

IS HISTORY SHUTTING DOWN CULTURE IN TIMES OF CRISIS? ABOUT THE RELEVANCE AND IRRELEVANCE OF PERFORMING ARTS

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Abstract: *In times of crisis, is history shutting down culture? This is a question that must have haunted our minds as authors and culture hunters as well. The moments we are living right now can stir in ourselves nostalgia for our past daily life, but also can reveal the new substance of the society we have been creating until now. As the most affected by the Pandemic, the performing arts could find in the turmoil and despair of the solitude of the multiple lockdowns a new identity and the confirmation of their own necessity.*

Keywords: *performing arts, pandemic, lockdowns, culture, live*

Over the course of history, humanity mainly expressed a certain anguish regarding some abusive restrictions on access to books. In the famous novel by Ray Bradbury, “Fahrenheit 451”, the violence of an oppressive system was expressed through its obsession with banning books. “There must be something in books, things we can’t imagine, to make a woman refuse to leave a burning house; there must be something there. You don’t stay for nothing.”⁸⁶ This is one of the musings the Fireman in the novel is sharing with the readers. And this make you think a bit about what it is that enriches your life. The most rewarding and especially freeing habit, the reading of a book has been seen as the guarantee of our true

⁸⁶ Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1967, p. 35

identities. What a sudden and unexpected twist to experience the hunger for live performing arts and what an impact it had!

I bought tickets for this evening! This is how a special segment in our daily life begins to take shape. We are planning something for ourselves. And it always has the aura of that special thing we owe to each other and we offer ourselves. We prepare for quite a while, we find the perfect outfit, we reschedule our day, and we present ourselves, usually in the evening, to melt in the experience of watching, listening, but most of all, feeling a performance. This is a need we socially acknowledge, even with a bit of pride. We have the confidence this shared moment of culture enriches us as individuals, and in a way validates our value in society. What happens then when all this comes to an end? An unintended end.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic challenged a lot the societies all over the globe, and practically made impossible the existence of live performances. This situation caused panic in the field of the professionals (performers, directors and all the people involved in artistic teams), and an awkward feeling within the audience. Somehow, everyone suddenly realized how deeply rewarding and intensive interconnecting performing arts really are. In fact, the disorientation (sometimes expressed by riots, sometimes by anxiety and depression) that took over all individuals was directly linked to the atomization of societies, the feeling of alienation and loneliness that spread rapidly.

“Everyone must leave something behind when they die, my grandfather said. A child, or a book, or a painting, or a house, or a wall built, or a pair of shoes made. Or a garden planted. Something your hand touched in some way so your soul has somewhere to go when you die, and when people look at that tree or that flower you planted, you’re there”⁸⁷, Ray Bradbury noted. The world has now the

⁸⁷ *Ibidem.*, pp. 142-143

freedom to do all that the writer mentioned. Still, something of utmost importance is missing. It has maybe something to do with the way our society has changed. The way all of us experience life in 2020. Apparently the warnings of psychologists, that contemporary people are more and more lonely and self-centred, were wrong. In a moment when the threat of a dangerous virus recommends social distance, we can openly see that our societies are more interconnected than ever. And it is not only the virtual world that our global connectivity consists of; it is much more about the craving for our direct exchanges. Also, this obvious fact now expresses something even stronger; our connection with the present. Interconnectivity in the modern world draws its main content from our immediate experiences. More than ever, the speed of our communication expanded the moment, the frame in time we are living in. We probably have less possibility to use meditation for reflecting on our lives, but we definitely got a more accurate sense of the *here and now* aspect of our existence. And that leads to why the exact arts that are doing the same for us, why we miss that much in our daily habits.

The performing arts are traditionally linked with both the intensity of the *here and now* experience of the audience present in a theatre or in an opera house, and with the here and now experience of the artistic team performing on the stage. Also, the themes of each performance have to be linked in a way or another to the living moment in time it happens. Whether we are talking about an adaptation of a classical text or a product of contemporary dramatists, the stage performance has to be relevant for the audience even in the very specific terms of its ethnicity and culture. Few books or paintings meet that condition, but the ephemeral character of live performances is orienting them towards addressing the immediate reflection of our existence, worries and fulfilment.

As a vivid reflection of ourselves, the chemistry of the performing arts rhymes now with the vivacity of life itself. In

desperation, artists tried to feed the internet with their recorded performances, like a claim to their continuity. That was simply not a solution, as audiences couldn't transfer the catharsis of a collective live experience to the isolation of an on-screen viewing by oneself. It became a similar frustration as the non-familiar, but now existing longing for face to face communication, the mutual touching, the confidence of sharing space, air, and experiences with one another. Suddenly, what had been the big temptation of the 20th century - remote dialog, virtual sharing etc., became a mere tool, a pale consolation in a moment marked by melancholy and longing.

We are now the witnesses of a strange phenomenon that few arts had the chance to experience. Life itself offers to performing artists their truest definition, and the proof of their undeniable necessity. Tormented, maybe, by the pecuniary problems they face, and the doubts any professional stoppage can bring to an artist's world, they tend to miss this most precious conclusion that rises from the midst of such a humanitarian crisis as we are living in. Coming from the last decades where the pressure of audio-visual arts was almost crushing theatre halls, the performing arts have now the chance to proudly find their true importance. And their importance is obviously the fact that they most substantially belong and take part in community life. All this is well suited for a breath of fresh air in the themes and styles they will adopt when life reopens to its regular flow. Because, much more than books or movies, the performing arts will have an essential role to play in our healing process as communities in the near future. All those very elitist and complicated forms that were aiming to attract by being very spectacular or forcing their originality upon an audience that was overexposed to any stimulus will then have to be forgotten. The audience itself have changed.

The individuals that will fill the audiences will be having a new and strong experience of the importance and fulfilment of being there. In that specific time frame and in the same space, they will be

conscious of the craving they already had for human sharing, as a community, of the same momentary emotion of being alive. This extraordinary intensity, the performing arts will have to be able to understand and work with it in the near future. Their efforts will no longer have to be oriented towards the sophistication of their tools, but more to the authenticity of their expression. The live moment of a performance will manifest life itself in front of and along with the entire audience, making them laugh or cry together, feel each other breathe, trusting each other. The capability of the performing artists to understand the role that opens for them will be of a crucial importance in the future destiny of these artful expressions.

As the human race, we have started this hard year, 2020, as societies that were more and more beyond the mirror, with our individual minds trapped more or less all the time beyond their screens, in the seemingly infinite world of internet connections, social media and podcast cinema. There was a bigger and bigger difficulty to have someone step out the door in order to attend some artistic event somewhere in the city. Suddenly, as if by the wave of a magic wand, the many imposed lockdowns, and social distancing revealed to everybody the limits of the virtual world. In this light, we may say that virtuality lives only in opposition to life itself. Whenever the basic needs for touching, smelling, and feeling life directly in relation to one another are being banned, the satisfactions offered by the virtual world become null. It means nothing to have everything from video gaming to a lot of social networking and films if your own apartment is becoming your prison, and human contact becomes the most dangerous act. We, as human beings, suddenly refuse to be apart, and a certain fear of losing our communities drives us into believing the most irrational conspiracy theories. This proves, beyond everything, how much we depend on our shared experiences, how much we are, even now, similar to primitive tribal societies. In those small groups, people were sharing a lot, especially their culture. During the long nights of storytelling around the fire, or in

the transcendent moments of religious rituals, individuals were developing, and even improving themselves through their community, witnessing and reflecting on the bigger life of the group. This is what we rediscovered in the light of these difficult times, and we have a terrible longing for what we took for granted before. This is what might bring us back the sensitivity of the artists that will have to fill in the gap when freedom comes again. The deep roots of performing arts are in the world of magic, in the impressive sacred rituals made by priests or shamans. These were mainly healing rituals, meant to cast out bad spirits from the life of the individual or the life of the group. Performing arts will probably have to get back to their history in the near future, and find once more that initial power. If that will be the case, we will probably be witness to a new age and a vivid diversity of genres, with record audience in numbers and enthusiasm. Now performing arts have the chance to live up to their importance and necessity, to offer to the public the authentic experience of living and sharing life. The past fear of the competition they felt with recorded arts, the arts of reflection, should be surpassed. If not, people will surely find a way of recreating culture for themselves like they do with social justice, gathering together, exchanging ideas, singing and painting, and filming all together, making history in the streets and, in the same way, reinventing their culture.

Peter Brook remarked about the essence of the theatre: "Theatre has to be permanent, theatre is life. We always say that it is a mirror of life. In the mirror of life, everything is always in motion. For this reason, an accurate mirror - which theatre is - has to be in constant motion. Why? Because a good mirror must be also be in constant motion. Why and where can we find theatrical truth? The truth of theatre is not on the stage, it's not in the audience. ... At certain moments - the healthier ones - the theatre, the audience and life walk hand in hand, more easily than in other times when the

theatre no longer follows the movement of the audience; then theatre is tired, it's no longer truly something living.”⁸⁸

In this light, maybe, interdisciplinarity in the arts will have to be defined as the constant physical communication between the arts and the audience – if we can count smell, touch and other senses as disciplines of the human being.

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⁸⁸ Georges Banu & Alessandro Martinez (eds.), *Peter Brook's Journey. Miscellaneous works*, Arte Grafiche Motta Avola (SR), Italie, 2004, p. 433