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“Our Theater,” in Performance

Abstract

The final chapter of Miguel Rubio Zapata's *El cuerpo ausente (performance político)* 'Absent body (political performance)' begins with an epigraph from Antonin Artaud, at first glance a very unexpected inspiration for a group famed for its politically-charged performances...

Keywords

Miguel Rubio Zapata, El cuerpo ausente (performance político), Absent body (political performance), Antonin Artaud

Our Theater, In Performance

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The final chapter of Miguel Rubio Zapata's *El cuerpo ausente* (*performance político*) 'Absent body (political performance)' begins with an epigraph from Antonin Artaud, at first glance a very unexpected inspiration for a group famed for its politically-charged performances. Rubio cites a passage from the essay "On the Balinese Theater" (I cite from the available English translation rather than Rubio's Spanish): "Our purely verbal theater, unaware of everything that makes theater, of everything that exists in the air of the stage, which is measured and circumscribed by that air and has a density in space—movements, shapes, colors, vibrations, attitudes, screams—our theater, with respect to the incommensurable, which derives from the mind's capacity for receiving suggestion. . ." (Artaud 56).

"Our purely verbal theater" 'nuestro teatro puramente verbal' is implicitly linked to *Yuyachkani's* long trajectory in Peruvian culture, yet the quote is ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so. For in context, Artaud argues that Balinese theater could teach "our" excessively rational, overly verbal, European theater a thing or two about spirituality, about the metaphysics of gesture, about the "movements, shapes, colors, vibrations, attitudes, screams" that for him define his controversial approach to spectacle. Unlike European theater, in the Bali of Artaud's imagining, the critical emphasis remains on ritualized qualities, located in the physical rather than the verbal, highlighting the role of gesture, music, dance, of the performative spectacle that does not rely on a pre-existing/dramatic text. These

are all elements that *Yuyachkani* deploys to such magnificent effect as well, though Rubio's group rejects the exoticism inherent in the French thinker to find its inspiration, not in Bali, but—a significant difference with political and methodological implications—in the local traditions, rituals, and customs of the Quechua-speaking Andes of their native Peru, as filtered through their collective vision in such performance pieces as “Santiago” (this issue) and “Adios Aya-cucho.”

Artaud was exposed to Balinese theater in the 1931 Colonial Exposition. Even more interesting from my perspective is that he almost immediately transferred this enthusiasm for exotic spaces and performance forms from Bali to his obsession with indigenous America, especially his fascination with the conquest of Mexico, such that it becomes the sustaining core of his 1932 manifestos on the theater of cruelty. Re-reading Artaud, as Rubio does, from this side of the ocean, is a necessary next step in this dialogue, and a particularly telling one, coming from a group with a Quechua name, and a Quechua-inspired practice. Unsurprisingly, Artaud's eventual trip to Mexico in 1936—explicitly defined as an anti-Marxist search for the secrets of the “Indian Revolution”¹—featured what can only be called a pilgrimage to Tarahumara country in the north of Mexico and his participation in the peyote ceremonies there, before returning to France, and his final sad ending in a psychiatric hospital. *Mutatis mutandi*, in a final twist, we could pick up this story across the ocean in the Americas once again, in another psychiatric facility, this time in Kansas, where a Tarahumara woman puzzles her doctors, and serves as the inspiration for Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's magisterial trilingual (English, Spanish, Rarámuri) play, *La mujer que cayó del cielo* ‘The woman who fell from the sky;’ (see Nigro for a discussion of another of Rascón Banda's important border-crossing plays). Thus, the French theorist who found inspiration in the image of the exotic Mexican Indian in his cosmopolitan city of Paris, travels back and forth across the ocean, and is finally brought back to the Americas and reframed here, both north and south, in theorizations that begin with the homely Indian, in the daily life of our America.

Mad, drug-addicted, contradictory, Artaud still remains a significant force in our thinking about performance today, in that he,

along with Brecht, serve as the two iconic figures defining the theory of theater since the early 20th century. Antonin Artaud's central concern was never with the staging of a definitive text, but rather in exploring the meaning and function of theater itself, and he struggles constantly with the serious idea of restoring to theater its original function as a form of public communication and a means to celebrate the essential aspects of human existence. In the early 21st century, when "performance" has become associated with internet aliases and bad politicians, and has devolved into a buzz word so liberally applied in our cultural criticism that it has become leached of a more precise meaning, it is well to take a step back and remind ourselves of the ways specifically theatrical performance and performance art help us to refine our understanding of "performance" more generally, when that term is taken as applying to any self-conscious act.

The late-capitalist, digital age presents new challenges to the dramatic field, no doubt about it. In response, theatrical performance today concerns artists and actors who refuse to be limited to a nation, an ethnicity or a gender, nor to the proscenium stage, a prescribed text, or a unicity of language. The articles in this issue often trace the performative trajectories of works that migrate in many senses: Rubio on *Yuyachkani's* literal and figurative procession through the Peruvian Andes; Unruh's discussion of tourism in Venezuelan Rodolfo Santana; Gladhart's analysis of the trope of migration in Ecuadorian theater; Nigro's study of performances on the U.S.-Mexican border, and Horn on Dominican migrant tales. Huerta and Solórzano-Thompson extend this analysis into immigrant drama within the United States. The migration is intellectual in Meléndez's piece on humor in Mexico's most applauded playwright. She explores Berman's appropriation of sacred totem figures like Molière and Freud on the one hand, and the conquest of Mexico on the other. Day's study focuses on performers known for their staged works, who are also on the move, as they take to the streets performing new-old roles as public intellectuals.

In this special issue, the articles' authors represent a balance of playscript and performance analysis, and they include some of the most distinguished figures in the field, alongside the very best of the new generation of scholars and performers: scholar-directors like

Huerta, Rubio, and del Busto, and the testimony of activist performance artist Rosina Conde, alongside scholars trained in literary and cultural analysis (Day, Gladhart, Horn, Meléndez, Nigro, Solórzano-Thompson, and Unruh). Like the plays and the performances analyzed, the authors of these studies are likewise multilingual border-crossers who work in the interstices of multiple traditions, and embrace the methodologies and content of both more traditional theater and performance art forms. They offer a glimpse behind the scenes of an extremely lively and rapidly changing field.

Note

1 See Writings 365; also “in short, we expect from Mexico a new concept of Revolution, and also a new concept of Man, which will serve to nourish, to feed with its magical life this ultimate form of humanism. . .” (268). Artaud is finally wary of this romanticism, in which he finds a suspiciously exoticizing continuity between the pyramids and sacrifices of Tenochtitlan and modern Mexico, but is continually drawn to these same effects in his own lyrical and highly contradictory writings.

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