

EUROPEAN PERFORMATIVE THEATRE

THE ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND TECHNIQUES OF
CRUCIAL MASTERPIECES

Annamaria Cascetta



European Performative Theatre

Performative theatre is one of the most important trends of our time. It is emblematic of the work of many European theatrical artists in the early twenty-first century.

Annamaria Cascetta does not propose a model or a historical overview, but rather strives to identify the salient features of a significant trend in the theatrical research and transformation of our time by analysing some crucial examples from outstanding works, of great international resonance. She draws on work by artists from different generations, all active between the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, and in various European countries, performed in a number of European theatres in recent years.

The aim is to apply a method of analysis in depth, bringing out the technical elements of contemporary “performative theatre” in the field, and above all to highlight the close links between it and the urgent and troubled issues and problems of history and society in the phase of cultural and anthropological transition we are experiencing.

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The Issues, Problems and Techniques
of Crucial Masterpieces

Annamaria Cascetta

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Introduction

Given the point of view adopted here, performative theatre¹ is a macro trend in the way of conceiving and performing theatre in Europe between the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century by artists of notable aesthetic commitment, cultural anthropological, ethical and political sense of responsibility and authenticity. It appears to me as the incubation of a live art adapted to the new times, in the horizon of the great communicative transformations of the digital age and in the urgencies of the anthropological regeneration of the time. It practises a bold technical-expressive experimentation and a free and responsible reflection on issues and values.

One of the most interesting aspects of its relationship of discontinuity and permanence with the tradition is that it has also assimilated, metabolised and brought to maturity some fundamental technical-expressive acquisitions of the experimental and research theatre of the sixties and seventies. It has also drawn less consciously on some categories of thought underlying them, combining them with forms and themes coming from other cultural practices of our time. Tending to be independent, or in any case not subordinated to the system of the culture industry, the artists who practise this kind of theatre seem to be firmly aware of their difference, but diverge from controversial provocation, self-referentiality, the proud apartheid of the catacomb niche positioning typical of so much avant-garde theatre and the experimentalism of past decades. Well suited to our world today, it is part of the great, millennia-long tradition of theatre that serves as mirror, consciousness, alarm and project of the community to which it relates.

The idea of performative theatre: cultural sources

We can first identify its conceptual strengths and the disciplinary fields from which arise the issues that have flowed into the catchment area of culture and the history of ideas to meet artists' needs and experiences. The important acquisitions of the philosophy of language and philosophy of knowledge, in particular the area of phenomenology, help us to better grasp the notion of the *performative*. It is firstly associated, I believe, with the theme of

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intentionality. This is a fertile concept, which has influenced many aspects of culture, in some cases even diverging from the methodological rigour of the philosopher Edmund Husserl,² who decisively theorised it in the twentieth century, anchoring it to the logical foundation of a philosophy that could present itself as a science. Intentionality is an old scholastic term that has been taken up and developed in our time, has created a certain climate, has spread to various fields of cultural practice and, I believe, has entered into the theory and practice of experimental theatre, contaminating its original purity yet also enriching it. Grotowski certainly knew and reflected on this concept and we know how deep is the mark Grotowski has left on the theatrical culture of our time.

Intentionality is the core concept to understanding the dynamics of knowledge. Husserl took the concept from Brentano, removing it from the limits of psychology that described it as a psychological phenomenon, the bearer of an immanent object, and inserted it in the perspective of philosophy as a science: intentionality is the mode peculiar to the relationship between subject and object of consciousness: it determines the very possibility of knowledge. Consciousness lives only in acts: it is consciousness of something, and this 'something' is a lived experience (*Erlebnis*) corresponding to the act of consciousness. There are various modes of intentionality: perception, imagination, evaluation, desire, judgement, etc., all equally possessing the dignity of knowledge. The problem is no longer the being of the thing, but that of its sense, of the donation of meaning, which, in turn, is configured in the modes of consciousness. As the Latin etymology suggests (intentionality comes from *intendere* = to tend towards and *intentio* = striving), the term indicates a reciprocal striving by subject and object in the flow of experience of the world. We are not a chaotic and confused world to be shaped by a legislative intellect, but a reciprocity of projection and infilling of meaning. Confidence in experience, the becoming of time and the stratification of meaning are all implications. The meaning of things is not independent of the intentional activities of subjects. Phenomena are not appearances opposed to things in themselves, but the manifestation of reality in consciousness, the expression of the meaning of the object 'for me'.

The zero point of intentionality is the *body*, located in the here and now. After the start made by Husserl, great attention was devoted to this strand of phenomenological reflection (think of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre and Virgilio Melchiorre). It is the fulcrum of every prospect that makes any human orientation in the world possible. This is valid not only for the individual self, but for the self and for the Other in the life that we lead together in this world already given, this world for us that is not the realm of mere things, as Husserl reflected in some impassioned passages (in paragraph 38 of the Book II of *Ideen*).

Thus the theme, important to our theatrical discourse, arises of the body as the organ of volition, which is the bearer of free movements and of the

body of the Other cultivated emphatically as similar to what I am, in an intersubjective relationship.

Continuing to reflect on the notion of the performative and the theatrology connected with it, within the framework of the lines of thought of contemporary culture, we encounter the philosophy of language and in particular Austin's *theory of speech acts*,³ which offers clues that help us to understand and define the climate in which the theatrical tendency that we term performative developed. There are now many works that, in the wake of Austin, consider language from the point of view of the acts that are accomplished in and by speech. They belong to a single line of research situated on the boundary between the semantic dimension and the pragmatic, for which speaking is acting and the use of language means exercising an activity.

The basis of Austin's work is the study of those statements that do not describe or observe anything (and therefore are neither true nor false), but that when they are emitted serve to perform an action (e.g.: I promise, I bet...) in appropriate circumstances and by appropriate persons. This first thesis (which in linguistics and the philosophy of language leads through a long route of corrections and investigations that need not delay us here) has important implications for understanding how the theatre works (namely the complex system of its scenic language and its event). Linguistic activity therefore has a dynamic, pragmatic character. The use of language consists of a set of multiform activities entwined with other types of activities (the use of verbal and non-verbal signs, the passage of energy, emotions, codified and non-codified situations) on which meaning and effect depend. The theatre is the space and the event inhabited by flesh-and-blood people, who represent and experience this adventure of language live, in a protected enclosure and by interacting with an audience physically present and sharing the same space and time. As Josette Féral rightly writes: 'The notion of theatricality is viable solely if the concept escapes from a vision that makes it only a place of meaning. Because theatricality also has to do with the body, impulses, desire, and therefore with performativity'.⁴ They produce meaning and effects and have the efficacy of a symbol.

Let us now introduce another fundamental notion of contemporary thought: *the theory of symbolism*. Here the symbol is understood not as a sign in which the relationship between signifier and signified is conventional and distant, but as a concrete entity in an intimate relationship with what it signifies (see the etymology in the famous passage in Plato's *Symposium*):⁵ this is the individual, to whom it is addressed, on whom it acts and whose feedback it awaits as a contextual reaction or as a delayed effect, outside that context. We are far from the abstract, conceptual, intellectual idea of a symbol against which, as we shall see, Beckett rightly argued.

Thus we have gained, through the indications offered by the philosophy of language, the notions of action, effect and meaning. A further contribution to grasping the notion of performative theatre comes from theory and

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performance. The conception and practice of performance have in recent decades been widely explored by critics, historiography and dramatic theory. From occupying a marginal position, performance studies have become central, and from initially being confined to discussion of the avant-garde they have come to reveal their own specific significance. But the term performance has very indefinite boundaries. It alludes to a wide range of activities in both the arts and in the social sciences and economic practice. It has therefore given rise to a broad critical reflection that explores it as a highly controversial concept.

Richard Schechner, after long being active in the American avant-garde, was among the first to approach the problem with a series of fundamental studies.⁶ Guided by a wide range of interests, he eventually dilated the concept greatly, taking many Western scholars and artists with him. He proposed that performance should be seen as extending well beyond the field of the performing arts into ritual, medicine, sports, popular entertainment, and face-to-face interactions. He made it a centre of observation for understanding historical, social and cultural processes. In fact, in the English language and the culture of the English-speaking world, the term performance exists in technology, management and even finance, where it signifies, profit, a return on investment.

In an extended acceptance, performance therefore signifies all events involving a performer and a viewer (a religious service, an athlete's performance, or a speech in a political debate). In the most general sense it indicates any activity that includes the presentation of rehearsed or preordained sequences of words and actions. But to us today the problem is to indicate its boundaries and ask the correct questions in order to identify and understand an extensive and significant phenomenon in order to assess its scope with regard to the performing arts today, to comprehend the relations of continuity and/or discontinuity with theatrical art of the twentieth and twentieth-first century with its text-based dramaturgy and in order to understand its position in relation to artistic creativity in general.

How can we distinguish *performance* from *artistic performance*? What distinguishes the performing arts and within them performative theatre, which seems to be the dominant mode of the theatre of our time, while positing the need to identify a more precisely defined category? To come closer to an explanation, we need to be aware of certain polarities that are active in performance. Apart from that indicated above between the dilatation and circumscription of boundaries, equally important are the polarities of presence and representation, of reality and pretence, of actuality and possibility.

The chapter that Hans-Thies Lehmann devotes to performance in his book *Postdramatic Theatre*⁷ offers clarification of this point. It is an art that 'offers not a representation but an intentionally unmediated experience of the real (time, space, body)',⁸ a shared experience between artists and audience in which

the task of the spectator is no longer the neutral reconstruction, the re-creation and patient retracing of the fixed image but rather the mobilization of their own ability to react and experience in order to realise their participation in the process that is offered to them.⁹

The actors do not represent roles, but are performers who offer their presence.¹⁰ No media communication is so advanced that it can replace the intensity of this face-to-face communication.¹¹ In addition, the action of artists 'is designed not so much to transform a reality external to them and to communicate this by virtue of the aesthetic treatment, but rather to strive for a self-transformation.'¹²

Of course, the boundary between art and life is eroded, but we must not confuse and misunderstand. If we hold firm to the inscription of the theatre in the horizon of art and return to the foundations of the ontology of art and aesthetics, we will see that it interests us precisely as representation, the locus of the possible, directed towards the world and reality, but not immediately coinciding with them. We will see that it is form, quality and symbolic depth.

The reference to reality and truth of presence and participation in art, the aspiration to an effective experience of intense and responsible transformation, is important and has also been one of the strengths of the pioneers of theatrical research in the twentieth century's golden years (Grotowski, the Living Theatre, Bread and Puppet, the Théâtre du Soleil...), which is all the more urgent today when the theatre, in its difference, can keep alive the demand for an expression that is not superficial, not manipulated, not labile and discontinuous, not fake. And yet, though it is right and meritorious that theatrical art has been driven towards a commitment to authenticity and projection onto truth and reality, the boundary remains and should remain. Art is still the place of the possible, as Aristotle has taught us insuperably, and requires an ethical decision to pass into the present, the reality of existence and society. Lehmann also seems to prompt us to this conclusion when he says:

All aesthetic experience knows this bipolarity: first the confrontation with a presence, 'sudden' and in principle this side of (or beyond) the rupturing, doubling reflection; then the processing of this experience by an act of retroactive remembering, contemplating and reflecting.¹³

Anthropology, the theory of ritual and the philosophy of religion have also been invoked to clarify the orientation of this form of theatre, which I would venture, as I have already said, to indicate as the incubator of the live art of our own and the coming times. References to *ritual*, close to the origin of the theatre and its matrix in our tradition, recurs frequently in the theoretical and innovative masters of the twentieth-century stage, who have seen it as a model suitable to support their project to strip the theatre of

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the superficiality of the commercial stage today and restore it to the modes of an intense, foundational participation, the creator of transformational significance, based on the radical issues of existence, which is precisely the ritual experience. The anthropologist Victor Turner was moved by a keen interest in modern experimental theatre and his frequentation of Richard Schechner to reflect on the two practices and to stress the capacity of the ritual model to nurture the modern re-establishment of the theatre.¹⁴ Investigating analogies and differences, Turner was led to relate the ritual phenomena in the *liminal area* especially to archaic, tribal societies and to classify theatrical phenomena within the *liminoid*, better suited to modern contractual, dynamic, fluid, polycentric societies. The basic idea remains liminality, the place of suspension and crisis, the passing of a threshold, in which profound situations arise that the consciousness has to elaborate. Ritual and theatre both disrupt the flow of the routine of individual and social life. Their time is that of separation, perceived by the community as festive, not ferial and serial. Their space is separate, their language multicultural and symbolic, rich in meaning. Both open areas of anti-structure or *communitas* in the social structure (with its a hierarchical order of institutions, positions, roles and status). In them the concrete relations 'I', 'you' and 'us' between particular individuals are valid and concrete, not mediated. The theatre, viewed in this perspective, is the place of choice, play, the enhancement of a creative pole that dares and chooses to produce ideas, symbols, images, knowledge and emotions with high revelatory potential. All these are concepts that fit the ambitions of the performative theatre, a transforming event that requires intense community participation. But it is precisely the combination of ritual and theatre that clarifies the possible misunderstanding of the confusion between theatre and reality, mentioned above. The theatre, while distancing itself from pretence and falsehood, bringing representation closer to presence and breaking up the structure to touch the *communitas*,¹⁵ remains in the field of the possible. To attain true efficacy (as pertains to ritual), it is essential to emerge into reality and make an ethical and political decision.

And from aesthetics comes the practice of performative theatre, which can be considered, as we have seen, a sort of *laboratory of live art* adapted to the new times, supplying decisive indications to increase the awareness that we are moving into the area of art. This is not at all evident, given that, as Theodor Adorno said, it is not obvious that art is entitled to exist today, given that its place has become uncertain. And this is all the less obvious in the case of the theatre, which has long been excluded by theorists of aristocratic and intellectualistic aesthetics from artistic practice and relegated to other practices such as oratory, or instructive or pure entertainment. One need only remember the position of the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce.

But it is not and it no longer has to be like that. From Theodor Adorno's observations¹⁶ and those on the symbolic imagination,¹⁷ we derive an illuminating compass of orientation and interpretation of the tendency that I am dealing with here. *Which art?*

I think, with Adorno, of art as absolute and irrevocable freedom and independence, lying outside the everyday world, its rules and unfreedom, as neither copy nor evasion, neither consolation nor ideology. It is not a copy of empirical life, but a representation of what is missing from it, of what it lacks. Detached from it, therefore, in antithesis to it, not abetting it, but directed at the world and reality. Thus its dual character is emphasised, as autonomy and as social fact, in which the desire to produce a better world is also at work. The world of art that it thinks of is a world free from immediate desire, from ephemeral and superficial pleasure, from ephemeral play, but not from profound enjoyment, the happiness of understanding and being moved.

Art, uncompromisingly following its own laws, expresses a content of truth. It gives expression to contradictions, suffering, the anguish of the mechanisms that grind existence, the yearning for otherness and utopia. Those who let themselves be duped by the culture industry, its commodities and consumer goods, come well short of this idea of art. And again, art is the place where the imagination works as described previously in an authentic search for meaning.

The concrete work of performative artists on themes and forms is engrafted onto all these basic issues that are in the air and can be sensed, even in the chaotic affliction of our times.

The performative theatre: salient characteristics

What are the salient features of performative theatre? I will try to list some of them, while it should be understood that clearly they are not all present, nor are they to be found in equal measure in all the individual works or across the output of all the artists.

In terms of 'scoring for the stage' we find a 'plateau à habiter', as the French say, where the arts, languages and materials are woven into a total equivalence in the construction of signs and meaning, even going so far in some cases as to renounce an 'aura' and embody the humdrum, the ugly, the disgusting, and cheap materials. The stagings oscillate between minimalism, the utmost simplicity, in keeping with the poetic of reduction in the manner of Beckett and Grotowski, and on the other hand the use of a wealth of artistic languages and expressive materials. The signs are arranged in a composition that aims at a complete perception (synaesthesia). As Lehmann points out, they do not form a hierarchy.¹⁸ The verbal part tends to be paratactic rather than syntactic, and not primarily dialogic, as it was in the tradition of modern drama. The latter must be understood as a literary-dramaturgical genre, not as a general category of 'action' (from the Greek δράω = act) and, as Peter Szondi has definitively shown us.¹⁹ It does not predominate. Silence, stillness, often form part of it. Music, visuality, physical writing dominate.

The construction of the stage representation often follows the procedures of workshop theatre, a collective construct, or the construction of the sign

modelled on the concrete reality of the performer. It expresses the loss of the 'aura' announced by Benjamin. In the age of performance this aspect is not so much a product of technical replication as of the decline of the Romantic and decadent idea of the artist as an extraordinary, irregular presence of life and 'inimitable' within society. What is established is the idea of the artist as bard, performer, narrator and voice of the community and its conscience, with whom the relationship is horizontal and necessary. It reminds one of the ancient bards. And this applies especially to the artist who performs before an audience,

Fundamental to this point is the focus on the performance of the actor or the author-actor. The performative value of the performance is all the more intense if what is said and done is credible, because it is not separated, divorced from his/her person in the flesh. The actor is not just a sign that alludes to something else, an allegory, but a presence heavily involved in what is represented and presented. What the actor says and does cannot be separated from who the actor is. This implication makes the actor credible. What he/she says and does gains in power through experience made tangible. There is an oscillation between presence and representation ('The Artist is Present' reads an incisive title by Marina Abramović), between truth and pretence (or fiction). The actor is the performer who invests the self, psychophysical subjectivity, who represents the self.

In terms of the audience, which is one of the nodes of this form of theatre, it seeks to create an intense relationship and searches for various original and often provocative ways of involving the audience in what happens on stage. Together with the actor, the audience is the focus of this drama.

An important factor in this respect is also the contribution made by expressive research, because live art transcends the barriers of language and particular conventions, reaching different audiences by raising their awareness of urgent issues of shared concern, in line with the orientation of the globalised world and integration between cultures.

In terms of relations with other media, while discontinuity and rupture remain key characteristics, often controversially expressed, the media, technology and the projected image are accepted for their expressive potential. At times they are used to film and enlarge from different angles the work of the actors on themselves in the act of dramatic creation (revealing details that would be lost in a frontal view alone), and at other times used with different artistic languages to construct the image on the stage.

The performative theatre: theatrical sources

In the light of these characteristics, schematically listed, a fundamental contribution to the establishment of the performative theatre comes from the reflection and theatrical practice of the great masters of the twentieth century. I will mention the positions of Artaud and Grotowski only briefly, as they are well known and the subject of an extensive bibliography, useful for our approach.

Antonin Artaud, in polemic with the tradition of Western theatre and the 'digestive theatre' (light entertainment) of his time, argued that the theatre is not reducible either to speech (especially dialogic speech), with its dictatorial presence, or to drama limited to expressing psychological, moral and social conflicts. It is not literature, but an independent art: a form of plastic and physical expression that also uses speech in a concrete and spatial sense, as vibration, rhythm, even a violent pulsation that acts as an acoustic signifier rather than conceptual meaning. It acts through the senses, the skin, the nerves, in short, the psychophysical unity of the body. It is freedom that eludes logocentric constraints. It is the double of another reality that does not coincide with everyday reality, but sinks into the deep forces that bind humanity to its mysterious context and emerge in the hyper-intensification of dramatic signs, like dolphins showing their heads above the water before plunging under it again. In this context the actor is an 'athlete of the heart'; the director a master of ceremonies, the theatre an experience of cruelty as a *rigour* that strikes deeply and transforms, establishing a stringent relation between actors and audience.

It is worth quoting some of Artaud's key statements. Making allowance for their form, which was bound up with the culture of the time, and the irrational excesses of a particular condition, which we should distance ourselves from, they are striking by their topical relevance and truth:

At the point of deterioration which our sensibility has reached, it is certain that we need above all a theatre that wakes us up: nerves and heart (...) whose resonance is deep within us. (...) It is in order to attack the spectator's sensibility on all sides that we advocate a revolving spectacle which, instead of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication, spreads its visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators. (...) One does not separate the mind from the body nor the senses from the intelligence. (...) Thus, on the one hand, the mass and extent of a spectacle [should be] addressed to the entire organism.²⁰

It is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood.²¹

For it must be understood that in this quantity of movements and images arranged for a given length of time, we include both silence and rhythm as well as a certain physical vibration and commotion, composed of objects and gestures really made and really put to use. (...) These means, which consist of intensities of colours, lights, or sounds, which utilise vibration, tremors (...) can obtain their full effect only by the use of *dissonances*.²²

The actor is an athlete of the heart.²³

Another indispensable reference of the performative theatre is Jerzy Grotowski. As recognised by Ludwig Flaszen, an important Polish intellectual

and co-founder of the Teatr Laboratorium,²⁴ the roots of performative theatre were already in Grotowski's idea when the Teatr Laboratorium still existed as an institution, but it is certain that the notion developed and was specified in the Italian phase of the 'para-theatre' of Pontedera and was embodied in his work as a teacher of performers and the now-classic text *Performer*.²⁵

The cornerstones that prefigured performative theatre were the rejection of theatre as spectacle; the centrality of the actor with body and voice; the work of the theatre as a process of self-penetration through physical and vocal training; the relationship with the spectator-witness and with the director-teacher as an authentic and almost sacrificial encounter for the actor-presence; the method of constructing the text not as an illustration of a literary text, but as a retrospective assemblage of actions born and developed during a lengthy process. I have already studied this question in a previous essay, to which the reader is referred.²⁶

However it is worth quoting some lapidary expressions, in the manner of the Polish master, taken from *Performer*, which are illuminating even though they refer to an experience that is now outside the theatre, though potentially directed at it.

Performer (...) is a man of action. He is not somebody who plays another (...) Performer is a state of being. A man of knowledge (...) a rebel face to whom knowledge stands as a duty; even if others don't curse him, he feels to be a changeling, an outsider (...). A man of knowledge has at his disposal *the doing* and not ideas or theories.²⁷

A situation of particular intensity is created that recalls ritual, danger and at the same time chance, involving performers and witnesses. The performer travels to another shore. We are dealing with an art that Grotowski, by borrowing the term from pharmacology, mechanics and esoterism, terms a *vehicle*. It is a question of guiding towards the essence of the human through a physical itinerary that sinks into the memory as deeply as the ancestral roots.

One access to the creative way consists of discovering in yourself an ancient corporality to which you are bound by a strong ancestral relation (...) You can arrive very far back, as if your memory awakes (...). Is essence the hidden background of the memory? I don't know at all. When I work near essence, I have the impression that memory actualises (...). The reminiscence is perhaps one of these potentialities.²⁸

Hence art is an itinerary of knowledge expressed in a performative structure. I hope I may be allowed a personal memory. When, as a young theatre critic, I attended the products and events organised by the 1975 Biennale Teatro, I had an opportunity to meet Grotowski several times. On

one of these occasions, informally, in a small piazza near Ca' Giustinian, he entertained a group of young people, myself among them, and strongly supported his approach almost scientifically (encouraged by a brother scientist) speaking of his effort to attain a knowledge of humanity by all means, including theatre. Nothing vaguely esoteric or mystical, but a rigour and authenticity of purpose that seem to me the most important suggestion for the art from life that we are seeking.

As for the theme of theatrical sources of the performative theatre, it seems to me above all significant to finally dwell on Samuel Beckett. He is in fact one of the most important sources of *performative theatre*. This relationship has already been seen by some scholars.²⁹ By summing up their observations, but also emphasising other points, I will devote more space to the weight he has had on the kind of theatre I am dealing with here. In short, it can be said that Beckett paved the way for performative theatre on a technical-formal level, through the relationship with the actor and his methods of working on audiences, and on a thematic level by the twofold significance, destructive and constructive, between dissolution and reconstruction, in his dramaturgy.³⁰

It is worth summing up the essential aspects of this relationship. First: if it is true that in the theatre the text is always the performance, it can be said of Beckett's dramaturgy that the text is also 'the screenplay, the scenario of the film'. And this is precisely why it cannot be changed by the director in any way and why it is believed that Beckett not only transformed the technique of the text, but also theatre *tout court*. Which made it difficult for the public and critics to initially accept it. The meaning of the words does not lie in this type of fundamental text.

In this respect, Beckett frequently observed the inadequacy of speech to express human existence. I will only quote the famous letter in 1937 in which he wrote that language is 'a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind' and that one cannot imagine a higher goal for an artist today than 'to drill one hole after another into [language] until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing starts seeping through. I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer'.³¹ Nor can we forget the famous poem, almost a final summation, *What is the Word?*³² Second: the starting point for the creative process may not be the verbal code, but other codes: a painting, a movement, a rhythm, a piece of music, a voice, a breath, a game. This is the reason why art, music, play and photography can be considered a great source of inspiration in Beckett. Among the visitors to the great Giacometti exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London in 2017, how many could hardly have helped wondering how far the artist's works played on Beckett's initial inspiration? The obsessive research into the head, the eyes as the starting point for the creation of each sculpture. The head, the eye is, as we know, a leitmotif in Beckett's work.

Third: the intersection of codes on the stage is not only important for meaning, but for the effect on the audience, on the nerves, the senses and the

body. The audience's various senses are affected simultaneously. Beckett's concern is not the intelligibility of what is represented. At issue is not the audience's minds but their nerves. Writing about *Not I*, Alan Schneider commented: 'I hear it breathless, urgent, feverish, rhythmic, panting along, without undue concern with intelligibility. Addressed less to the understanding than to the nerves of the audience which should in a sense share her bewilderment'.³³ This is a fundamental affinity with the performative theatre and is important for the demand today for an international audience and for complicity with it beyond words.

Fourth: the culminating point and the fundamental anticipation of the performative theatre of the future, which Beckett seemed to intuit, after Artaud and before Grotowski, is that the new theatre had to pass from representation to presence. The core of this process is the body. The body is existence, whatever level it is placed at, even the most embarrassing, all the way down to levels that traditionally have never been presented or considered worthy of being shown on the stage (though they may have been at circuses or fairs). The drive towards performativity in Beckett's theatre is consistent with his experimental interests, but it is above all the result of a human sensibility that leads him to mimetically present the many aspects of existence, to concretely render the many degrees of energy of the living to the point of pushing himself so far as to make present and pulsating on the stage forms of humanity traditionally expelled, segregated, with their vital or even residual rhythm. His work avoids the typical pretension of psychological, literary theatre to probe or express the characters' psychology, their conscious suffering with words lent to them, but impossible in their real mouths. We encounter the ending, the slow dying, the sudden unblocking of the long suppressed voice in an existence without love, dissociated, the disappearance of strength, the boundary between life and death, languishing, disability, the frailty of age, the decreasing energy, the emptying of time and space. The drama is not dominated by action (which had seemed to be peculiar to the theatre ever since Aristotle), but stalemate, tension restrained without exploding, the endurance of a residual being. The body is the voice and the language arrives at what Jakobson termed the 'phatic function', namely not allowing contact to die, even though in reality there is neither dialogue nor drama.

Beckett is concerned to materialise the vital rhythm through actor's body, movement, pulsation and voice. It is a prophetic research and anticipates a well-established trend of the performative theatre that gives a voice to those who do not have one, all the way to the rejected, excluded body. In this case Beckett goes so far as to make absence a palpable presence, as Enoch Brater observes: 'Beckett has finally succeed in making absence a palpable stage presence'.³⁴

The impatience that Beckett repeatedly expressed for every abstract, symbolic, ideological interpretation, stems from this passion for the 'presence' of naked and raw existence, its rhythm, its breath, surprised and grasped at the

moments that seem least representative. Not expressing and representing, but presenting and bearing witness. 'There is nothing to express', Beckett writes, 'nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express'.³⁵

Fifth: the enormously enlarged resources of the theatre, of performative events, of the actor, starting from 'less is more' and from the person as a zero point. The simplification and essentialisation of the theatre by Beckett, in keeping with the principle of 'less is more', actually enriches the possibilities of the theatre and enables it to transform itself. It prepares it to become a profound encounter between presences of and testimonies to existences, a symmetrical democratic human encounter, abandoning the traditional plane of heroic character and audience, between star actor and audience. Hence a school of democracy.

Contrary to what we might suppose, Beckett valued actors and he showed this whenever he supervised or directed them in the theatre. He freed actors from clichés of character and emotions and guided them through passage, tone and physicality to feel emphatically in themselves the level of existence on which the characters were set and to sympathise with them through the reduction to a minimum that is simultaneously a dense tangle of energy capable of embodying the crippled body, the unborn body, the dead body. (Think of *Endgame*, *Footfalls*, and *Play*.)

Beckett, of course, never theorises anything, but his positions on the theatre, in relation to the points listed earlier, are clear from certain references to his biography by James Knowlson,³⁶ from passages in his letters, which have now been published in full,³⁷ the testimonies of actors who worked with him, in particular Billie Whitelaw,³⁸ or directors like Alan Schneider,³⁹ and his important *Notebooks*.⁴⁰

Here are some examples, just to give some impression of his ideas. In his biography James Knowlson notes that Beckett more than once spoke of a situation that he had experienced and that would eventually inspire *Endgame*, an anti-dramatic situation, at the limits of representability: the expectation of what must inexorably happen in a lapse of time when nothing happens. It is the disease in a terminal phase, analogous to a chess game that has reached stalemate and cannot end.⁴¹ Again, speaking of the *Endgame* rehearsals directed by the young Michael Blake in 1964, starring Pat Magee and Jack MacGowran, he recalls how both Beckett and the actor Magee, who was very dear to him, curbed the young director Michael Blake's tendency to look for symbols and meanings. 'Beckett says: "Don't look for symbols in my plays." Magee lights a cigarette and grins, *sotto voce*: "He means don't play it like symbols".'⁴²

Speaking of *Footfalls*, Knowlson mentions the young Beckett's stay in Munich and his passion for Antonello da Messina's *Annunciation*, with the superb beauty of the head and shoulders of the figure expressing the terrified pose of the 'servant' of God. This, writes Knowlson, 'is strangely echoed

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in the posture of May, the pacing figures in Beckett's play *Footfalls*, when Beckett, directing, had the actress Billie Whitelaw, clasp her hands across her body in a gesture that seemed to encapsulate her whole being'.⁴³

In her autobiography, Billie Whitelaw describes the composition of *Footfalls*. She mentions that the last thing anyone could speak to Beckett about was the meaning of his works. In a letter of 12 February 1976 from Paris, on the plan to stage the play, Beckett emphasised that 'the pacing is the essence of the matter. To be dramatised to the utmost. The text: what pharmacists call excipient'. The observation is extraordinarily close to Grotowski's on art as a vehicle. And again:

He was primarily concerned with my character's movements, not the words. I felt that *Footfalls* was going to be different for him: he was interested in something other than his text (...) It's the movements – he explained – the movement is most important, the way you hold your body.⁴⁴

Instructed by Beckett, Whitelaw realised that

the play's movement, the pacing up and down seven or nine paces to the left or to the right, is the physical substance of the play (...) The stillness and the silences are as important as the words, and just as important are her clothes which over the years seem to have rotted as they cling to her. May seems to be in the process of disappearing like smoke, of becoming more and more inward, the movements getting ever slower, the body gently spiraling inward as the play proceeds – towards nothingness.⁴⁵

For his part Alan Schneider, when he tried to explain the workings of Beckett's works, invoked analogies with music: the actors are asked to function as musical instruments that play visual music. Certainly he had not forgotten the controversial letter against the critics that Beckett had sent him from Paris in 1957:

But when it comes to these bastards of journalists I feel the only line is to refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind. That's for those bastards of critics. (...) My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among overtones, let them.⁴⁶

Amiable, but firm and determined as always, in a letter from Paris dated 25 July 1953, he had already expressed the concept to the German director Carlheinz Caspari, who had asked him about his work, evoking Expressionism and Symbolism:

If my play contains expressionist elements, it is without my knowledge. Nor is this, to me, a symbolist play, I cannot stress that too much. Above

all it is a question of a thing that happens, almost a routine, and it is this everyday quality and materiality, in my view, that need to be stressed (...). The characters are living creatures, barely alive, if you like, but they are not emblems.⁴⁷

This study

This study does not propose a model or a historical overview, but attempts to identify the salient features of a significant trend in the theatrical research and transformation of our time by analysing some crucial examples. They are selected from outstanding works, of great international resonance, by artists from different generations, all active between the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, and in various European countries, performed in a number of European theatres in recent years. They are emblematic both technically-expressively and on the thematic and problematic planes. The productions analysed deal with crucial themes, both by their universality, their relevance to the passage of time between the end of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first, which the special sensibility of these artists captures and expresses with the means appropriate to the new times. In leafing through the chapters of the book, the reader will notice that they offer a picture of the most problematic urgencies and trends drawn from the history of the period considered between advance and regression. I can briefly list them: the search for a path between global and local perspectives (Wilson); the search for the structure of the person through the science and behaviour of humanity (Brook); the cultural overcoming of war (Dodin and the pioneer Littlewood); the attainment of democracy and the encounter between cultures (Pommerat and Lawers); the realisation of the condition of freedom of man in the recognition of liberties through the culture of rights and inclusive procedures (Motus, Dante, Delbono); the relationship with tradition, access and the free choice of genealogies best suited to the anthropological project of contemporary man (Garcia, Castellucci); the construction of the city of man by balancing concreteness and mediation, past and present (Rimini Protokoll).

The aim is to apply a method of analysis in depth, bringing out the technical elements of contemporary 'performative theatre' in the field, and above all to highlight the close links between it and the urgent and troubled issues and problems of history and society in the phase of cultural and anthropological transition we are experiencing. It is a matter of showing the far-from-marginal role of the theatre, at the height of its history and its centuries-old function: the role of consciousness and alarm, mirror and project. Because Badiou is right to conceptualise 'theatre "as a form of thought" offering us "an ethics of the event" and an aesthetic encounter which functions for the spectator as an elucidation of the present'.⁴⁸

The hypothesis, to be further verified with a broader range of cultural instruments, is that ours is, for better or worse, the age of performance, in

civic and political life, in communications and in the orientation towards which live theatre is now moving.

The privileged interpreter of this development is precisely what we call 'performative theatre'. Why?

- 1) Because it is a way of raising awareness and raising the alarm about the themes and the positive and negative values of an era.
- 2) Because as a language it is the homologue of the imagery of the artists of our time, trained after the 1960s in a visual, aural, medial culture, and no longer literary, unlike the twentieth-century masters of text-based dramaturgy. This is not to impoverish but to exalt speech in human expression as a whole.
- 3) Because it is a language that tends to supersede the barriers of speech and translation and is a homologue of the pressures towards globalisation.
- 4) Because it is a language open to the recomposition of the segmentation of art in the search for an 'Ars una', a 'total work of art'.
- 5) Because, with its distance (which some may term marginality) and its 'difference', it keeps alive the demand for humanism, increasingly at risk in the present time and ever more urgent.
- 6) Because, in its independence of the cultural and entertainment industry, it seems to be an art form not only well suited to aesthetic and ethical purposes, but also to the orientation of an emerging economy of the kind identified, for instance, by Mariana Mazzucato. The award-winning⁴⁹ Italian-American economist, in her brilliant studies, endorses an economy that places value at the centre of the debate, distinguishes 'value creation' from 'value extraction', reverses the point of view which sees value as synonymous with price,⁵⁰ considers value a process tending towards the formation of wealth that is not 'a cumulative stock of the value already created', but a 'flow [that] of course results in actual things, whether tangible (a loaf of bread) or intangible (new knowledge)'.⁵¹ Her book alludes to the use of different types of personal resources, calls for long-term investments and perspectives and notes the importance of returns of a kind that are immediately relevant to this book: knowledge, education of the feelings, participation in democratic gatherings and community debate, equality in the enjoyment of beauty among people who are required to go offline for the time of the theatre. Value is produced together in relationships and interactions and not in prices and economic rents. I feel that the theatre we are dealing with here is fully in harmony with this view of value.

It is true that we also have to meditate problematically on the risks and gains of this macro tendency in live art. The theatre has benefited greatly from its exploration of the theories and experiences of performance in the summons to authenticity-truth, the concern for reality, in the drive to move away from a tendency towards self-referentiality and closure in idiolects

that are barely comprehensible. At the same time it has promoted collective authorship through the complexity of the expressive codes and materials that make up the machine of meaning that is the stage. It has given rise to a performative theatre that is often very lucid and problematic in its diagnosis of the historical, cultural and anthropological situation in which we live. It presents itself as the critical conscience of the age (in its positive and negative values) and the role of the artist, committed, even when apparently anchored in a strongly autobiographical position, to the search for active culture in reawakening a sense of aesthetic and ethical responsibility and the rediscovery of the original vocation of dramaturgy.

Notes

- 1 I take the term from the study by Josette Féral (*Théorie et Pratique du théâtre. Au-delà des limites*, L'Entretemps éditions, Montpellier, 2011). I feel it is more appropriate than others, although in this essay I will revise both its meaning and area of application.
For a brief bibliographical introduction to the topic the reader is referred to: Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, Routledge, New York, 1988; Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Verlag der Autoren, Frankfurt, 1999; Erika Fisher-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2004; Henry Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004; Gerardo Guccini (ed.), 'Dramma VS post-drammatico: polarità a confronto', *Prove di drammaturgia*, 1, 2010; Josette Féral, *Théorie et pratique du théâtre: au-delà des limites*, Éditions L'Entretemps, Montpellier, 2011; Josette Féral (ed.), 'Entre deux: du théâtral et du performatif', *Théâtre public*, July–September 2012; Christian Biet-Sylvie Roques (ed.), 'Performance: le corps exposé', *Communications*, 92, 2013; Joseph Danan, *Entre Théâtre et performance: la question du texte*, Actes Sud, Arles, 2013; Marco De Marinis, *Il teatro dopo l'età dell'oro: Novecento e oltre*, Bulzoni, Rome, 2013; Fabrizio Deriu, *Mediologia della performance: arti performative nell'epoca della riproducibilità digitale*, Le Lettere, Firenze, 2013; Karen Jürs-Munby-Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles, *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, Bloomsbury, London, New Dehli, New York and Sydney, 2013; Annamaria Cascetta (ed.), *Il teatro verso la performance*, 'Comunicazioni sociali', 1, 2014; Marco De Marinis-R. Ferraresi (ed.), 'pensare il teatro: nuova teatrologia e Performance studies', *Culture teatrali*, 26, 2017; Valentina Valentini, *New Theatre in Italy 1963–2013*, traduzione di Thomas Haskell, Routledge, London and New York, 2018.
- 2 The fundamental work is: Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie and phänomenologischen Philosophie*, M. Nijhoff, Haag, 1952–1976. For an introduction the reader is referred to: Virgilio Melchiorre (ed.), *Enciclopedia filosofica*, Fondazione Centro Studi Filosofici di Gallarate-Bompiani, Milan, 2006, 12 vols. See the entries *Intenzionalità* by Virgilio Melchiorre and *Husserl* by Elio Franzini.
- 3 John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, The William James Lectures at Harvard University 1955, Oxford University Press, London, 1962.
- 4 Josette Féral, 'Les paradoxes de la théâtralité', *Théâtre public*, no. 205, July–September 2012, p. 11.

- 5 The term comes from the Greek and means 'to throw together'. It indicates an expression with a twofold meaning: its primary meaning expresses an intimate connection with a secondary meaning and, in this, a more radical meaning never graspable in its most comprehensive extension. The myth of the androgyne in Plato's *Symposium* is famous as expressing the love and symbolic nature of humanity. Zeus, to counter the arrogance of men, spherical, terrible in strength and power, decreed they should all be cut in two. There were originally three genders. Each half yearned for its lost half, sought to find it and cling to it by desire so as again to be whole. So each of us returns to the other. Introducing the term that interests us, the Greek has: 'hécastos [...] anthrópou symbolon' (*Symposium*, 189 d; 190 a–e; 191 a–d).
- On this subject see: Virgilio Melchiorre, *L'immaginazione simbolica*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1972; Annamaria Cascetta and Laura Peja (eds.), *Ingresso a teatro. guida all'analisi della drammaturgia*, Le Lettere, Florence, 2003.
- 6 See Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1985; *Performance Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2003.
- 7 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, London and New York, 2006. The chapter devoted to performance is on pages 134–144.
- 8 Ibid., p. 134.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 134–135.
- 10 The temptation to autobiography in performance is illustrated, for example, in Deindre Heddou's book, *Autobiography and Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008.
- 11 Marina Abramović's noted experiments exemplify this to electrifying and scari-fying effect.
- 12 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 137.
- 13 Ibid., p. 142.
- 14 *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, Performing Arts Journal Publications, New York, 1982.
- 15 *Communitas* was a great theme of reflection in the twentieth century. An example is the thought of Martin Buber: see the recent publication in French of a collection of his short texts: *Communauté*, Éditions de l'éclat, Paris, 2018.
- 16 *Ästhetische Theorie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1970 (a work he intended to dedicate to Samuel Beckett).
- 17 See Virgilio Melchiorre, *L'immaginazione simbolica*.
- 18 'We can repeatedly note a non-hierarchical use of signs that aims at a syn-aesthetic perception and contradicts the established hierarchy' (*Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 86).
- 19 See: *Theorie des modern Dramas (1880–1950)*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1973. It is not true that the performative excludes the dramatic: at most, it reduces that part of verbal drama bound up with dialogue.
- 20 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre of Cruelty*, in *The Theatre and Its Double*, Grove Press, New York, 1958, p. 84.
- 21 Ibid., p. 122.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 120–121.
- 23 Ibid, p. 133.