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## Descrizione di una battaglia (1988)

*From* Franz Kafka. Adapted by Giorgio Barberio Corsetti from the short stories *The Burrow*, *The Judgement* and *Description of a Struggle* in their translations by Ervino Pocar  
*Directed by* Giorgio Barberio Corsetti  
*With* Benedetto Fanna, Giovanna Nazzaro, Giorgio Barberio Corsetti  
*Artistic collaboration* Catherine Mc Gilvray  
*Music by* Daniel Bacalov, Galliano Prospero and Gianfranco Tedeschi  
*Sets by* Giorgio Barberio Corsetti and Mariano Lucci  
*Films by* Italo Pesce Delfino  
*Lights by* Alberto Chinigò  
*Costumes by* Eve Kohler  
*Organisation* Marilisa Amante  
*Co-produced by* Compagnia teatrale G. Barberio Corsetti and Inteatro/Polverigi-AMAT in collaboration with the culture programme of the council of Rome

## Descrizione di una battaglia (1988)

by Catherine Anne MC Gilvray<sup>1</sup>

Staged as a theatrical “execution” of Kafka’s literary universe, *Descrizione di una battaglia* (“Description of a Struggle”, 1988) appropriates themes, figures and situations that are typical of the author, graphing a path through Kafka’s imagination. The performance stages Kafka’s creatures and has characters from Kafka interacting with each other (lifted not only from the three stories the performance declaredly draws on, but also from other works); in doing so, the piece effectively stages the structural specificities of Kafka’s works, not only its contents. As such, *Descrizione* adopts the procedures that allow Kafka to use literature to create a parallel universe, and organises the theatre according to those procedures, with the actors as its main characters.

The guiding ideas are Rhythm and Repetition, which are evident in some of the performance’s mechanisms: there is a repetition of gestures and shapes (such as the recurring curved position, and repeated gestures such as dusting down one’s coat with both hands and banging one’s head against the wall), a mirroring of themes through compositional structures (an example is the triplication of the character, reflected also in the presence of three musical instruments, three narrative situations and three environments), a presence of musical leitmotifs and a rhythmic repetition of combined movements as well as, finally, the circular composition of the performance itself, which concludes with a return to its beginning. These elements demonstrate how a structural form is employed as a building block of the content of the show and of its themes: the formal procedure of repetition takes on a thematic value linked to the subjective condition that lies at the heart of the show – the fact of repeating a failed attempt, or of obsessively and apparently nonsensically playing back a painful memory are built into the performance’s formal structures.

The paroxysm of the movement sequences and the endless and obsessive repetition of gestures on stage seem to have no apparent objective other than wearing the performers out; but the repetition of gestures also obliges us to interrogate that gesture, making it gradually appear different, enigmatic, or monstrous – like the figure composed of three different bodies that walks to edge of the stage returning the audience’s gaze.

Words, as well as gestures, function in the performance as what Cacciari has called the “open door”<sup>2</sup>: an enigma whose solution cannot be found because its key has been lost, because it poses a question from a time so distant it is no longer comprehensible, not even as it appears on stage, right in front of our eyes. The repetition of the text in the form of “canons”, performed in two or three rounds at a time, is the signal of an impossibility to “open” words up, to possess and truly understand them.

The image of the struggle, reflected also and importantly in the title of the piece, is the thread that holds together three different narratives melted into one story. The performance is based on three of Kafka’s short stories that have at their centre a

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Anne MC Gilvray, *Analisi del processo costruttivo e dello spettacolo Descrizione di una battaglia di G. Barberio Corsetti*. Undergraduate thesis, Sapienza University of Rome, academic year 1989/1990. Supervisors: L. Mariti and V. Valentini  
<sup>2</sup> M. Cacciari, *Le icone della legge*. Milan: Adelphi, 1985.

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struggle, a conflict: in the soliloquies in *The Burrow* the animal prepares itself for an attack that is threateningly announced by a hiss; in *Description of a Struggle*, the two characters are engaged in a frenetic conversation that turns to brawl and even to murder; in *The Judgement*, the protagonist experiences his innocent visit to his sick father turn into a struggle with paternal authority which will lead him to his death.

All of these stories contains struggles whose outcomes are never definitive, and this is also reflected in the final sentence of the performance, that goes back to the beginning: “but all remained unchanged” – a sentence that encloses the entire piece into an obsessive circularity, into an inescapable space. The struggle is destined to go on forever in the space of the subject’s consciousness, which is also the physical space that *Descrizione* takes place within: the impossible contrast of perspectives and vanishing points in Kafka’s writing is transposed in the spatial organisation of the stage, and literally embodied by the actors, who become the opposing parts of a fractured whole.

Thus the central element of the show is an interior landscape sketched out through physical and psychological depths; within this landscape a struggle takes place, but it is a struggle without winners nor losers, which leaves behind nothing but a sense of paralysis, of the impossibility of relating to the outside world. The opposing tensions in the show resolve themselves in a lack of movement, in an incapacity to act or will: what remains is an endless repetition, an infinite series of attempts to gain ground against the Other, an endless banging on that “frontal bone” that “blocks the road” and “bangs its forehead against my own, until it bleeds.”<sup>3</sup>

The performance’s dynamics, that work on an alternation of prevarication and submission, are rendered through a game of alliances and exclusions written into the piece’s movements and into the three-way split between the character’s three “faces”. But the true struggle was lost before it even began, and maybe it never even started in the first place: from the very beginning, the father figure – that looms over the entire piece like a law both human and divine, as both authority and habit – has deprived the performers on stage of the world, of the fullness of being. They are in a state of exile, forever burrowing, obliged to defend themselves from the external world in an underground, in an afterlife of life itself.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.