

Larry Tremblay's "Talking bodies"

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Interview at the Obrador de la Sala Beckett, 26 November 2009

Recorded on the occasion of the intensive writing workshop that Quebec dramatist Larry Tremblay taught at the Obrador de la Sala Beckett last November, and of the dramatised reading of his first text translated into Catalan, *Abraham Lincoln va al teatre* (translated by Jaume Melendres), PAUSA offers the following interview with the aim of introducing one of the most important dramatists of Quebec and inviting you to read his texts.

Let's start the interview with a question that you have probably been asked loads of times. I would like you to explain how you discovered theatre, how and when.

I believe that I started very young. When a very small child I was always fascinated by everything that was performing and everything related. I was born with the television and I remember that I passionately followed a broadcast which involved clowns, sketches involving clowns. There was a famous clown in Quebec, known by the name of *Pallaisson*. I was fascinated by his way of performing, his play as an actor, and the case is that, thirty years later, I had the honour of being able to work with the actor that played *Pallaisson*, who performed on many occasions my work *The dragonfly of Chicoutimi*. I find that there is a very strong link between by interest in everything that the clowns represented – because I was a child – and the world of theatricality. At the same time, fate also has something to do with it, as it means that idols of your childhood, as in my case, can be found once more in the future and worked with, and that is amazing. Moreover, I would say that the world of theatricality is also the world of fiction, and as far as I am concerned, fiction was born from the desire to write. I think that first of all the writer was born. I was initiated, if I can put it that way, very early on in the comics of Tintin, again another reading, a childhood idol. Tintin was a reporter, in other words, a writer too. Strangely, afterwards I never found him again in any “written” book. I mean that he had not written any books. He only lived through adventures, he didn't write. I thought that I wanted to be like him, a special reporter who would live through a heap of adventures and above all, who would travel a lot. I believe that I very quickly associated writing with fiction, fiction with adventures, and adventures with travel, in other words, with the other. For me theatre is the other, otherness. And, from that perspective, I question identity, I seek identities. And it is for that reason that in my works, whether theatre or novels, we find the search for identity, which very much a Quebecer theme.

So when you were a child, did you want to be a writer, an author first of all, rather than an actor?

Yes, the writer was born earlier, but chance meant that early on I joined a theatre company. It was an experimental theatre company. It was not an amateur company nor a professional one, but an experimental one. Possibly it is a category that no longer exists, today. Then, in Canada, there were three experimental companies: one in Montreal, one in Toronto and one in Jonquière, near Chicoutimi. It was in this latter company that I started working at the age of twenty years. A year later we went to India to perform a play, and there I discovered *kathakali*. I decided to dedicate five or six years of my life to the study of *kathakali*, which gave me a very good physical, gestural and corporal training. It was very “exotic” training, which allowed me to reflect on the training of actor, because I compared how actors in the East trained with my knowledge of how they trained in the West. In summary, I was a writer that became an actor

and after a dancer of *kathakali*, a young man who asked himself many questions about how we actors trained in the West, a young man who returning from India was employed by the Higher School of Theatre of Montreal (ESTM), where I have trained actors for over twenty-five years and the last eight I have been in charge of the courses on dramatic writing.

As you say, *kathakali* has been very important for you as an actor and when training new actors in Montreal. Reading your essay, *Le crâne des théâtres. Essais sur le corps de l'acteur* (Lémeac, Montreal, 1993), we also see that *kathakali* is present in your processes of writing and actor training.

Yes, because *kathakali* is based on a vision of the body, on a corporal practice based on segmentation. In other words, in *kathakali* one learns to control the muscles in an independent way, separately, in order to immediately look to combine them to form greater totalities. All this, to express more precise codes: mime codes and *mudra* codes. *Mudra* are the signs made with the hands, a veritable language for speaking with the hands that makes possible the expression of very specific and diverse emotional states. I have analysed and worked the five-hundred gestural codes, “gestural words” or *mudra*. All this is shown in a show based on forms and rhythmic structures, in other words, it is also dance and even, opera, because everything that the actor expresses with gestural codes is sung by other performers who are behind him. Then, it is dance, it is opera, it is mime, gestural theatre. Above all, it is theatre.

You wrote your first play at a very young age, when you were eighteen years old, *Le déclin du destin* (1988).

Yes, I was quite young and, in reference to the title, it is a work that already announced everything that would affect my fate as a playwright. This short play is a kind of matriarchal work that already condensed back then everything that I would write afterwards, both theatre plays and novels and books of tales that I have published. We could say that it is an inaugural text.

What is there in *Le déclin du destin* to consider it the matricial work that would mark the path of all your later works?

This work talks of a man who loses bits of his body. It is incredible as a starting point: a man eats a bit of chocolate and suddenly realises he has lost a tooth, afterwards all his teeth, then his tongue, then his fingers, etc. It is, therefore, a metaphorical play, a metaphysical one too, that expresses the abyss, the gap that exists in our civilisation between the body and the spirit. It is an abyss that has existed since far-off times, which we could also identify as the abyss between heart and soul, or alternatively between reason and emotion. In fact, that is a traditional dichotomy that I expressed from the viewpoint of a young man aged eighteen in his native Chicoutimi, a little village north-west of Montreal that used a language that was a reminder of the language of the 19th century, because as a very young man I read a lot, especially the great classics and specifically Edgar Allan Poe. I read him in a translation of Baudelaire and I can say that in *Le déclin du destin* there is a lot of Poe and of Baudelaire. I don't mean that I copied them, but that my author's language was still in a process of formation, still at boiling point. When I re-read the work, sometimes I think that it wasn't me that wrote it. For a young man from Chicoutimi, writing that way was completely unheard of.

In your article “Écrire avec de la matière”, which closes the book *Le corps déjoué. Figures du théâtre de Larry Tremblay* (Collective work, Lansman Editeur, 2009), the first book that analyses in depth your entire dramatic oeuvre, you talk about a reading that was fundamental in your training as a playwright: *La transcendance de l’ego* by J. P. Sartre.

Indeed, that is a very short book, but I read practically all of Sartre when I was very young. In that book Sartre defined the ego as an object. We are not necessarily our ego, we can separate it, make it appear or disappear and analyse it with objectivity. What I found interesting is that when an actor acts, he puts his own ego to one side in order to accept another. That is so from a metaphysical plane and it seems interesting to me because I have always wondered why I like being another character. I realised that when I performed, I stopped being myself somehow and that relaxed me, because always being oneself is very very tiring. I find it very interesting “ceasing to be” oneself to live what is lived by another or some other characters through the imagination, the theatrical fiction itself or even fiction in other genres such as the novel and short stories. Finally, I associated the metaphysics of Sartre with the pleasure of all that is playful. That is how, over the years, above all as a teacher of actors, I have created a method of anatomical approach to the work of the performer, the playful anatomy, which I later applied also to the field of writing.

Can we associate this ego-object with the abyss that you presented between body and soul, reason and emotion?

Yes, clearly. The problem is always the same, expressed with other variants. In other words, when I was young, I felt that it was not necessarily what I was. It seems complicated but it is not. What is there inside my body? Whose is the body that I inhabit? Is it me? All my work tends to harmonise the two sides, body and soul, body and thought, it tends to create bridges over the inherent abyss that is installed in our being. There are always the same questions: Is thinking hidden inside the body? Or alternatively does the body try to free itself of itself via thinking? It is a circle or a spiral? I don’t have the answer, but what makes me write is precisely that questioning. Who am I? Who are we?

As an educator, do you discover the abyss between body and thinking in young people who want to be actors?

Every generation tackles this central problem in different ways. Nowadays, there is a very important tendency towards exhibitionism, narcissism, the mediatisation of oneself, things that did not weigh so heavy in my generation. Today, the image of the ego – everything is a question of image – takes the place of the body. In other words, the body loses value in favour of the image of this very body. There is a strange link with the body: the body is only valued as a potential factor for creating an image, which is what counts. It is not so much the truth of the body as the deception that it could produce: an image. In other words, the deception that makes people to approach their body, to try and know it, only to produce an image that will be valued in our society of today. There is a very subtle relationship of true/false but at the same time it is very perverse and dangerous, because behind the image there is the risk of finding the void.

This problem is developed in your most emblematic work, *The dragonfly of Chicoutimi* (1995). Moreover, the linguistic problem of Quebec also makes an appearance as an essential feature of your work. The main character of the work lives a kind of eternal search for a social and a cultural identity, a search for his own voice as a being.

I often say that the name of the character is Gaston Talbot. His surname is English and his name is French. Gaston finds himself forced to wear a linguistic mask to be able to talk to himself. He is dumb, I prefer to say aphasic or perhaps that he no longer wants to talk. To know what it is, one has to pass through being “the other” and being the other involves being an Anglophone, putting on the mask of English. Evidently, it is a social work and with a strong political charge. It reflects the linguistic problem of Quebec, based on the fact that French is a language that has to be protected and that could disappear in twenty, thirty or fifty years time, we don’t know. If we don’t protect it, it will probably disappear through a phenomenon of assimilation. For me, losing the language also means losing identity. I wrote a work around the anguish that every linguistic minority feels when there is a pressure that might make it disappear. It is a very emotive work in which there is no French, no character who speaks French. The words are those of the other, the Anglophone, but with the phantom of Francophone syntax. The work was a big big hit for many years, until the death of the actor, unfortunately. A lot of people asked me, months later, if the work would be translated into English. It wasn’t necessary, the work was already written in English! Those people, who had seen the work, forgot that the work was in English. They would say to me: “No, no, I’ve seen your play and it was in French”. So, the same brain had transformed all the memories it had of the work and they believed they had seen it in French. It was a neurological, or psychoneurological, or neuropsycholinguistic phenomenon, I don’t know, but a truly interesting one.

Does the political element remain present in your most recent works? Is it there in *Abraham Lincoln va al teatre*?

Yes, there is a clear political element in this work. I wanted to talk about the schizophrenia of America, but only in the United States, because America is a vision of the world that is spreading everywhere. I want to make people reflect on this “American” way of seeing things, reality. Quebecers and Canadians and Europeans alike, we all share this American vision, where there is a schizophrenia between what we say and what we do. On the one hand, democratic values are projected and put on the table, and on the other, arms are produced, a quick and speculative profit is sought, wars are made. I wanted to explore that double language, even though the work not only talks about this schizophrenic vision, but it is a work with numerous interwoven leitmotifs. The work rebuilds the assassination of Abraham Lincoln at the hands of an actor, while Lincoln is watching a play at the theatre. I find that it is an eminently theatrical situation that allows us to question what is true and what is false. It allows us to talk about the image, about being, not being, about the imitator, about the imitated, because I believe that, today, often what is preferred is not what is authentic but what is imitated, the imitation. In the same way, there is a clear preference for the image against the thing itself, which takes us to an active reflection on the mediatization of things. I also wanted to investigate how to express a national tragedy through the devices of comedy, for that reason I incorporate the figures of Laurel and Hardy.

Are the numerous *mises en abîme* that occur throughout the work mechanisms to advance in the search for the identity of the main character, who is split at the same time into a theatre director?

We could relate it with the ego-object. If we visualise the ego of the main character as a recipient, as a kind of game of Russian dolls, we see that within his ego there is another, and within this last one, another. That causes a movement, a movement towards something. I see it as a movement towards being, towards the truth. It is a search, because a search is an arrow that moves crossing all the characters towards their truth, something which may be an endless movement. In the work *Le ventriloque* (El ventríloquo)¹ I already proposed this movement. In *Abraham Lincoln va al teatro* I take this movement to a very major tension: each character hides a second one, and that second hides a third. That highlights my vision on the functioning of the ego, which is formed by all kinds of things: often we express ourselves more through the voice of others that is in us than through ourselves. We are very contaminated, and in a constant way. We can come to say things and have opinions that have been inoculated into us by the manipulation caused by the massive mediatisation of reality. We are not authors of all our opinions, even though it seems difficult to believe.

Returning to your educator facet, could you explain to us what the playful anatomy method for the training of actors consists of and how you have adapted it to playwriting workshops?

The method was born in the form of exercises to help by acting students. When they want to start playing a character, they have a problem with their own body. In a slightly exaggerated way, they don't know what to do with their hands, their legs and when it comes to structuring the words they discover that they don't know their own body. I proposed to help them by creating a corporal score and locating very specific points of the body to guide their concentration. For an actor, concentration is very necessary, it is necessary to identify and create clear points in a kind of corporal map. I propose to create objects of concentration in the body through the imagination. It is true that it is a training that requires great effort and discipline. Initially, the score that I create divides the body into sections that I call "hemi-bodies", which are like halves of the body, such as the left-front hemi-body, the left-rear hemi-body, etc. First of all it is necessary to concentrate on these major parts. This is the locative phase: the actor has to learn to concentrate on a specific part of the body. Then, I introduce the subject, and then, through the imagination, cavities are created in the body to house different materials. This is the cavitation phase where, for example, an actor can concentrate on a cavity full of gel in his lungs. Right next will come a third phase, the psychological phase, where he plays a character that will carry out one or more actions propped up by a body that has been prepared and conditioned in the previous phases. These are, very succinctly, the general lines of the method to train actors, which I baptised as *playful anatomy*, because the actor meets a playful body, the tool with which he has to learn to play to "create" a body for his characters. After some years, I realised that I could apply the playful anatomy to writing processes. First of all I experimented with it myself when creating new texts. Then I incorporated it into the writing workshops, always in an experimental way. Well, in fact I think that playful anatomy as a writing process is still in an experimental phase. The workshop I have given at the Obrador de la Sala Beckett is one of the first that I have taught outside of Quebec. I started to try it out in writing classes when I realised that, after so many playful anatomy exercises, some texts which I wrote were clearly situated in a particular part of the body: head, belly, etc. They were belly-texts, head-texts or they began at the legs and finished at the head and other combinations. I carried out some experiences with young writers and the result was quite positive. The ideal situation, for me, is to be able to bring

¹ Lansman Editeur, 2000. Spanish edition: *El ventríloquo* (Los Textos de la Capilla, 2009, Mexico City).

together young playwrights and do a long and intense corporal training session, as I have briefly described, and before writing anything, each participant has to be able to master the cavities and the objects of concentration of his body and circulate between them with fluidity. When the young playwrights learn to dominate what I call the *energetic ranges* of their body, the writing can be born from a point of concentration and a specific subject associated with this point of concentration and thus create a flux of words. It is a case of establishing the triggers of the writing in the body of our character, whom we investigate based on our own body, the ego of another in our own ego.

From this point of view, the playful anatomy applied to writing seems to be a method for generating a large quantity of textual materials.

It is true and one of the main purposes for the experimentation. Deep down it is a case of awakening everything that is hidden inside the flesh, under the skin, in the nerves and in the organs. I base myself on the principle that all that we have lived is found in all of our cells, in our energetic circles, in our nerve networks, in the liquids, in the ligaments. Everything is found in the body. There is a corporal memory that stores it all. The most difficult thing is to find that treasure and know how to structure it. Every artist, whether painter, musician or writer, has the same problem: how to make everything that already exists hidden in some part of himself emerge. Playful anatomy proposes paths to find this treasure and methods of excitation of the imagination asleep or inhibited in our body. In the case of a playwright, the images created have theatrical forms and are very much related to sensations.

Playful anatomy applied to dramatic writing consists of several stages. Could you explain them to us briefly?

Taking advantage of the four days in Barcelona at the Obrador's seminar, I have explained the four stages based on a culinary metaphor. The first phase would be the sponge egg, in other words, a phase in which nothing is written, but sensations are accumulated. The playwright becomes a kind of sensitive plate that records all the interior and exterior stimuli. It is a case of searching those questions that dwell inside of us and, through the reading of external sensations, positivising this plaque. It is a task of gathering data. It seems that the author wants to write on a subject, but he still manifests himself in a vague, not very precise way. The second phase is the incubation. The author accumulates these vague sensations, that data that have been revealed on the sensitive plaque, and has to let them incubate without getting obsessed over them. It is necessary to let time pass. The third, is the phase of the hatching, of the enlightenment. It is already a phase when the author starts to write dialogues, monologues, without even knowing whose voices speak. It is, and has to be, a driven writing. It cannot be rational, we have to be able to write five, six pages in three or four minutes, lists of words, a monologue voice that we don't know where it is taking us, for example. We note that it is a fluid writing, adapted to the voice promoting it and causing it, that we do not have to censure in any way. From this moment, the author brings together all the material generated, which may be a great deal, and faces the last phase. Following the fun culinary metaphor, the fourth stage is the omelette, the making of the omelette. It is the moment of reasoning, coherence and organisation of the elements. It is the phase of the re-writings and the verification. These four phases allow one to write without anguish, regularly. This is thus because an author can work on several texts at the same time: one text may be in the first phase, another in incubation and the third in a process of hatching. There are always texts that are written in the interior of the playwright, if he is capable of recognising the stages and practicing a certain training. For example, in my case, the incubation of *The dragonfly of Chicoutimi* was extremely long, a lot of years, and the hatching was shattering: I wrote the work in three weeks, and the omelette, the re-writing and the final text, I did in one month. Each work demands its own times for each phase, its own genesis, different in each of the cases. It is important to say, also, that the playful anatomy allows many playwrights to see the existence of texts in their interior that until then they did not know or left out.

Seeing the results of the playful anatomy workshops and reading the materials generated, it seems that the characters produced are a kind of *talking bodies*.

What characterises my works in a more personal way is the importance that I confer upon the bodies, the body of the character. The body occupies a central place in my training as an actor, in my theatrical texts, in my short stories and novels, and also, in an almost exclusive way, in my theoretical texts. When an editor from Toronto proposed that I publish the four works where the body is at the centre of the drama, I thought about the title *Talking bodies*, in other words, bodies that talk. In all my works, situations take place in the bodies of the characters, rather than in their psychologies. However much these situations unleash psychological effects, it is important to remark that in my texts the drama, the rupture, the main lagoon, the fissures, in other words, the main problem, installs itself in the body.

To finish the interview, what place do you think that theatre should occupy in such a mediatised society? In one of the debates that took place in the Quebecer theatre conferences at the Sala Beckett, you showed yourself to be in agreement with Carles Batlle when you affirmed that a very major tension exists between significance and performance, in a theatre that is more concerned with presentation than with representation.

I am rather optimistic with relation to the theatricality of the text. I find that it resists all modes and tendencies. It is true that we find ourselves in a very mediatised world, but even though theatre also creates images, these emerge based on a real presence. Theatre is maintained as a place of real presence. The image presented at the theatre is real, this is the power of theatre. The spectator lives an existential experience thanks to the real presence. In the fight between performance and significance, in France there is a tendency towards deconstruction of the text, of the person and of the psychology. In America, and specifically in Quebec, there is still a major devotion towards the character, we very much like identification and we do not feel very comfortable when the dramatic text is too fragmented. I would say that contemporary American playwriting is based on the pillars of the action, and that contemporary French playwriting, and perhaps that of other European countries, on the deconstruction of the personality to make the word reemerge anew. There is the same need of stories as always, and it is important to make the spectator see that the story can be done, undone and redone again. It is a kind of post-Brechtian proposition, because the main danger is that the most important referential element is the television. People have a tendency to compare theatre with television, forgetting that theatre is thousands of years old. Theatre has to move the spectator in terms of content, structure, rhythm, etc., to make the spectator emerge from his television hypnosis and highlight the fact that what is real is not what is televised. The truth is not necessarily what is mediatised. Theatre has to have a social and political function to be able to awaken the spectator from media hypnosis.

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