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Woyzeck (1973)

By Georg Buchner

Directed by Carlo Cecchi e Italo Spinelli

Set and costumes by Sergio Tramonti

Music by Gianni Guaraldi and Toni Bertorelli

With Dario Cantarelli, Carlo Cecchi, Paolo Graziosi, Gianni Guaraldi, Gigio Morra, Fabienne Pasquet, Daniela Piacentini, Italo Spinelli

Debut Torino, Lingotto, novembre 1973

Every man is an abyss, if you look inside you feel dizzy

by Valentina Valentini

Carlo Cecchi has staged *Woyzeck* a number of times: in 1969, first at the Teatro Gobetti and then at the Cultural Union, and then again in 1973 at the Lingotto, also in Turin. What the director finds fascinating in *Woyzeck* is, on the one side, its formal construction – the fact that the work is built in tableaux, without patterns of cause and effect; on the other, its political aspect – the fact that *Woyzeck* is the first poor man in the history of the theatre that took on the dignity of the tragic hero: the poor man who drops his canonical role to become a character defined by his social being. ‘We wanted an opportunity to confront a great performance text, let’s say a tragedy [...] we wanted to try the interpretation of a classic text today.’¹

The choice of *Woyzeck* as a literary text is also informed by its quality as unfinished. It is a classic and tragic theatre, but different: ‘the fact that it isn’t finished makes it continuously available to new inventions. It’s particularly interesting in its fragmented form, which generates [...] a continuous need for an immediate and clear relationship between actions, gestures and the spoken word.’² Following this thinking, the title of the show is *Rehearsal of Woyzeck* by Büchner³: a kind of programmatic statement by the Gran Teatro theatre company that expressed the group’s urgency to get away both from the idea of the ‘product’ – and as such to stage something that looked like an open rehearsal – and from the architectural space of the Italian theatre, allowing the theatre to invade the space of the spectator and for roles to become flexible, a desire which was common to many in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In approaching the text, the director specifically interrogated the characters, the relationship between gestures and language, and the relationships that occurred on stage:

How do you go from a mystified and mystifying kind of acting to a real game? I say ‘real’ as opposed to realistic, as opposed to the treacherous space of realism where the theatre obsessively defends the actor-as-alienated-worker. [...] And then there’s dialect. How can you blow up the linguistic castle decreed by Fascism as the language of Italian theatre, that same language that is academicised, stabilised, reaffirmed everyday on the country’s stages? You need a dialect that expresses the linguistic level of tragedy, not the specks of theatre in dialect shown in cycles on TV.⁴

Indeed, the trait that makes Büchner’s theatre ring in tune with Carlo Cecchi’s is what Giuseppe Bartolucci called a ‘realistic’ yet ‘experimental’ intent, capable of avoiding both the popular and the intellectual and composed of a neither formal nor abstract irony and materiality of expressive means, where composition takes place in a logic of team work, as part of a culture and of a living kind of experience. The result of this sort of process is an ability to inscribe an epic distance and a pre-linguistic orality into different expressive materials, which include the popular and the cultured, the avant-garde and tradition. Having made the move from the Italian theatre to the underground space of the Sala degli Infernotti, Carlo Cecchi commented that

The first two nights we presented the show on a platform with the spectators on the sides [...]. On the third evening the action was everywhere in the room, on the stage and on the two platforms that surrounded it, at its sides, in the corridors [...]. The action got broken down and set up again by a series of ruptures, which are the ‘rehearsals’ themselves: a series of moving images that are nothing more than the projection of that tragedy and of that violence, images moving according to internal ruptures, both popular and emblematic [...]⁵

¹ C. Cecchi. ‘Lo spazio tragico’ in *Teatro* (1970):1, pp.116-122, also in F. Quadri. *L’avanguardia teatrale in Italia (materiali 1960-1976)*. Turin: Einaudi, 1977, vol 1, p. 374.

² Guido Boursier interviewing Carlo Cecchi in *Sipario* (April 1969): 276, pp. 8-9, also in Quadri. *Avanguardia*. p. 381.

³ The cast was composed of Paolo Graziosi, Carlo Cecchi, Sergio Tramonti, Domenica Ippolito and Eugenia Basenval; musique concrète score by Jon Phetteplace, directed by Carlo Cecchi.

⁴ Boursier interviewing Carlo Cecchi.

⁵ Ibid., 381, 383

Büchner here is ‘reassembled’: a different succession made up of the same parts. The ruptures are marked by darkness and silence and, in the ‘environmental’ version in the Infernotti space, images are arranged in the space so as to envelop the audience, like ghosts (and viewers are called to wander down a corridor, next to the dressing rooms, approaching a window).

That toing and froing is similar to the erring of someone attempting to follow his own moral and ideological ghosts but who realises he can’t find them; or rather, he can, they’re always behind him... the shadows of the actors haunt the shadows of the characters, and all of these shadows embrace the shadows of the wandering spectators [...]⁶

The stage space is shattered by projections and by the shrill and neurotic voices that give the characters the quality of ‘infernal shadows’ – Carlo Cecchi is the only one on stage who maintains a regular rhythm and whose style is estranged and estranging as he plays different characters, all of whom represent power (the captain, the doctor, the drum-major, the jew). This *Rehearsal of Woyzeck* from 1969 was the first time Büchner’s text was shown in Italian. As the reviews noted at the time, the direction remained poised between the tones of verism – embedded in Paolo Graziosi’s use of the Romagna region’s dialect – and expressionistic cries and silences of inner torment, also aided by John Phetteplace’s electronic score composed of sounds, noises and voices. According to Franco Quadri, while this first version of Cecchi’s already saw Büchner’s text as an expression of social conflict, it also aimed to represent the contradictions inherent in the dominating pole, which are what determine Woyzeck’s madness, the destruction of himself and that of his loved one: his inability to understand the world in which he lives. In his letter to his parents Büchner wrote, “What is it inside us that steals, kills, violates, lies?”; Cecchi poses this same question to himself, to his actors and to the audience.

Class struggle: ‘It must be nice sir, to be virtuous – but I’m a poor devil!’⁷

Cecchi returned to *Woyzeck* in 1973, having staged Antonio Petito, Mayakovsky and Brecht: a mixture of popular Neapolitan comedic tradition and of revolutionary historical avant-garde that is typical of Cecchi’s poetics and aesthetics.

The piece was made with a group of Southern Italian immigrants who lived in the working class area of Lingotto, who shaped the actors’ language with their cadence – no longer Neapolitan, but Calabrian – and also proposed the musical sequences for scene of the dance at the fair. Carlo Cecchi wanted to create a theatre rooted in a social context that was capable of incorporating theatrical research and folk tradition, a desire that was widespread in the theatre of the early 1970s, and which manifested itself as a need to root the text in its given historical and social situation. In this second *Woyzeck*, the class struggle was highlighted by the fact that the humble, the poor, the exploited spoke dialect, whereas power spoke Italian: as such, there was no communication between the two worlds. The costumes of power exasperated this difference – uniforms were used, rigid clothes that emphasised the impossibility to communicate across classes and roles. To start off the rehearsal process, the company used a military training manual: an actor played the part of the instructor, and the others played the new recruits. The use of dialect in the text, as Peter Szondi has written, reflected ‘a transformation of dialect into poetic language’.⁸

In March 1974 the show was presented in Rome, in the suburban cinema Nevada in Pietralata, a neighbourhood linked to the memory of Pasolini’s *Ragazzi di Vita*, chosen by Teatri di Roma as its decentralised venue. The stage was an open platform, with the rigid costumes of power hoisted on its bars; according to the conventions of Brecht’s epic theatre, the costumes were put on in full sight, as were white make-up and masks. The piece’s sound register is interesting: during the vision scenes, the sound is deafening and the words are indistinct; in the other scenes a drum continuously beats out Woyzeck’s actions, as if to demonstrate that they are performed out of necessity and not out of free will – the obsessive drum roll has the oppressive atmosphere of the tragic ballad, stressing the weight of social conditioning. According to Quadri’s analysis, the show contains two alternating rhythms: one that spins in circles, and one that is a military march, which gets faster as the succession of tableaux moves faster towards the end, in the dark. The juxtaposition of these two rhythms establishes a polarity between the oppression of power and the world that suffers that power to the point of obsession, nightmare and derangement. But *Woyzeck* here is no longer the generic poor that will do any job and will comply to all of the doctor’s experiments – according to Italo Spinelli’s reading, this *Woyzeck* is the Calabrian immigrant of the early 1970s, transplanted into a big Northern industrial city. Cecchi’s theatre can thus be seen as an example of political but non-didactic theatre: a rare feat which, as Italo Moscati noted, Cecchi was able to achieve because of his experience with Brecht and Petito, with Mayakovsky and with Molière.

⁶ G. Bartolucci. ‘Crudeltà e candore del Woyzeck’, in *La politica del nuovo*. Rome: Ellegi Edizioni, 1973. p. 104.

⁷ Büchner. *Teatro*, p. 134.

⁸ P. Szondi. *Teoria del dramma moderno*. Turin: Einaudi, 1962. p. 58.