recover the identity we lost in the massacre. We are animals and we want to assert the SELF. Because animal doesn't only signify living being. Living beings that lose their limbs in the air together with

another effusion of shattered limbs. By the sacrifice we mean SELF. On the other hand, thanks to the contemplation of the sacrifice the spectators recover the feeling of the continuity of the SELF. According to Bataille we are discontinuous beings and "the contemplation of death" in the sacrifice restores the experience of continuity. "The victim dies, and then those present partake of an element which that death reveals to them. This element may be referred to as *the sacred*. The sacred is precisely the continuity of the being revealed to those who pay attention, in a solemn ritual, to the death of a discontinuous being". The return to the continuity of the being is the return to the SELF. In times of "warlike peace", as Heidegger denominates it (because according to Heidegger war breaks out to guarantee peace), where death is a number, a mass of amputated limbs, we resist with the SELF, with the unique, with our totally individual desire to kill what we most love, our only son, Isaac, our body, our thoughts, i.e., we resist through art, through the IN-COMPREHENSIBLE. We are the particular Abraham who breaks the general laws of men. According to Bataille, in sacrifice death and violence are delirious: "they cannot keep the law and show the respect that orders human activity socially". Thus, Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, is a transgressor who orders life socially. And for this reason poetic violence and death serve to measure the degree of repression, of cowardliness and mediocrity in a society. Bataille affirms that "death (in poetic sacrifice too) violently disturbs the social order". This is the reason why poetic sacrifice is related to obtaining freedom.

Poetic sacrifice not only extracts us from the massacre, but also liber-

ates us from the collectivisation of behaviour, from massification, from uniformity, from the global, these concepts so closely linked to the repression, cowardliness and mediocrity of our orderly societies. Massification finds its pathological equivalent in the massacre. The misuse of man's domination of the earth finds its equivalent in the massacre. The power of poetic sacrifice resides in its opposition to the collective, to general opinion, in other words, to the Hegelian general, i.e., to the support of the State. Sacrifice leads to the suspension of ethics. With its poetic individual violence sacrifice redeems real collective violence, the violence of the State. And, on the other hand, sacrifice reveals spiritual violence from the exterior. For Bataille the body, through sacrifice, ceases to be mere anatomy in order to reveal an interior, transcendent violence: "what the exterior violence of the sacrifice reveals is the interior violence of the being", i.e., the sacrifice reveals a spiritual violence to us which is the prelude to thought and transcendent knowledge. The bruised flesh discloses intimations of the spirit to us. The search for identity through the body is pure spiritual strength. And extending the quote from Bataille, "what the exterior violence of sacrifice revealed was the interior violence of the being as perceived in the light of bloodshed and the display of the organs. That blood, those organs full of life, were not what anatomy sees in them". Through sacrifice, spiritual conclusions are drawn that are not accessible in a calculated life, designed to protect our physical integrity. Sacrifice implies maximum physical vulnerability, which is maximum spiritual vulnerability. It is disprotection. The flesh is already violence, because of reproduction, death and sex. And sacri-

fice is an offering and transgression because it debilitates the force that the law applies to reproduction, death and sex. According to Bataille, what the sacrifice reveals is the flesh, the flesh that suspends the law, the flesh that frees itself from the law to explore the human condition. In the flesh, as a liberating instrument, there lies risk and provocation, the barricade. And in no place is more flesh sacrificed than on the stage. Bataille says: "The flesh is the excess in us that opposes the law of decency; the flesh is the natural enemy of those tormented by the prohibitions of Christianity; the flesh is the expression of the return of a menacing freedom". The sacrifice is, therefore, excess, beautiful excess. Liberating excess, excess that draws attention to the repression in society. Derrida also relates sacrifice to transgression and repression. Being a transgression of the law against killing, sacrifice should address "the excluded, the ostracised, the censured, the repressed and the displaced" in the *calculated life*. According to Derrida, poetic sacrifice "is an abnormal moment that reveals the law to be repression". So sacrifice is liberation. In times where decency is a mandate and correction a persecution, the desire for indecency, incorrectness, in short, for immorality, civil disobedience, poetic violence, is the way towards greater spiritual emancipation, and it stands as the only route to independence.

Some artists harm and expose their bodies violently before the audience in order to recover precisely this identity and independence, which is spiritual strength. The closer the sacrifice is to nihilism the greater the risk of real destruction. This approximation occurs out of distrust of the fictional. The

greater distrust provoked by the fictional the closer poetic sacrifice comes to destructive nihilism. The contribution of personal suffering, the contribution of the Self so much criticised by theatre, is related as much to the distrust of the fictional as to the distrust of reality itself. We need to reaffirm the truth in opposition to falseness; we feel that everything is false; the insufficiency of the fictional and the manipulation of reality force us to resort to personal feelings as the only certainty, as the most suitable way of discovering some instant of truth, of sincerity. We perceive that in fiction and in reality language is never on a par with real suffering and for this reason we use our feelings, what we are sure of. Using one's own feelings, one's own pain, bears no relation to narcissism, rather it is an act of extreme generosity and renouncement, renouncing the protection of the masks. The exhibition of your pain makes you more vulnerable in the presence of the others; you bear your naked breast to the knives. It occurs very frequently in the case of female creators that self-injury has a belligerent character that opposes the collectivisation of the feminine gender. In this way artists such as Marina Abramovic and Gina Pane sacrifice their bodies in order to return the violence employed against them to the society that collectivises them. Through sacrifice we recover not only our identities but also our freedom. Sacrifice, in any of its poetic forms of expression, is concerned with obtaining freedom and the benefits of freedom, precisely because it is transgression. The transgression began with Abraham and in the modern world concludes with Sade. Sacrifice rips us open from Abraham to Sade. Poetic sacrifice is concerned, then, with breaking

away from social hypocrisy, from the social pact, from the general. Unexpectedly, the particular triumphs over the general, the IN-COMPREHENSIBLE over the COMPREHENSIBLE, the DIFFICULT over the EASY. Art is the struggle of the particular against the general. Sacrifice contains another paradox: we create out of destruction, destroying we act, we are builders of debris, builders of ruins. It is not the desert that grows, sterile; it is the powerful creative force of destruction. Transgression is transformation.

Derrida, with great ingenuity, affirms that in theatre Abraham, Isaac and the ram stand up at the end and take a bow; it is the sacrifice of the sacrifice. But to consider that theatre is the sacrifice of the sacrifice simply because there is no real crime and no real blood is a surprisingly superficial view. It is true that a supposedly unrepeatable event becomes repeatable, but that repetition does not exclude the reality of the sacrifice. In the performance onstage there is sacrifice because there is nihilism, because there is angst, because the performance is what precedes real death, because the tragic does not exist independently of the onstage performance, the tragic is poetic sacrifice by opposition to life, by opposition to the final bow of Abraham, Isaac and the lamb. Poetic sacrifice is also real. Maybe Derrida only had contact with the theatre of costume and talking heads that takes no more risks than a memory exercise. It is clear that in our reflection on poetic sacrifice all those shallow and sterile manifestations of the performing arts are excluded. Mannoni says, "A wolf mask does not frighten us the same as a wolf, but it frightens us in the same way as the image of the wolf we have in our minds".

Life is the wolf, while the sacrifice is the image of the wolf we have in minds. Both things are real and both things make us afraid. The important part of the poetic sacrifice is not, then, the blood, although sometimes it is shed as an artistic choice, but the angst, “the image of the wolf we have inside us”. Through angst, which precedes death, the limits of culture, of history and of religion are transgressed; angst is also a type of political beligerence, because “the image of the wolf we have inside us” is something we never admit to anyone, something we don’t want to explore, something we want to hide, and it only becomes evident through the sacrifice. The private becomes political to combat repression. Sacrifice explores the forbidden areas of the mind. Angst, in its approximation to transgression, finds its equivalent in the violation of the limits of the body, like in Viennese Actionism, or of the limits of thought, like Genet. Without angst only the law exists.

Therefore, the important thing about poetic sacrifice is not the bloodshed, but rather the angst. Thanks to art we can relate to the world in a state of apprehension. Poetic sacrifice is about being on the alert for “the shaking-up of the idea”. We act all shook up, so that the link between melancholy and thought develops onstage. As Roger Bartra tells us in *El duelo de los angeles* (The duel of the angels), “melancholy, symbol of imbalance and death, sinks its roots into the heart of the European culture, steered since the 18th century by rationalism, as a source of knowledge”. The revelation comes through angst, and angst does not seek the greater benefit, it is in itself. For this reason poetic sacrifice means Abraham and not Agame-

mon. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter to save a whole people, for the greater benefit, for the general good. It is possible to understand his action. It has a Hegelian significance. Abraham’s, on the other hand, has no meaning.

Abraham took his son Isaac to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him by divine command, without a greater goal than to commit the deed for its own sake, because the mandate is disconcerting; it entails transgressing the laws of man and even those of God himself, since God rejects human sacrifice and the first commandment is that you shall not kill. It is a test that goes against all logic because the whole of Abraham’s life was marked by the divine promise of descendents and orientated towards this as its goal and rationale. And even so Abraham is willing to ascend Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son by virtue of a disconcerting mandate. Abraham’s sacrifice is, quite horrendously, no more than a test. His sacrifice does not contribute to the general good: it is quite simply, and terribly, a test. Poetic sacrifice, like Abraham’s, has no goal; it is a horrendous test, absurd, which has no more value than that of being INCOMPREHENSIBLE. This gives rise to one of the great frustrations which art has to live with. We don’t save the world, we don’t look after the sick, we haven’t discovered the malaria vaccine: art is a deeply individual business, absurd. Since Hegel laid down the bases of the general, particular actions that do not contribute to the general have been concerned with the absurd. The terrible and the beautiful thing about poetic sacrifice is that it is only a test. And in this lies its valour, its difficulty and its risk. Being a test, sacrifice should be supported by a belief. Kierkegaard, in *Fear and*

Trembling, affirms that Abraham acts with the absurd in mind, which is belief. A sacrifice is a solitary act of faith. The scenario is loneliness, because it does not provide a general service. The spectator witnesses the loneliness of the test; he is faced with the loneliness of an absurd act of faith. We actors are loners who burden ourselves with angst. On suspending ethics, meaning the laws that govern general opinion, we discover that our sacrifice is carried through in what Kierkegaard calls “universal loneliness”; we act in this universal loneliness, bearing the weight of our responsibility, despite the fact that this loneliness comes into contradiction with what is manifest in the sacrifice.

But an angel appeared at the last moment to stop the sacrifice.

Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the story of Abraham is as follows: that we should be willing to kill whom we love most so that they will be returned to us. “Only the person who knows angst can rest. Only the person who descends into hell saves the loved one, and only the person who brandishes the knife will conserve Isaac”, says Sören. Destroy to save. To create man it is necessary to destroy the law. To make art it is necessary to destroy art. Art shares the paradox of Abraham: only if we are willing to kill Isaac will he be returned to us, we return to life thanks to transgression, we annihilate so that life can be returned to us, so that the man can be returned to us.

The creative act is immolation, but salvation at the same time: it returns continuity to discontinuous beings. We sacrifice what we most love and this action is self-hatred. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche says

the most contemptible man is the one incapable of feeling of self-contempt. Sacrifice should be a form of self-contempt, which simultaneously is love for the sacrificed object, renouncement, surrender. It is “the most absolute expression of surrender”, because it is done out of love. If I don’t feel contempt for my own life I cannot surrender what I most love. Self-contempt is related to the generosity of the action. In poetic sacrifice there is an air of inevitability clearly linked to belief, because it is a test and linked to love. Love, which is no more than self-hatred, needed to create out of destruction. Kierkegaard quotes St Luke, “If anyone comes to me, and hates not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, and even his own life besides, he cannot be my disciple”. Just as melancholy and thought are united in sacrifice, love and thought also go together. Heidegger stresses this point when he reflects on the following verse by Hölderlin: “Who has thought the deepest loves the liveliest”. Heidegger is interested in the two verbs united in the same line, think and love. Heidegger says, “Love lies in thought; it is admirable rationalism to affirm that love originates in thought”. Sacrifice can bring us to the realization-representation of an act forbidden by ethics, but it will never induce us to stop loving, which is hating oneself, one’s father, one’s mother, and everyone else. We work despite and thanks to this love that is hatred of the rest. And this is our only certainty. In the same way, the spectators witness an unethical act, but they cannot help admiring and loving the sacrifice, which is hatred for its own sake, hatred of the hidden part, which has just been revealed. Believing is a great thing, but contemplating the believer is even greater, says Kierkegaard. It is the

audience who wish to witness the event of the sacrifice, despite the suspension of the ethical, with the same strength as Abraham or the same strength as the murderers. Kierkegaard opens *Fear and Trembling* with some sentences that probably refer to his own father, “And his soul only harboured one desire: to see Abraham; he only had one regret: not having been able to be a direct witness of that event”. The event of a suspended murder.

Sacrifice is suspended murder; it is, therefore, beyond the ethical. Poetic sacrifice is pure transgression. This means, as we said before, confronting society, a series of family, social, political and historical circumstances that define us. Therefore, a confrontation with the norms is produced in a poetic sacrifice, and the result is the INCOMPREHENSIBLE, and only through the INCOMPREHENSIBILITY of the transgression can a new reconfiguration of the world be achieved, only the INCOMPREHENSIBLE stirs up the necessary conflict in the spectator for this reconfiguration to be achieved. And so although poetic sacrifice is a test that does not aim at any greater benefit, it does generate an inevitable ethical gain. When we suspend the ethical, we work with “a moral form of evil”. Thanks to the suspension of the ethical, the spectator reaches moral conclusions; we suspend ethics so that the spectator assumes them. Sade, the culmination of the absurd of Abraham, employs the same thesis: evil as one of the ways of producing good. In *Justine* (or *The Misfortunes of Virtue*) he expresses this idea as follows: “Doubtless it is cruel to have to describe a host of ills overwhelming a sweet-tempered and sensitive woman who, as best she is able, respects virtue, and, on the other hand, the affluence of

prosperity of those who crush and mortify this same woman. But nevertheless, if good is born out of this tableau of misfortunes, will we feel remorse for having offered them?”. Continuing with Kierkegaard: “the goal is to extract a knowledge of life from the paradox”. The idea of Rohmer in his book *The Taste for Beauty* is very similar: “Art... justifies its immorality on restoring its assets to the ethical”. Bataille insists on the revelational character of sacrifice, “Through angst it brings to the surface the obscure activity concealed in all human existence”, which is beneficial. And he also affirms that through sacrifice, the revelation takes place “of what usually escapes our attention”, which is also beneficial. In Heidegger we also find the idea of making the invisible visible, when he discusses beauty. In Heidegger visibility is related to truth, “Beauty is a gift of the essence of truth, bearing in mind that truth means revealing the hidden. The beautiful is not what pleases. Rather it is what is encompassed by that gift of truth which materializes when the eternal, lacking appearance and, therefore, invisible, is caught in the reflection of the maximum manifestation”. Thus, sacrifice is the maximum manifestation, maximum visibility, even though it causes pain and fear. Or precisely because it causes pain and fear, and hatred of ourselves, sacrifice is the maximum manifestation, in other words, “the dark activity concealed in all human life”, and of course the result is inevitably beautiful. So even if the sacrifice lacks an objective, in the end, as Godard says, there is still the ethical. Poetic sacrifice is the heir to Pascal’s paradox according to which the INCOMPREHENSIBLE serves to help us understand the universe and ourselves. Making the invisible visible

is related to surprise. Through sacrifice we put into practice the pedagogy of surprise. In art, when faced by the exceptional, there is no learning without surprise. It is not possible to learn without surprise, because it is a question of believing in the incomprehensible and in the impossible. In his essay *On the Sublime* Schiller defends the incomprehensible as a path of knowledge. "What is incomprehensible for the mind, confusion, can equally well serve as a representation of the suprasensory and provide the mind with an impulse to elevate itself". So theatre, poetic sacrifice, is linked to the incomprehensible, not the comprehensible, and this leads us to the essence of poetic sacrifice, MYSTERY. We know we have to go beyond what can be understood, that we have to find the inexplicable. Poetic sacrifice causes general bewilderment; it causes bewilderment because we cannot "provide an explanation for each opposing argument". We cannot say what would explain everything, what would make everything comprehensible. We cannot give a finite answer to an infinite question. We can only show the sacrifice and the incomprehensible of the sacrifice. In other words, the mystery of angst. The experience of the beautiful begins when the comprehensible, the measurable, the explicable is suspended. The experience of the beautiful begins when technique is expelled by the miracle. The ineffable is the measure of beauty. Attempting to justify beauty, attempting to analyse it with explanations is, of course, the work of dull minds, impoverished and mediocre, whose only resources are academic. Mystery should always be given an opportunity. In other words, the work also depends on an error, an accident, chance, discovery. The passing of life, the enjoyment of a good

breakfast, the sadness of a blind dog, mysteriously define a work. Nobody in the world can analyse or find justification in the enjoyment of a good breakfast or an encounter with a blind dog, pleasure and meeting, which will mysteriously define the work.

So, like Abraham, when we are charged with the sacrifice we cannot make ourselves understood. As Kierkegaard says: "And the angst and the pain of the paradox reside in the fact that Abraham cannot make himself understood by anyone" and "whoever observes him cannot understand him, and much less so feel much trust on resting their gaze on him." In effect, the person charged with the sacrifice feels the pain of not being understood and works with this pain. And since the sacrifice is an incomprehensible act, it is closely linked to madness, that same madness seen in Diderot's work, *Rameau's Nephew*, where the jester fails to make the philosopher understand him, and steps over the line that separates professional madness from clinical madness, fusing them together in one impossible but infinitely moving and revealing gesture, since Diderot, in *Rameau's Nephew*, associates madness and exclusion with the renovation of aesthetic ideas. Diderot uses an eccentric and a failure to tell the truth. The jester's work, the poetic sacrifice, is the mountaineering of suffering. It is not possible to understand without risk, that risk that brings him so close to lepers and criminals, together with those who shared confinement for centuries. In other words, the madman is a transgressor. Kierkegaard also discusses Abraham's madness. He says, "From the human point of view Abraham is mad, and will not succeed in making anyone understand him". We know how agreeable it is to be understood from the stand-

point of ethics, but "the solitary path (of the sacrifice) is a steep and narrow path". We can't understand Abraham, but he moves us, he scares us, he terrifies us. Of course, poetic sacrifice by its very nature is made up of everything people prefer not to hear, as Kierkegaard also says: "What nobody wants to know anything about is angst, wretchedness, paradox". When we witness something that is beyond the general, when ethics is suspended, the result is a feeling of horror, because it lies within human possibility, because it concerns the substance of the human soul. It concerns what makes us the same, not what differentiates us. What makes man the same is the worst part of man. What makes us the same is precisely what we don't want to see. If we present an ethical conflict, it is very easy for us to tell each other apart, we are on the side of ethics, naturally. The ethical divides men into good and bad, but if dramatic sacrifice is suspended, ethics reveals NOT what differentiates us (here we can never lose, we always have the upper hand), but what makes us the same, PASSION. And what makes us the same, this is what really terrifies us, what we don't dare to reveal to anyone.

Perhaps we should conclude with this reflection by Derrida, that the paradox of the stage sacrifice consists in "leaving space for the non-theatrical in the heart of theatre".

TWO CLARIFYING REFERENCES: RAVENHILL, VIRGINIA TECH AND THE CATHARSIS

As a result of the events that occurred at the Virginia Tech in April 2007 and the ensuing persecution of violent creative writing by the U.S.

academic authorities – or rather their fear of it – Mark Ravenhill, one of the most polemical members of the new generation of English-language authors that emerged at the end of the 20th century, has written an interesting article on the logic behind violence in theatre and the need for it. Some excerpts are reproduced on continuation.

Very much in tune with this reflection on the presence of violence in theatre, the article about *Cathartic* included in *Lexique du drame moderne et contemporain* (by Jean-Pierre Sarrazac) contributes an academic vision of the theme. An excerpt is also reproduced on continuation.

* * *

"It is wrong to repress students whose writing contains violence and it is also dangerous."

28 April, 2008, 9.30 a.m.

The creative writing faculty of America's Virginia Tech University has new guidelines for teachers to use when assessing students' work. "Is the work expressly violent?" they are asked. "Do characters respond to everyday events with a level of violence one does not expect, or may find even frightening? Is violence at the centre of everything the student has written?" Similarly, in colleges all across the US, teachers are now asked to inspect creative writing for violent tendencies and to guide authors of such work towards counselling and even medication.

It seems a strange response to creative work, especially if one considers contemporary British theatre. From the linguistic and emotional menace of Harold Pinter's first plays to the infamous baby-stoning

in Edward Bond's *Saved*, from the anal rape in Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* to a soldier eating a journalist's eyes in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, violence has often been a dominant theme on stage.

"Yes, I thought they were good", I overheard a member of the audience say, as she left my play cycle *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*. "But that poor playwright. He must be so unhappy to write about such a horrible world." I laughed about this later with the actors, who reassured me that I am an averagely balanced and reasonably happy person. Yet many of the key moments of the plays are undoubtedly violent and upsetting: a woman turned feral by her grief, a headless soldier visiting a child's bedroom, an interrogation that involves knee-capping and branding, a soldier cutting out a detainee's tongue. If written in a Virginia Tech class, these scenes might lead to me being counselled, or perhaps medicated. But these violent plays are an honest attempt to express the brutality of our "clash of civilisations", of "jihad" and "the war on terror", the white noise that fills our everyday lives, driving us to act in irrational, cruel ways. There may be an element of the personal, even the therapeutic in this writing, but they are, above all, political plays.

[...]

I once taught playwriting for a semester in a Californian university. There was a bland pleasantness to the place; students delivered polite chatter-on-the-page as their playwriting assignments. A student with more abrasive work would have been welcome in my class. But maybe that would have been wrong. The Virginia Tech guidelines weren't issued because of primness, but because of the events

of April 16, 2007 when a student, Cho Seung-hui, opened fire on campus, killing 33 people, including himself. It emerged that the projects he had delivered in his playwriting class were full of verbal and physical violence.

Asked to write a contemporary response to *Hamlet*, Cho produced *Richard McBeef*, in which a teenager accuses his stepfather of murdering his biological father and of abusing him. In front of a self-indulgent mother, the boy rams a cereal bar down the obese stepfather's throat, before the stepfather batters him to death. The piece owes as much to *Beavis and Butt-Head* as it does to Shakespeare and has nothing like the high bodycount, madness and poison (or indeed philosophy) of the original play. It's a violent cartoon, not a pathological shocker.

Maybe the journey to Cho's shootings didn't begin with his writing. Maybe being taken out of his class and given solo tutoring because other students found his work too threatening was an isolating act that helped turn him into a lone killer. Maybe, as the *Washington Post* reported, his poetry teacher telling him he would have to drop out of her class if he didn't change the type of poems he was writing pushed him closer to picking up the gun. And maybe the insistence, from another teacher, that he "write with another voice" was one more step in his transformation from an apparently troubled youth to a mass murderer.

Of course, encouraging students to write about violence in a habitual and lazy way would be wrong. There have been as many shallow, brutal plays on the British stage as there have been urgent, important ones. We have to be wary of violence as fashion. But to discourage

all such writing is to curb a natural response to the world around us. Young people are sensitive to the inequalities of our society, to the daily reports of the Iraq war and its futile violence. This will surely find its way into their work. We can't tell them that only grown-up writers can use brutal words and imagery. Those of us working with young writers can help them to craft and contextualise violence, but we mustn't ask them to repress it. This would only increase any capacity for instability and lashing out.

It would stand as much chance of causing as it would of preventing future shootings.

(Excerpts from the article published by Mark Ravenhill in *Theatre & Performing Arts*, april 2008.)

* * *

Cathartic (material)

[...]

Since its beginnings, Brecht's epic theatre was based in part on a "pedagogy of fear". As the title *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* indicates, fear comprises both the consubstantial element of a type of theatre based on a background of historical terror (and misery) and the immediate reality of a type of playwriting the objective of which is to teach the spectator how to be afraid in order to manage that fear better. According to Heiner Müller, it is fundamentally a question of "finding the focus of fear in a story, in a situation and in a series of characters, and communicating it to the audience as a focus of fear. Only if it is a focus of fear can it become a focus of strength. But if the focus of fear is hidden or covered up, it is not possible to make the most of the available energy. To overcome fear

by facing it. It is impossible to free oneself from anguish by running away from it". And Müller, who takes fear to extremes in his own theatre, observes, "Now, we can again relate all this to Aristotle, but it's a dialectisation, I think".

Dread, fright, terror, and above all panic: since the decade of the 1930s the old Aristotelian fear has constituted an active poetic ingredient that has shattered the cultural scene of drama. Artaud is, together with Brecht, the other instigator of this work using fear. In order to restore the power of theatre, he recommends resorting to the old store of violence and paroxysmal terror contained in the myths and tragedies. In *The Theatre and the Plague* he states that for the purposes of "all true theatre" the aim should be to "rediscover the terrifying apparition of Evil, which is presented in the Eleusinian Mysteries in its purest form".

Today, our aversion for the world is newly expressed, and more so than ever, through a "panic style" (Sloterdijk), which comes out of the melting pot of Aristotle, Artaud and Brecht, but at the same time goes beyond any heritage owing to the immediate brutality of a type of terror staged with neither a subjective parapet nor aesthetic props. For Bond, for example, violence is of no personal interest, "not even the aesthetics". He does not use it "to create dramatic tension" either. It accounts for itself "simply so that it can be identified": "when the victim sees a certain photo, recognises the aggressor and has a shock: this shock of recognition is what I'm after". Through "the shock-effect", fear does not constitute only what it shows, but rather what is shown of it. Some more recent playwrights have demonstrated this: in Kane and

Mayenburg it is not a so much question of writing about or through panic, but rather from *inside* panic.

It remains to be seen whether, in the same way as fear, other cathartic (post-cathartic) materials still have a place in the latest contemporary theatre, especially pity. If fear has become, or has become again, a main driving force in drama, has the same thing happened to pity? In view of the varying styles of modern playwriting, it seems that in this respect there is an uneven treatment of the two components of the ancient catharsis and that fear constitutes the main cathartic material on which modern theatre is based. On the other hand it undoubtedly possible to discern the desire to bear witness to the suffering of others in the corpus of texts and shows written since the decade of the 1990s, especially in the sphere of theatre documentaries – take for example *Rwanda 94* by Groupov. And although this doesn't necessarily appeal directly to the compassion of the spectators, it brings into play all, or a part, of that pity which was so long marginalised in theatre. A movement like this would constitute, beyond panic and violence, a new political dimension in the theatre of the future.

(Fragment of the article written by Catherine Naugrette. Catalan translation soon to be published in *Lèxic, Institut del Teatre, Barcelona*.)

THE CURRENT REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE

Claudio Zulián

The Vietnam War was probably the first and the last war to be faithful-

ly reflected in the media. Television had already sufficiently developed its organisation and its technical apparatus to "cover" the war. Daring reporters positioned on the front line caught the crude reality of combat and transmitted it rapidly. Moreover, in the United States, televisions figured amongst the electrical appliances in the majority of households. And so, for the first time, horrific images circulated, almost in real time, which realistically reflected the horrors of war. The inhuman and cruel behaviour of both sides was caught in recordings that we all still remember: the South Vietnamese officer who shoots a defenceless prisoner in the head, the girl who flees with her face and body burnt in a napalm attack on her village.

The United States army blamed the diffusion of these images for the demoralisation of a society which became more and more reluctant to continue this war, until the political class was convinced of the need to sign a peace treaty in 1973: the first time the United States army had ever been defeated, apparently.

Consequently, the United States military would then take extreme precautions to stop anyone from producing pictures that documented the reality of combat.

As we have been able to appreciate during the Iraq war, journalists now have restricted access to the battlefield – the army "cannot guarantee your safety" is the threatening euphemism employed; independent information centres are bombed – the headquarters of Al Jazeera and the Palestine Hotel, where the journalists would meet in Baghdad; and all the arguments and subterfuges imaginable are used to hound and confuse the press and television, to

the point of even preventing the publication of photographs of the coffins of the fallen.

The United States army has naturally set the trend for the military all over the world, in particular in democratic countries that, like the United States, have to contend with the weight of public opinion. The result of the great care taken to conceal and manipulate information is that, in reality, we have very few images of the scenarios of wars in progress where the armies of the "more developed countries" intervene, such as the war in Iraq or in Afghanistan. The pictures disseminated by the armed forces have much more in common with video-games than scenes of carnage, to such a point that Jean Baudrillard titled a book of essays in which he analysed the situation, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*.

On television the violent images that now predominate refer to "incidents", whether these are natural disasters, accidents or murders. These events and their portrayal are exaggerated, irrespective of their importance, to achieve a dramatic climax. In this way a murder can be news during a week and then become the argument for sensationalist programmes in the form of a dramatised reconstruction. In this way the media situate themselves on the frontier between the news item and fiction, since, although there was originally a real event, its dimensions and circumstances are invented. The portrayal of violence acquires a phantasmagorical character that nourishes – and is nourished by – a diffused feeling of fear in the viewers. They perceive their environment as dangerous even though they live in one of the most peaceful societies in history. Italy is a paradigmatic

example of this situation: Rome figures in the statistics as one of the safest cities in the world and its inhabitants among those who are most afraid. It is enough to go through the experience of watching Italian television to understand where, to a considerable extent, the roots of this drift towards paranoia lie. Neither should we forget that the larger part of Italian television is the private property of the current prime minister who, like other contemporary heads of state, has known how to exploit and increase the citizens' fear for political ends.

These violent "fictionalised news items" are accompanied in the modern media by other programmes that really are completely fictitious and offer the viewers the possibility of enjoying large doses of violence.

Although the history of horror films and thrillers is as long as that of the film industry itself, their current aspect presents some peculiar features. The Hayes Code (the rules of censorship self-imposed by Hollywood in the 1930s) radically limited the possibility of realistically portraying violence in the cinema. This is why in the majority of classic westerns the shoot-outs have almost invisible consequences. Towards the end of the fifties and, more so, during the sixties, these prohibitions became ineffective in the face of the twofold influence of the market and a deep ethical and institutional crisis that affected the whole of society. In the United States the first example of "gore" showed great economic potential: *Blood Feast* (Lewis, 1963) was a commercial hit for its director and opened the way for this genre. Not long after, well-known directors such as Sam Peckinpah (*The Wild Bunch*, 1969) and Arthur Penn (*Bonnie & Clyde*,

1967) demonstrated the dramatic capacity of realist or hyperrealist violence. In Europe filmmakers such as Godard (*Weekend*, 1967) and Pasolini (*Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975) channelled their political and social criticism through extremely violent scenes. And, naturally, gore and horror films also began to be produced in Europe. The Spanish film industry, for example, has produced curious mixtures of horror and socio-political criticism in the films of Eloy de la Iglesia (*Cannibal Man*, 1972). For some years the hyperrealist portrayal of violence conserved its critical capacity. New York's punk cinema from the eighties, for example, consists of extreme films where blood and sex generate images that are almost unbearable to look at, in an obvious attempt at visual transgression and provocation of the spectators. Nevertheless, in those same years, scenes of extreme violence, boosted by commercial success, began to appear in more commercial productions and the television as well as B movies. During their progressive diffusion they met with less opposition than sex scenes. The latter, carried along by the same cultural mutation, also passed from B movies to mainstream, but met with much severer restrictions.

At the present time, we can find scenes of classic gore – carnage, murders in all their variants, torture – in series broadcast on television in prime time. The trivialisation of the theme has gradually neutralised any critical content in scenes of violence and has reduced them more and more to pure entertainment. Nowadays, scenes of extreme violence are impossible to use as indicators of an ideological discussion or as social or political denouncement. The only value they have is

as entertainment – they are “commercial”.

The reason why an extremely violent scene can be “commercial” is related to our inexhaustible fascination with death and, as Sade would have said, with “the eroticism of the act of murder”. But in addition to this, the portrayal of violence nowadays is almost always accompanied by the deliberate intention of provoking “fear” in the spectators. This is illustrated, for example, by the particular structural layout which – by means of stretching and shrinking the narrative time, accentuated diegetic and non-diegetic sound, and visual ellipses – aims to transmit the maximum anxiety to the audience.

Fear is revealed in this way to be the nexus between almost all the current representations of violence, both in the news and in fiction. The main goal of the portrayal of violence is not to encourage its mimesis, its imitation, but rather to generate fear. Hence its eminently phantasmatic nature, hyperbolic in its forms and unreal in its contents.

As we already pointed out on the subject of fictionalised news items, the representation of imagined violence and fear generates a circular path: fear is expressed in these imaginings and these imaginings feed it.

On the internet it is easy to find even greater proof of this peculiar feedback between fear and the portrayal of violence.

On the one hand, terrorist groups and crime organizations take the most spine-chilling portrayals of violence at face value and make them real in order to instil terror in their enemies and rivals. Executions and

torture scenes are recorded and posted on the web with this object in mind. But under the same caption in YouTube, for example, it is possible to find film clips and short homemade sketches that depict the same scenes, with an abundance of rudimentary effects and ketchup. This circularity is both the success and the defeat of the terrorists' efforts. Any neighbour will now include terrorism among his/her fears when the chances of being the victim of an attack are infinitely smaller than those of being a victim in a traffic accident. But at the same time, that same neighbour returns the real image of terrorist violence to the limbo of imaginary violence by playing it out in the living room and filming it with a webcam.

It is no novelty that we live in a society of fear. As summed up by Yves Michaud, what characterises us is the “the feeling of comfort and security as protected citizens, with property, insurance policies and rights” (*Changements dans la violence*). The individual who continually measures his rights and interests is an individual condemned to feel afraid. Always aware of himself and his environment, he cannot avoid measuring his irremediable fragility when carrying out his calculations. The limits of his calculations are the certainty of the *accident* that has to be taken into account in order to evaluate the level of security that he considers he has a right to. Seen from this perspective, resorting to periodic and hyperbolic representations of imaginary violence becomes necessary in order to exorcise not a specific threat, but rather fear itself. But these are ephemeral moments of catharsis that are not really liberating at all, and, in addition, they give clues to those who build their power on foundations of fear.

VIOLENCE OFFSTAGE. A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO FURAN LANGUAGE.

Sabine Krüger

Violence is part of human beings and therefore also one of the basic resources of theatre. There it is subjected to all the facets of aesthetic development that, to take an emblematic example, the creative work of La Fura dels Baus presents us with. All their shows play with violence in a very particular way: the male violence in *accions*, the suffering of Gregor Samsa in *Metamorfosis*, the terrorists in *Boris Godunov* and the domesticated women followers in one of their most recent shows, *IMPERIUM*.

Violence to resolve violence

IMPERIUM exemplifies a theatrical approach to violence. On the subject of this show, the artistic director Jürgen Müller comments: “Basically we are dealing with an aspect of imperialism that is linked to violence. Violence as a kind of relationship between human beings. And this is a journey through fear and through domestication.”¹ The director also says: “The moderate discourse of *IMPERIUM* is, ‘Cut off your legs! Cut out your eyes! Cut off your body! I’ll domesticate you.’ The theme of self-annihilation, ‘Kill that part of you that bothers you! Let’s domesticate it!’ This part of the play begins with physical domestication, then mental domestication, and lastly emotional domestication, when I myself put on the chains, but absolutely convinced that this has to be done. I am completely domesticated. Once at this point, when I have been domesticated with violence, I have a problem: I realise that the women

who’ve domesticated me are bitches. How do I resolve this? Well, with violence. *I’ve been taught to use violence and I resolve the problem using violence*. BOOM! I kill my two instructresses. Finally, we kill each other fighting for the power that the instructresses had.”²

Violence is the force that dominates and directs *IMPERIUM*. From this perspective it comes as no surprise that each scene in the show contains its own variant of violence: in the first scene an attack takes place that is intended to evoke human beings’ primitive fears. In the second, prophets appear who propose different solutions to escape from fear; the so-called moderate prophets (PMs) are victorious because the rest are murdered by an “occult power” personified in a group of anonymous hooded individuals. In the third scene, the PMs receive the order to create an empire based on physical domestication; for this reason they “straitjacket” the followers who have just appeared and force them to do hard physical labour. In the fourth, the PMs introduce weapons that their followers are made to use to quell any sign of rebellion amongst themselves, in an act of self-aggression. The fifth scene presents a type of mental domestication where the personality is buried and its purpose is to achieve a state of total commitment on the part of the followers; however, during this act of final conversion, the “occult power” again intervenes and redirects the violence that the followers have been instructed in against the PMs themselves. The sixth shows a campaign of vengeance directed against the PMs. It includes provocation and torture. The seventh and last scene concludes with a massacre; the lust for power leads to the death of all the participants.

These various forms of violence are developed using the aesthetic language so emblematic of the group. “*IMPERIUM* is the ninth show to be conceived following the codes of *furan language* where rhythmic dramaturgy predominates over narrative dramaturgy.”³ Thus, the performance of the actions is one of the most important elements in this artistic language; and a statement made by the direction makes it clear what the fundamentals are: “The theatre style of the *furan* scene has very little theatre in it. What does this mean? That things are done. If I give, I give. If I touch, I touch. If I limp, I limp. I don’t pretend to hit, but I do it to the right degree. So the actors take things as far as they can, depending on what they have to do. If I have to spit, I know I can spit as well as I can. Later it can be washed off, no problem. It’s a question of keeping things in proportion, but doing something real. I won’t kill her, because I can’t kill her.”⁴

In this way La Fura dels Baus highlights the importance of really carrying out the actions; as a *furan*, an actor has to learn to distinguish between actions it is possible to carry out and those it isn’t. Those that can’t be carried out aren’t done. Therefore, the rehearsals for *IMPERIUM* are mainly focussed around one aspect: real physical force. La Fura dels Baus works fundamentally with the human body and their actions often remind one of circus acrobatics where physical strength and real risk are combined. The actions are normally connected with demonstrations of violence that represent an explosive synthesis and a genuine challenge. For this reason the group receives special training so that the actors are prepared for the demands of a *furan* show.

The work of La Fura dels Baus has been analysed in many previous studies, which focussed on different aspects of their functions. However, little is known about the creative process that precedes the staging of a show. I was able to take part as an outside observer in the rehearsals for *IMPERIUM* and examine the methods of this artistic collective. I had permission to record the directors' discussions and improvisations; I will draw on this material to set out some ideas dealing with the subject of creative development. I will particularly focus my attention on the way the actresses approach the violence they wish to portray; I will explain what exercises and methods the directors use to facilitate the actresses' interpretation of the violence in accordance with the aesthetic sensibility of *frican language*. How La Fura dels Baus draws out this potential for violence in the actresses during the rehearsals will be examined on continuation in two examples of scenes with three different exercises.

Physical domestication – pulling like a slave

In the third scene of the show physical domestication makes up the central structure. The direction paid a lot of attention to the beginning of the scene, which involves the on-stage birth of the followers. The PMs have to wake the followers from a paradisiacal state, similar to the conditions in the maternal womb, and force them slowly from a foetal to a standing position. However, after trying several approaches, La Fura dels Baus decided to change this scene because the transition from the "birth" seemed too slow and therefore rhythmically inappropriate. Moreover, the PMs – followers had to take the rough with the smooth – punished badly done work and rewarded learning

progress with bread. And the followers jumped up and down around the PMs asking them for something to eat. This part seemed very innocent, which does not concur with *frican language*. At the end of the rehearsal process, the directors expressed their decision as follows: "We will now go directly into physical domestication. We are eliminating this moving of the performers around the prophets. We only want to see suffering and people going straight. Enough of happy bambis."⁵

The different elements did not have the desired effect, so the directors shortened the scene and all the improvisations then led towards a sole objective: physical domestication without recompense by means of a simple and hard task. The "followers" – driven by whips – build a pyramid by pulling, dragging and pushing a series of modules – which according to the directors weighed "a bloody tank". After suppressing all the "frills" in the scene, the directors focus their attention on one sole action: the movement of the modules that make up the pyramid. Müller stresses that the object is to use real physical strength. For this purpose an improvisation is designed where the actresses are tied to the modules and asked to drag them themselves. To increase the physical effort one of the directors sits inside one of the modules and brakes their movement with his feet: "I want it to be tough. And it's tough like that, isn't it?! [...] You have to make the effort of pulling, yourselves." The actresses have to drag a real weight to achieve an expressiveness that is real and suited to *frican language*. The effort is reflected in the actresses' faces.

In this scene, according to the directors, the actions of "suffering"

and "going straight" should be especially distinguished by their intensity. So they resort to an exercise that will evoke the force and the expressiveness that La Fura expects. It is a very simple exercise, which could be titled "pulling the bar": In it two groups face each other; the actresses hold onto a bar set in the wall; very loud, aggressive music is played. The actresses have to "release tension" with the person opposite; using all their strength they begin to shout and pull on the bar, but without letting go of it at any time. During the improvisation the directors shout without cease: "You're like carhorses! Like oxen working the land! Like slaves dragging the stones for the pyramid!"

Cannibalism – biting like a wolf and sadistic torture

The sixth scene in the show deals with the murder of the prophetesses and is referred to as "cannibalism". As regards the dramaturgy it has been established that the two PMs die in different ways:

"There are two chases. In the first you are a pack of wolves hunting (*He makes an animal gesture, as if he was devouring flesh.*), you sink in your teeth and you kill her. [...] Then we go after the other one. The other one is running over there and the first thing we do is capture her. [...] After capturing her, we basically immobilise her. And here we need someone to go and fetch the crane. There, the story of vengeance begins with feathers, glue, bags of paint."⁶

The first will be torn apart alive, while the second is captured by the group of followers, very much in *frican* style, hung from a crane and sadistically tortured. To achieve the violent attitude, "energy" in *frican language*, which is required in

these two central actions, Müller uses two special exercises designed to help the actresses.

The first exercise is prepared as follows: six actresses (followers) form a circle and close their eyes; two actresses (PM) are in the centre of the circle. The latter are told to push the palms of the hands into the faces of the others and press very hard to provoke a real reaction. In reply, the actresses who form the circle have to bite, but they mustn't move or defend themselves with their hands or cover their faces:

"You close your eyes, ok?! Let's try it. The idea is to try and find this WUWUWU stuff. Everything I can do with my mouth. WR-RGGHRH! I don't drop my head, I don't pull away. Is that clear? Position: hands behind. CLACK. I push forward and charge with my head. If they get you on the side they bite you, and you have to try and bite them. On the mouth, not so much the nose. Ok, ready? All set? Eyes closed! [...] You have to throw yourselves at each other, there's no way that... (*He jumps up and down like a small boy.*)"

Just as they were asked the actresses begin to grab and bite and trap hands, always with their eyes closed. The directors shout constantly at the group: "Attack! Attack! Please, do it for real! Bite! Bite! Eyes closed!" Those who don't have a hand in contact with their face wait impatiently their turn, moving their heads from side to side, biting the air, looking for contact. Meanwhile one of the directors enters in the circle and joins in the exercise; he stretches out his arms to put his hands on the mouths of the actresses, pressing hard. After the exercise one of the actresses spits on the floor, turns

away in repugnance and shouts: "That's disgusting! Disgusting!"

As determined by the artistic structure, while the first murder is an explosive action, swift, merciless laceration, the second is a long, cruel and painful calvary; the objective is slow and sadistic torture:

"There we have the energy of wolves. Here we have the energy of a celebration, ok, because we've caught them, and now we kill them and we have a great time. Killing them, one. The energy of sadism, two. What does it mean? I get a lot of pleasure from suffering, so the object here is not to kill them but to make them suffer. The more suffering there is, the happier I am. And the more I celebrate it, ok? It's the energy of vengeance.

There's a type of pleasure that's not a game of 'Hey, that's funny!' No. It's nastier, like, 'I'll get you like this'. (*He grabs a stick and pulls it up against an actress's neck as if to choke her.*). Let's see how much she can take, good, good, now she's begging to enjoy it, a bit more... there has to be a bit of enjoyment. And the more she endures it, the more enjoyment and the more I hit her, it's not hitting to release tension, 'Ahaha, bitch!' Now it's 'BABABA', but (*He lifts her chin.*) the enjoyment is a joint celebration, 'Look at the way I hit her, the way I hit her!' You have to enjoy every blow."

As acting preparation to find the energy required by the torture scene, the actresses (followers) again form a circle. Unlike the previous exercise only one actress (PM) situates herself in the centre. She lets herself be moved around from side to side. They push her, insult her, hit her with sticks (made

of foam), shout at her. The directors observe the improvisation and egg them on constantly: "Pick up the stick and hit her. And let's see that energy hitting her! On the head, on the shoulders, woman, hit her! Come on, come on, insult her." As a result they start to swear, hit harder with the sticks and directly against the body. During the exercise one of the actresses apologises to the actress in the centre after hitting her in the face with the stick, she says "sorry" and puts her hand on her shoulder as a consoling gesture. The directors ask the actress, brusquely, to continue with the improvisation. At the end the directors immediately comment the incident:

"One thing: while we're playing, we don't disconnect! You let out an 'oh, sorry'. Ok, afterwards fine. We know it's a game, and if someone gets hurt, we'll stop at once, but while we're playing... as we're dealing with energy that's nasty and dirty and all that, then we'll play with energy that's nasty and dirty during the game, afterwards we'll go outside and leave it there. But in the middle, no! Because that way we start to change, to get in a muddle. The game: we're a bunch of sadistic bitches and we go full blast."⁷

La Fura dels Baus tells the actresses not to abandon the game during the improvisations and not to let themselves be carried away by reactions caused by their own acts, but which have nothing to do with the basic tone of the show – no matter how violent they may be. Despite the delicate situations that arise in these improvisations that experiment with violence, the actresses are asked to adapt, as far as possible, to the rules of the show: "We play with real fire. We mustn't be afraid to touch the body." says Müller with emphasis.

They have to search for the different facets of sadism and develop them to the maximum in a theatre improvisation.

Violence as aesthetic expression and as a tool

The observations made prior to the creative process reveal a method which the group La Fura dels Baus uses to adapt and adjust the structure of the rehearsals to the needs of the show. At the beginning, the directors propose some initial improvisations and it turns out that the way the actresses carry them out does not coincide with what they imagined, and consequently the structure changes and other aspects are highlighted. The directors try to point the actresses in the desired direction by separating out the central actions in the scene in order to work on them individually in intense additional exercises. In this way they give the actresses more play space to experiment and explore the performance of the physical actions in the realest way possible. These exercises often coincide with the improvisation of violent actions. Obviously these are moments that require concentration and persistent analysis by the actresses. This is what the directors explain during the rehearsals: "The structure is more or less clear. What is needed now is a clear energy, intense with violence. We'll try working in the following way: we're going to propose improvisations more or less close together in order to find the energy and the actions."⁸ The direction is aware of something lacking in the actresses' work: there's a certain lack of a bodily aggression in their actions. The type of violence that La Fura dels Baus employed in its beginnings is not usually seen in the later generations of actors. The basic traits of *furan language* make it a very direct language that needs a presence and physical force accentu-

ated by the actors. According to Müller, the actresses are incapable of instilling fear or carrying out actions of an adequate dose of violence. What they lack is a basis of physical training that takes away their fear of contact with other bodies; they have to learn to lose their shyness and really touch each other, if need be, in a violent way. This is why the directors take an active part in the three exercises explained previously, not only examining and commenting on the improvisations afterwards, but also giving advice and guidance during the exercise, and sometimes doing the actions to put more pressure on the actresses.

This analysis helps to understand the limitations and difficulties involved in communicating a form of violence like that proposed by the *furan language*. In such a direct and realistic language, violence is not only a form of aesthetic expression but is also used as a tool for training the actors within the limits of the theatre proposed by La Fura dels Baus.

¹ Notes from 22.02.2007.

² Notes from 05.03.2007.

³ <http://www.imperiumlafura.com/es/synopsis/>

⁴ Notes from 23.02.2007.

⁵ Notes from 10.04.2007.

⁶ Notes from 12.03.2007.

⁷ Notes from 12.03.2007.

⁸ Notes from 19.03.2007.

(Out of section.)

IN A ROOM WITH HAROLD PINTER

Carlota Benet

On June the 27th I arrived at a white cottage, two floors, very unpreten-

tious, even a bit tatty, where, supposedly, Harold Pinter had arranged to meet me. I thought that perhaps I'd got the wrong place, but I rang the bell anyway to see if I was in luck. After a few minutes that seemed to last forever, Pinter himself opened the door. I let out a ridiculous "oh!" in surprise, which he ignored, and I stepped inside the house. Pinter looked very different to when he appeared in the photos two years earlier, when he won the Nobel Prize. He looked very well now, stronger and slimmer, and he was smartly dressed in a black shirt and the same colour trousers and shoes.

I realised at once that the cottage was a studio and that he didn't live there; this explained why it was so small. Inside it was warm and low-key. On one of the walls on the ground floor there was a niche containing his awards, in disarray and without fuss; and a small staircase led to the upper floor. On climbing the stairs I realised why he had taken so long to open the front door: Pinter's only noticeable physical weakness was that he couldn't quite walk properly and helped himself along with a stick. His workroom was upstairs, full of books, with two big windows, a sofa, his table...

I hadn't stopped talking since I'd stepped inside – Harold Pinter had only articulated a few monosyllables. I was trying to reassure myself behind a wall of words, like the characters in his plays, who don't know how to communicate. Nevertheless, one of the trivial comments I made – that I liked his studio and the way it was decorated – motivated an interesting reply: he told me it was where "he spent his time". I was probably in the place where he had written several of his plays... And where he now read and wrote his poems.

Strategically Pinter sat in an armchair with his back to the window and invited me to sit opposite him, but not too close, on a sofa facing the light. There was an ice bucket containing a bottle of white wine, and two glasses next to it. He offered me a drink, I accepted, and at last we began our conversation.

Harold Pinter: You haven't come straight from Brown, have you?

Carlota Benet: No, the term's already finished and now I'm in Barcelona. I wouldn't like to spend the whole year away... I like my city.

HP: Naturally.

CB: I've got a lot of questions to ask you...

HP: Well I don't know if I'll be able to answer them...

CB: Don't worry, if you get bored you can throw me out and that's that. You once said to Mel Gussow that whenever you met someone new you felt that that someone was treating you with enormous respect and that made you uneasy, because your public image doesn't correspond to who Harold Pinter really is. Well, I feel terribly in awe of you... How do you react when people like me come and bother you?

HP: Hardly anyone comes here. I never see anyone. But I liked your letter.

CB: Really?

HP: That's why I replied and invited you to come.

CB: Thanks!

HP: But you must tell me more about yourself.

CB: Ah, if you like...

I couldn't ignore Pinter's direct question and we wasted quite a lot of time talking about me, but I finally managed to regain control.

CB: And you've been to Barcelona...

HP: Yes, and I liked it a lot.

CB: What do you remember about it?

HP: The people... I liked the people I met there... (*Pause.*)

CB: I know you met Lina Lambert...

HP: Yes, that's right, and I also met Doctor...

CB: Mireia Aragay?

HP: Yes. And I took part in a public debate with her and someone else...

CB: Ramon Simó?

HP: Yes, that's right, and it's published in my book *Various Voices*

CB: I am very interested in asking you about Doctor Aragay because I think her interpretation of your work is very accurate. I don't know whether you know that she has analysed some of your pieces from the standpoint of pragmatic linguistics... (*Pause. Pinter shakes his head.*) Well, the fact is that using this approach she has substantially changed the interpretation of plays such as *The Room*, which is considered by most critics, including Martin Esslin, to have a melodramatic ending. But Aragay doesn't agree and says that Rose (the main character) convinces herself, by dint of talking and talking, that she is happy in her room, and that the world outside is dangerous, despite the fact that we can see that her relationship with Bert and the space where she lives is not exactly pleasant...

HP: Right...
CB: And that then, the arrival of Riley (the black man), who represents everything alien, makes her realise that she is living a lie. This is why, when Bert arrives, he beats Riley unconscious. (*Pause.*) Do you agree with Mireia Aragay?

HP: Yes! Of course I agree.

CB: And why do you think the critics have ended up generally agreeing that *The Room*, despite the fact that it displays all the qualities of

your later work, has a melodramatic and sensationalist ending?

HP: What it's about is what happens in the play, like it or not.

I realised that asking him overly specific questions on interpretative nuances of his work was not something that was going to encourage him to talk.

CB: Is it true that you've decided not to write any more theatre?

HP: Yes, it's true.

CB: How could you come to a decision like that?

HP: I have no more plays to write. I've written twenty-nine of them, that's enough. I write poetry and I'm very committed politically. I feel there's no more theatre inside me. I've been writing poetry since I was twelve, in other words, for a very long time. I'm a poet.

CB: Some of your plays have poetic elements...

HP: Perhaps. (*Pause.*) Where were you when I was in Barcelona?

This question forced me, once again, to talk about my life and the place where I work, Brown University. This prompted him to tell me that this institution had made him Doctor Honoris Causa and that at Newport, which is very close to Brown, they staged *The Hothouse* many years ago.

CB: Are you aware of the fact that for many writers you constitute a model because you embody both the aesthetic avant-garde and political commitment?

HP: I've never considered myself a model for anything, but after my Nobel Prize acceptance speech I received thousands of letters from around the world and I realised that many people share my views on politics; it was very gratifying. Have you read my Nobel speech?

CB: Yes, and I cried.

HP: Oh.

CB: In that speech you said man had almost lost his dignity, but I wonder, has man ever had any dignity? I'm thinking of wars, concentration camps, slavery.

HP: There is an innate dignity that exists in simple people and even in those who are oppressed or enslaved. Well, not in all of them; some of them are totally overwhelmed by their misery, but others keep their pride, they love their families, and they fight for survival. On the other hand, it seems to me that nowadays these people live in even worse conditions than before, because of countries like the United States. *(Pause.)* I know little about Obama's programme, I'm not American, but I have the feeling that if he doesn't manage to win the elections, we'll fall even lower. But if he does win there's the small possibility that he may be able to make some changes. However, he'll be under enormous pressure from the economic powers and the armed forces, and he'll have to fight desperately not to lose his integrity.... I've recently been invited to take part in a debate on whether Tony Blair is a war criminal, and maybe I will go because... he obviously is! Not to mention Bush and Cheney.... I rarely take part in debates, of late, but I may go to this one... You see, I'm seventy-seven and I've been really ill. But now I feel well...

CB: You look great.

HP: Oh, my God... *(He laughs.)* Whatever the case, it's left me feeling rather tired. You're twenty-six, I'm seventy-seven; there's a difference. But I won't give up, my head is still in the same place. I've been really ill over the last five years, and on the point of dying three times, but I have a wonderful wife and she's given me enormous support. Now I sleep more than I used

to, I sleep a lot, like a log, and despite everything, bearing in mind what I've been through, I'm surprisingly well.

CB: So can you say that you're completely cured?

HP: Yes, for the moment, yes.

CB: Let's touch wood.

HP: Let me tell you something. You missed the revival of my play *The Birthday Party*.

I would have liked to have seen this production, at the Lyric Hammersmith, premiered the 8th of May, but when I arrived in London the few performances were over.

CB: Yes, I know... How did it go?

HP: It was staged at the same theatre and on the same date where, fifty years ago, it was premiered... And it was an absolute fiasco. This time, though, it was given a fantastic reception, and the production was very good, perhaps the best ever of this play. It was very moving for me; a very special occasion.

CB: So you're able to enjoy yourself during the performances of your plays?

HP: If they're well produced...

CB: I'm referring to the fact that there are playwrights who get so nervous that they're incapable of relaxing.

HP: Oh, no, I don't get nervous.

CB: Not any more?

HP: I never have. Well, perhaps a little tense... But I'm confident about what I write, and if it's well performed... everything runs smoothly and I'm happy. When *The Birthday Party* was premiered, it was such a disaster that I thought that I would never see it on a stage again, that I would never write theatre again. I couldn't see the point. Even so, after the first night I went to see it again – there were hardly any spectators; I wanted to see something of mine performed for the last time. I

really did think that it was all over for me...

CB: My favourite play of yours is *Ashes to Ashes*, but the first time it was staged it didn't really convince the English critics...

HP: You'll have to ask them why not... But it was staged again two years later at the Royal Court, and in 2001 it was done again at a festival in New York, and everything went just fine.... On that occasion I also played a role in my play *One for the Road*...

CB: Playing the villain, like in your days as a repertory actor in Ireland...

HP: Right...

CB: But in Barcelona *Ashes to Ashes* was certainly a hit.

HP: Yes... it was given a splendid reception, very intelligent. Much better than here in London. I had a great time.

CB: And when you wrote *Ashes to Ashes*, were you aware that you were fusing together your darkest most intimate style and the most explicitly political one?

HP: It came out like that. I never think much when I write, I just let the writing flow.

CB: Yes, that's what you always say...

HP: I don't want to seem too innocent or naïve; I do think a bit, but then I let the play live its own life and breathe on its own. That's how *Ashes to Ashes* was born.

CB: But later I suppose you saw that you had managed to introduce the outside echo of politics into a private universe...

HP: Yes, yes... Obviously, the piece is about two people who lead normal lives. Every day the man comes home from the University, has a drink and his wife makes his supper. But on this day everything is different, she doesn't make the supper and she talks to him about strange things. She is completely obsessed

(Pinter taps his head three times.) and he doesn't like it, it annoys him and mortifies him. *(Pause.)* But some people here, the critics, were so stupid that they took what she was saying literally, about seeing people walking and going into the sea. One of them wrote: "Is Pinter trying to tell us there was a concentration camp in Dorset?" For God's sake! What fools! Most of our critics are not very intelligent. There's an excellent one, though, Michael Billington.

CB: Right. What's more, he wrote your biography.

HP: He's a very intelligent person, I like him a lot.

CB: And are you pleased with how the biography turned out?

HP: Have you seen the latest revision?

CB: Mine is from two years ago...

HP: No, there's a new one where he's included the most recent years of my life. I can let you like have a copy.

CB: Oh, I'd be delighted. By the way, I'd like to ask you, if it's not too indiscreet, what do you like reading?

HP: I read a lot of modern fiction. I've just read a book that still hasn't been published and which is about sexual obsession. It's a disturbing book and the author stops at nothing. In fact I've written a few lines for the cover of the first edition. Now I'm reading a book by V.S. Naipaul, a remarkable man... He won the Nobel before me... He comes from the island of Trinidad, but he's lived here for a long time. He writes in a very fine style... very interesting. I also read things that are not fiction. I can't be informed about everything, but I'm interested, for example, in this horrifying and indignant question of torture. Of course, I don't really need to read much more about it because I already know almost

everything about the subject, if I may say so.

CB: Well, *One for the Road* looks at this question... When I was studying the play, I read up on torture, in order to situate the piece, and I found it difficult to bear...

HP: My wife can hardly bear to read or see *One for the Road*. As I said, I acted in it... After writing it I read it to her and it made a deep impression on her.

CB: And how did you play the role? Because it's a very hard-hitting play...

HP: I'm an actor, but I found some points quite horrible. Especially when I picked up the little boy and sat him on my lap. The audience knew I was going to kill him afterwards, and that's precisely why I was so sweet and friendly to him. That scene was hard. Luckily, the boy actor didn't know what was going on...

CB: Right. By the way, when I read *Mountain Language* I couldn't help projecting the repression of Catalan speakers during the Franco dictatorship onto the problems reflected by this piece... What do you think is the future of cultural minorities like mine in a more and more globalised world?

HP: I'm sorry to say that in general power remains with the powerful, it's a cliché but it's the way things are. And the powerful are only interested in one thing, money, and they're absolutely indifferent to the fate of the human beings around them... But it's also true, for example, that if I've been extremely critical of Tony Blair, not to mention that other individual *(Referring to Bush.)*, or also Brown, our new prime minister... I have to admit that if I had said what I've said about Blair referring to the presidents of many other countries, and I was a citizen of one of those countries, I would have been arrested. That has-

n't happened here. And that's something positive and we should strive for the same situation all over the world. Let's see, if I had said those things about Bush in America, I wouldn't have been arrested, no, but nevertheless I would have placed under a lot of pressure: "Don't let this man ever appear on television, don't let him write in the newspapers". At least here, in my country, we have true freedom of speech.

(Long pause.)

But above all I'd like you to understand that writing has been a very natural occurrence in my life. For many, many years, I've written without even thinking about it. I've always loved words and I think that what they do, finding out what they can do, is very important. And I'm really pleased when there's a good performance of one of my plays, like now with this recent production of *The Birthday Party*. I'm delighted when the director captures a moment of a scene and knows how to sustain it. There's a point in this production where two of the characters, Goldberg and Macann, in the third act, have broken Stanley's glasses. And Pete, the husband, is watching them through the little window – they can't see him – and suddenly he says "I've got some sticky tape around somewhere, we could mend them". Then the actors turn round and stare at him, and the look is sustained for about thirty seconds. This long pause makes the audience understand that the characters realise that Pete has been listening to everything, and that he's a threat to them. It's a brilliant moment in the production, because it captured the deeper meaning of the idea of a threat.

I must admit, I've had a good year... Firstly, because there's been a fan-

tastic production of *The Homecoming*...

CB: Yes, I saw it in New York...

HP: Ah, fantastic... I no longer go to the United States... And, then *The Lover* and *The Collection* were on; in July *A Slight Ache* will be on at the National, only a few performances but with a really good cast... And a new production of *No Man's Land* has been programmed for autumn, probably for October...

CB: Perhaps it's a consequence of the fact that you've won the Nobel Prize, that there are more revivals of your plays...

HP: Definitely, there's no doubt about that.

CB: Is the fact that your more explicitly political plays are not situated in a specific place intentional? Is this a way of making your work more "universal"?

HP: Well, in *One for the Road* they talk a lot about God. "God's on my side," someone says. So when I wrote it, it was easy enough to identify what happens there with the ideology of certain western and Christian countries. *Mountain Language* is inspired by the situation of the Kurds in Turkey, but I didn't want to situate it there because I'm aware that this type of problem occurs in other parts of the world, I mean the fact that people aren't allowed to speak their own language.

CB: Yes... Obviously... That's why I told you it reminds me of the Catalan problem during the Francoist era...

HP: Really? Was it as bad as the case of the Kurds?

CB: I don't know as much about the Kurd problem as the Catalan one, but our language was forbidden in the public sphere. There was a systematic attempt to destroy our culture, by force, and, certainly, situations occurred like the one you describe in your theatre piece.

Harold Pinter seems interested in the subject and asks me about the current situation of Catalan. I tell him things have improved a lot.

HP: On the subject of Barcelona... How's the Sala Beckett doing?

CB: Very well, it's been a reference point in the city for years now...

HP: I found it a wonderful place... And how's Sanchis Sinisterra? He's a playwright too, isn't he?

CB: Yes, he certainly is...

HP: I really liked him.

CB: Yes... Now he spends a lot of time in Latin America... In fact, who now directs the Sala Beckett, with other people's help, is Toni Casares, who's also a theatre director. He's doing a very interesting job, making known modern authors... For example, I've seen two shows by Martin Crimp at this theatre.

HP: Ah! I like Martin Crimp.

CB: Really? And what other playwrights do you like? And please, don't say Beckett, because everyone knows that...

HP: (*Laughing.*) I like Martin Crimp... (*Pause.*) I think Albee's very interesting too... and Mamet has things to say... I think *Glengarry Glen Ross* is very good (*Mamet dedicated this piece to Pinter.*) and I directed *Oleanna* for him. But well..., when people ask me these things, I go blank.

CB: I can understand that. And what do you think of Tom Stoppard?

HP: Well, he's an interesting person... I admire him, although we have different approaches, because I'm more in favour of theatrical economy and he..., he tends to... But there's no doubt he's an interesting author. What's more, as a person I hold him in high regard. We're friends and I'm very fond of him. During the last five years I've spent long periods in hospital and on one occasion when I said that I didn't

want any visitors, except my wife, the door of my room burst open and Tom Stoppard appeared. He'd gone shopping and brought me bread, pâté, cheese..., and other things like that. Can you believe it? He knew just how bad hospital food is... And his gesture really moved me.

CB: And did they let you eat it?

HP: They certainly did, in the room there was a little fridge and we had a great time. It was something totally unexpected and a really nice thought on his part. He's a very warm person, a little solitary...

CB: It's a fantastic anecdote. I find it strange hearing personal things about people I've read so much about... In fact it's really strange for me to discover that you exist.

HP: (*Laughing.*) Yes, I do exist... Well, you never know. But I do exist...

Harold Pinter had to leave me. After taking a photo of him, he showed me a little more of his studio. He drew my attention to a painting behind his table of a room distorted by a lens (in the latest version of the biography by Michael Billington there is a portrait of Pinter where this canvas appears in the background). He also pointed out a painting on the staircase, depicting a man gripping a woman by the neck, and he explained to me that it was inspired by one of the more disturbing moments in *Ashes to Ashes*. It's a shame he couldn't remember the name of the painter of these pieces. With complete naturalness he concluded the tour of his studio and then, very cordially, said goodbye with two kisses.

The interview was over. I left the house. And I had the impression of having squandered a unique occasion, that I should have asked him much more interesting questions. But later I realised that Pinter had

been controlling the situation all the time and I could not have easily imposed a tone of conversation... let's say more intellectual. And less so bearing in mind that Harold Pinter has written so much about characters who try to take control of the situation by means of the dialogue that unfolds in a closed room.

Interview with
KATIE MITCHELL

Víctor Muñoz i Calafell

English theatre is basically a text-based theatre. However, the productions you direct, even when you deal with classical plays, are not so much text-based but much more interdisciplinary. Where does this interest come from?

I don't really know, but my early influences were not text-based theatre productions. In my youth, I saw many foreign companies. In fact, when I was 17 or 18 I went to Spain and I happened to see a performance by La Fura dels Baus, with its members running through the audience, and Josep Costa's work. I also had the opportunity of seeing more avant-garde work at a festival in Polveriggi, near Ancona, Italy, called In Teatro; at the festival in Almagro, where I had the chance to see some international groups; and finally, I also saw a lot of Russian and Polish drama at different festivals in Edinburgh – work by Anatoli Vassiliev and Eimuntas Nekrosius, among others. I was also seeing British avant-garde groups, like Hesitate and Demonstrate and Impact Theatre, and then Canadian groups, like Lalala Human Steps. As a result, almost all my influences were from outside my own country, either avant-garde, visual or dance-orientated

work: Tadeusz Kantor, Pina Bausch... That's where my interests lay. However, English theatre is so text-based that I had to do my apprenticeship in mainstream text-based British companies. I always had a private conflict with that because it wasn't how I wanted to work. Theatre as live literary criticism is not something that interests me. I'm more interested in image and behaviour than I am in language, and as a result, I have had a very conflictive relationship with my own community of fellow artists, which has meant that sometimes they want me and sometimes they don't. I would probably be happier somewhere in Spain or Germany...

Your theatre has a very German flavour...

I know, it's strange, isn't it? Anyway, that's my background, those were my formative years: when I was 17, 18, 19 and 20, that's the work I was watching all over Europe. Then I got a grant and I went to study directors' training in Russia, Lithuania and Poland, and that's where my main influences come from, from companies like Gardzienice, for example, which is a Polish, near Grotowski company. All those companies worked in a way that spoke to me, more than the work in my own country, and they set a very high bar for me. So, even now, I measure my work by the productions I saw in the 1980s. I say to myself, "is it as good as Anatoli Vassiliev's work or Lev Dodin's?" I don't know why they became etched so strongly onto my memory, but they did. But also, as I've got older, I've realized I don't experience myself or the world as if I were inside a neat, linear narrative. And I have also realized that words are so approximate, they are so inaccurate when it comes to capturing feelings...

Did you say Vassiliev is one of your masters?

Yes, a big influence – especially his work from the 1980s: *Cerceaux* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. I actually studied with him in Moscow for three weeks in 1989, and it was amazing. Another influence is Andrei Tarkovski, the Russian writer and cinema director.

Up to what point do you consider your work to be experimental? Because *Waves* (a stage adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel) certainly is – or at least that's my opinion. But what about *The Seagull* or *Three Sisters*?

It's difficult to say because, mostly, when I'm working, I don't think that I'm being "experimental" as such. With *The Seagull* and *Three Sisters* I didn't have a consciously experimental agenda. I was simply trying to direct the plays accurately. I decided that the genre of both plays was symbolist rather than realist and then I used all my craft to crystallise that genre. However, in *Waves* I was more consciously experimenting with video and therefore pushing myself formally. I wanted to see whether I could evolve a different language for making theatre.

You have just said that your production of *The Seagull* was symbolist rather than realist, but I think that it's the most realistic play I have ever seen. I particularly remember two specific moments. Firstly, Trepliev's monologue, the way he spoke while preparing everything for his play. I thought that was really interesting because that's the way things happen in real life: we don't stop doing something in order to speak, but we do several things at the same time. And in your production of *The Seagull*, Trepliev, instead of standing in front of the

audience in order to perform his monologue, he carried on doing other things, and as a result he became really alive. On the other hand, I also remember scenes in which two characters quarrelling or talking privately happened to be interrupted by a third character. The other two characters had no other option but to wait silently for the third character to leave the stage in order to go on with their conversation. I thought that was very similar to real life too...

Those were the two things that British critics hated: they thought it was a disgrace. However, it wasn't my intention to make them think that. When I was working with Martin Crimp on the text, we found short sections of the material that were very clunky theatrical conventions of the 19th Century. For example, there were asides where characters spoke their thoughts directly to the audience or long patches of exposition in the first act. We decided to cut out these conventional elements in order to make the production feel more like a new play than an old one. So, direct address to the audience was removed, sitting and talking about history very boringly was removed, etc. We were also interested in creating a clear impression of a busy household with lots of servants moving to and fro. So conversations were interrupted. However, all this caused an uproar in this country and there were unbelievably negative reviews: I nearly lost my career over it. I even got some programmes of the production on which someone had written "rubbish" on every single page. I was accused of mutilating Chekhov, of putting my grubby fingerprints all over his work, when all I was trying to do was to make it as life-like as possible and to remove some of the conventions that I think interrupt the communication of the material today.

I think you are considered to be a feminist director...

A feminist director? No, we would never say that in this country... What do you think that means?

Well, that's what I wanted to ask you...

Feminist... I don't know what that means. I mean, in my life, of course I believe that women should be equal to men economically. In my work, though, I don't think "I'm a feminist" as I conceive things. I say to myself, "I have a problem with this play that I don't know how to solve, but I have to solve it", that's all. Perhaps the fact that I'm a woman means that I look at the play from a certain point of view, which may be different to how a man looks at it. Or it may be the same, I don't know. What does it mean? Perhaps there may be some tendency to avoid a characterisation of women that is two-dimensional, but then I might also end up characterising men two-dimensionally. I don't know...

If I had to associate your name to certain genres and authors, I would say tragedy, Chekhov and Martin Crimp. What do these names say to you? For instance, tragedy. I think you have directed four tragedies: *Women of Troy* (twice), *The Phoenician Women* and *The Oresteia*.

All the tragedies I have directed have been a response to specific wars going on. I first did *Women of Troy* during the conflicts in the Middle East in the 1990s; *The Phoenician Women* was during the Bosnian war; *The Oresteia* was in the aftermath of the Bosnian war, and this second *Women of Troy* is a response to the current war in Iraq. When a war breaks out, I tend to search for material that's going to have a conversation with that war,

and I always end up directing plays by Euripides or Aeschylus.

Does the same happen with Chekhov? You have directed *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*, *Ivanov* and *Uncle Vania*.

No. Chekhov's plays are less directly political. He studies the tiny details of human behaviour with a forensic eye. So the trigger for directing his plays is not a concrete external event. My interest in his plays is often slightly more intellectual and formal, I may say to myself, "Mmm, I'm going to give Chekhov a try because I want to work with symbolism...", or "I'll try Chekhov because I really want to work with exquisite realism". However, I also like the fact that Chekhov is not sentimental: he looks at human behaviour like a doctor and describes it as it is. And his descriptions are quite harsh. I think the tendency in Chekhov productions is to over-romanticise the action, and we forget that he is a doctor, a man who studied psychology early on in his life, and that he is a man who is dying. That means that in his mind, as he wrote most of his plays, was the thought that this could be his last one. As a result, the plays are quite urgent about how and how not to live in a certain way. And sometimes this is very exciting to communicate. So, I like the harshness of Chekhov. And moreover, he knows that we can't say what we mean with language – that language is approximate. So there is always a tension in his writing between what characters really want and what they are actually saying. He is a writer who knows that saying something like "pass me a cup of tea" can contain all the longings one has for another human being, though it only comes out in the most compressed and ridiculous banality,

and I love that in his writing. He is more interested in behaviour than language, and that's what I find so exciting, that's why his stage directions are in many ways as exciting as his dialogues. For instance, when he says "through tears" (a very famous Chekhov stage direction before a sentence), he means someone saying something whilst trying not to cry.

And finally, what about Martin Crimp? You have directed *Attempts on Her Life* twice, *The Country* and soon *The City*...

I don't know... He's not at all sentimental, he is very harsh, forensic... Formally, for me he is too knotted now, his plays are like tight riddles, you can never quite unravel them. His writing used to influence my work much more deeply than it does now. I'm casting for *The City* at the moment. It is the companion piece of *The Country*, but it is formally much more radical, and harder to do, and challenging, and lovely because of that.

Apart from Martin Crimp, you haven't directed many contemporary plays...

Kevin Elliot's *Forty Winks*, John Arden's *Live Like Pigs*, Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*... I've done a few!

Some playwrights have adapted classic texts for your productions, such as Martin Crimp with Chekhov's *The Seagull* or Caryl Churchill with Strindberg's *A Dream Play*. What was your relationship with them?

The relationships were all good and very challenging. I pushed them and they pushed me. In both cases, Martin and Caryl had moments where they felt compromised by directorial choices but both relationships emerged unscathed.

What is acting?

For me acting is the accurate articulation of human behaviour. This means that what the actor does – physically, vocally, emotionally – is completely credible and completely life-like. The actor does not use any conventional theatrical gestures or gestures that are connected with the fact that they are being watched. Often acting is a combination of three things: gestures which are theatrical conventions, gestures which are a result of being watched, and gestures which embody the character in the situation. I try to subtract the first two from the actors' work, so that the only information coming to the audience is connected to the character in the situation. In my experience, audiences are very sophisticated, and even though they can't consciously describe that they are seeing three things, they are actually receiving three bits of conflicting information: the theatrical gesture, the gesture born of being watched and the physical information about the character in the situation. And this mixture of gestures makes it very hard for audiences to understand precisely what is going on in the situation that the play describes.

Science defines an emotion as a physical change. That physical change can happen inside the body or in the skeleton or muscles of the body. In most cases, the effect of the change (or emotion) is legible to anyone watching. For example, when someone blushes you can see that they are embarrassed or when someone tenses up their shoulders you can see that they are angry. I want the actors to reenact these physical changes fully and accurately and I have found that the biology of emotions is a much more useful field of research than psychology to achieve this accuracy. With psychology there are so many

theories of how to read and make sense of human behaviour... By comparison, biology has a reassuring concreteness: you scan the brain and you can see the brain activity. I also like the way in which biology notates emotions. For example, there are six primary emotions: anger, happiness, sadness, surprise, disgust and indifference. These emotions are legible across all cultural and racial divides. For instance, if I suddenly landed in an African village, I would be able to see if someone was angry or sad, and they would be able to see whether I was angry or sad. This is amazing. When directing, I want that to clearly reach the audience.

And do actors readily agree to get rid of those two types of gestures you have just mentioned?

I have been working mainly with a small group of actors for the past five or so years. These actors work on the productions I direct and also participate in the research work I do into things like the biology of emotions. This means that together we have evolved a way of working. With these actors it is relatively easy to get rid of the types of gestures that are not concerned with the character in the situation.

Having said that, I work better as a team member than I do as an autocrat. I have to have actors in the rehearsal room who I have existing relationships with, so that they don't have to prove anything to me. They feel very secure in the relationship and I feel very secure in the relationship. Then we can just work very hard and, without vanity and ego and anxiety, getting in the way. It leads to great efficiency. And bravery too, since they take bigger risks because they feel very confident in the working relationship. However, sometimes I do

work with actors outside this group and it can prove difficult to weed out the unnecessary gestures.

Is it then more difficult to work with stars? I'm thinking of Juliet Stevenson, for instance, who played Arkadina in *The Seagull*...

It was rather hard to work with Juliet. I had worked with her before doing Beckett's *Footfalls* and *Not I* and she was fantastic. However, our relationship in *The Seagull* was conflictive for quite complex reasons. Primarily, because she had a vision of the character, and therefore of the production, that had to do with her psychology, and she was in conflict with the direction I wanted to go in. This disagreement affected the scenes. Moreover, she held the tempo of the character very close to her own tempo and refused to play any of the time pressures at work on the characters in particular situations. Put bluntly, she did not want to do or say anything quickly. Finally, she wanted to express some of her own private pain through the character. This private pain was related to one facet of the character and it meant that the other facets were neglected. Arkadina the lover was fully imagined but Arkadina the mother, Arkadina the actress and Arkadina the sister were not fully built. So the work that she and I made was unclear for the audience. She also disagreed with the process I was using to build the world of the play. Ben Whishaw, who played Konstantin, was the opposite. It was the first time I had worked with him and yet his acting was immaculate. What he did in that first very complex speech in Act One was enormously difficult. He had to play time, place, and a very clear intention to his uncle at the same time as tuning a piano. Maybe I work better with actors who are going to think,

"bloody hell, that's a difficult acting exercise but I quite fancy the challenge of doing it". Therefore, in a way, they have to be as interested in the process as in the product.

How do you organize rehearsals?

When I'm working on play texts I spend forty per cent of rehearsals with the full acting ensemble. Together, we build the world and the past of the play. We ask questions like: "Where is Sorin's estate in Russia?", "How long have Arkadina and Trigorin known each other?" and "What was happening in Russia in the 1890s?". We look at the biographies of all the characters. If the play is set in a historical period, we do all the relevant research. We also look at the idea structure of the play and we do practical work on the ideas of the play...

What do you mean by practical work?

For example, one of the big ideas underpinning *The Seagull* is unhappiness in love. So I say to the actors: "think of a moment in your life when you were unhappy in love". Then they come to the rehearsal room the next day and they reenact the event from their lives with the other actors playing the other people. The actors and I watch the exercises and observe what actually happens when people are unhappy in love. For example, we notice what the body does when a person is about to reject someone or at the moment when they are rejected. Then we discuss any links between what happens in these reenactments of real events from the actors' lives and the action of the play. This encourages the actors to draw from real life to build their characters and work on the action of the play. It stops them from doing a romanticised version of human behaviour.

If you ask actors to reenact hurtful moments from their lives in front of you, that must mean they really trust you...

I always ask them not to do anything that has happened recently and that is not properly digested. And they don't have to reenact something significant – they can literally do the moment after someone has rejected them and they are just sitting looking at a book. The reenactment is not a scene from a play. I also make it clear that theatre-making is not therapy. However, theatre is an imitation of life, so this exercise makes them have a little look at a few frames of their life and study them for anything they can use in the action of the play. If the ideas are particularly harrowing, like death and illness, I make the reenactment exercise optional.

As I said before, during this period we also build a world together, and I mean literally: we make a big map of place, so that, wherever they are, the actors can turn 360 degrees and know exactly what they are looking at all the time. So, in *The Seagull*, if they stood by the lake, they would know that, if they turned round, on the left there would be the road, a farm on the right, and a derelict house on the shore opposite.

After that, we look at the immediate circumstances, that is to say, the things that have happened in the twenty-four hours leading up to the action of the scene. In *The Seagull*, for instance, it would be Arkadina and Trigorin's arrival at the estate, how that event changes everything. Then we improvise key events in each character's biography. Finally, for the remaining sixty per cent of the rehearsals, we analyse the action of the text and we practise the scenes. However, when we start practicing the scenes, we don't do it with the words that are written in

the script. First, we analyse what the intentions are that motivate the words, and then, when we stand up, we do it as an improvisation: actors can use whatever words they remember, but they can also invent their own words. As a result, the first scene rehearsals feel more like an improvisation than a scene rehearsal.

That's probably the basic structure: first, we build the world that exists before the action begins; then we study the action; and finally, we practice the action. And all the time, actors have to be playing place, time, pictures of the past, intentions and events, which are the changes that happen in the action.

And when do you consider it's time to learn the text by heart?

Hopefully, it happens organically, but I don't mind if they still don't know their lines on the first night, it doesn't bother me (though it bothers a lot of other people and the actors have always learnt their lines by then...).

Performing implies repeating the same actions night after night. What can a director do or how can a director help an actor to keep these actions alive?

For me, work on the intentions is the key to keeping work alive over time. An intention is the desire underneath the words the characters speak and the actions they do. In rehearsals you pinpoint the precise intentions and in performance the actor finds different ways of playing that intention. The intention never changes but the means by which it is achieved can vary from night to night. This variation is what keeps the performance alive. The actors are constantly surprising each other with how they are playing the intention.

That's how I create life in the performance over time.

Finally, what makes you choose a play? Do you have the opportunity of choosing the plays you want to direct, either at the National Theatre or at the Royal Court?

I don't always know why I want to direct certain plays at certain points in my life – other than the obvious things, such as the moment when there is a troubling war going on and, as an artist, you want to have a conversation with that event. Probably there are private psychological things that lead one to one writer or one play at a given moment, or as I said earlier, my choices may be driven by the desire to experiment with form, like the work I'm currently doing with video.

I'm lucky enough, however, to be able to direct the play I choose and this is mainly because of the patronage of Nick Hytner at the National Theatre, who provides me with an artistic home and allows me to do what I want. Obviously my desires have to fit inside his agenda for a balanced programme of work, and sometimes his programming needs do affect the choices I make. For example, in 2004 I wanted to direct *The Seagull* but he said, "No, don't do *The Seagull*. Do *Three Sisters* instead because it will fit in better with the rest of our repertoire", and that was fine.

You have mentioned your current interest in video, which we saw a few months ago in *Waves*. What can you tell me about your current stage adaptation of *The Idiot*?

The Idiot (the production, which premiered in July 2008, was finally entitled *...some trace of her*) is a

big formal experiment. We are looking at 19th century photography by Munch, Strindberg and two female photographers, Lady Harwarden and Julia Margaret Cameron. We are also looking at a fantastic American photographer called Francesca Woodman from the 1970s. We will use the style and atmosphere of these photographs to construct the scenes from *The Idiot*. Then we will lay text and dialogue over them.

Isn't that experimental?

Is it? I don't know, I just think it's beautiful.

This interview took place at the National Theatre's Studio, in London, on 7 December 2007.