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Roberto Latini. *Ubu enchaîné* (2005)

by Alfred Jarry

and by Roberto Latini and Gianluca Misiti

with Roberto Latini and Paolo Pasteris

music and assistant director Gianluca Misiti

interactive digital environments Andrea Brogi

motion capture assistant Paolo Pasteris

lights and technical direction Max Mugnai

direction of scene Dario Palumbo

video in croma key Pierpaolo Magnani

scene photo Cristiano Colangelo

adaptation and direction Roberto Latini

Fortebraccio Theater production

With the support of Armunia Costa degli Etruschi Festival, Teatro Stabile d'Innovazione, Teatro Floriano Stable of Innovation

and in collaboration with Art Mama Factory, Blue Cheese Project, Ass. Culto. Dn @, Xlab Digital Factory

first performance Udine, Teatro San Giorgio, December 14th 2005.

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by Serena Terranova

After seeing a lot of military action and being awarded a long list of aristocratic titles, after being King of Poland and Aragon, Father Ubu abandons his role as leader of the people and says he is ready to become a slave. This declaration of intent signals the beginning of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu enchaîné*, written in 1899 as the third installment of the Ubu saga, comprising *Ubu roi* (1888), *Ubu cocu* (1898) and finally *Ubu sur la butte* (1901). In *Ubu enchaîné*, Jarry (apparently) reverses bloody Father Ubu's bloody career, always in the company of his better half Mother Ubu, playing for us a character struggling with a new, higher goal: "I want to do well by the people I pass in the street, Mother Ubu [...] I'll go and make myself a slave."¹ His new resolution has him offering his services to everyone he meets. In Father Ubu and his unexpectedly obedient attitude his soldiers recognize the value of a new unlimited freedom worthy of admiration. His theory, according to which voluntary servitude is the best service that can be rendered to Masters, spreads to the point of filling the prisons with convicts. Father Ubu then sees his plan quashed and finds himself once again king, a king of slaves (freer than free men), at the head of an army of convicts striving to defend their right to eternal captivity, tied to balls and chains and humiliated. The final scene sees Father Ubu at the head of his slave army on a Turkish galley on which they have embarked on the orders of King Suleiman.

Freedom and slavery are linked to a common process, a single act of will embodied by Jarry's puppet, a marionette in whom manipulation is already ingrained as a precondition of action. The coexistence of these two extremes in Ubu is the key for entering the work that Roberto Latini realized in his 2005 staging of *Ubu enchaîné*, produced within the larger *Radiovisioni* project.² Here, the "chaining" concept was realized through a technological device of scenic control, and the freedom concept was embodied by the very individual who wore those "chains": the actor.

Exoskeleton, integrated bodies, theater, video

1. Roberto Latini and his company chose to approach *Ubu incatenato* using the new technologies with the aid of specialists. In particular, Andrea Brogi of XLAB Digital Factory (digital architect and 3D Real time graphic animation expert) and Pierpaolo Magnani of XLAB and Dn @ (video maker) in support of Forebraccio Theater in weaving the play's electronic and digital fabric.

Ubu incatenato was conceived as an exploded puppet theater, where puppeteer and puppets were funneled through a single body, Roberto Latini's, doubled by an exoskeleton equipped with computer systems for motion capture, designed by Andrea Brogi and worn by the actor like a suit. The information coming from his body generated graphics, images projected onto three screens around the stage (one in the background, the other two slightly opened to right and left) and that played, each depicted differently, the characters being interpreted from time to time by Roberto Latini or the landscapes in which the scenes were set (buildings, open spaces, dance scenes and more). The action took place on a raised platform, under which Paolo Pasteris, the technician working with Latini, managed the software of the apparatus³.

¹ A. Jarry, *Ubu incatenato*, in A. Jarry, *Ubu*, Adelphi, Milano 1977, p.112. Translation from the French by Bianca Candian.

² The *Radiovisioni* project was founded on the research on voice amplification. It comprised the plays *Buio Re_ da Edipo a Edipo in radiovisione* (2003), *Per Ecuba_ Amleto, neutro plurale* (2004), *Ubu incatenato* (2005), *Le madonne_ personaggi shakespeariani in motion capture* (2006), *Iago_ concerto scenico con pretesto occasionalmente shakespeariano per voce dissidente e musica complice* (2007), *Radiovisioni* (2008), *Desdemona e Otello sono morti* (2009) e *Iago, Desdemona e Otello* (2009).

³ The theoretical functioning of the whole digital apparatus summed up here and the role Paolo Pasteris played are fully explained by Roberto Latini himself in his introductory text to the play, entitled *Incatenando Ubu*, as part of his writings on this Focus at the link <http://goo.gl/qdlri1>.

So there was the actor, boss of the action, and a technological staff that sheathed him from back to legs, arms and hands (covered by special data gloves) and worked on what the actor fed it.

2. *Ubu incatenato* was part of the Radiovisioni project, which highlighted Roberto Latini's research on a voice that did not neglect other languages: the stage, the interactions with the characters, movements and gestures, the visual environment in general. In *Ubu incatenato* the concept of amplification extended not only to the vocal element but to the whole body: the exoskeleton with which the actor was equipped and its virtual derivatives (graphic images) were also tools employed in presenting Jarry's *Ubu incatenato*, and took on a meaning inseparable from the actor's dramatic work through the reciprocal relationship that connected them.

We can say that the actor Roberto Latini was a nexus of integration between organicity and technology that worked on two levels: a physical one generating the stagecraft and a virtual one whose manifestation gave it meaning.

3. The idea of representation was thus thrown into crisis and renewed by the use of motion capture. We can say that Latini's *Ubu incatenato* was an actual staging of Jarry's text: the plot survived in full, the scenes of the dramatic text corresponded to those of the play and the main characters emerged in their entirety. The play was stretched into a virtual space consisting of multiple layers, and in realizing them the actor took into account the mechanisms that generated the scene and placed them before the spectator's gaze.

But what was actually seen on the stage? At the center there was the actor, Roberto Latini, wearing the motion capture exoskeleton designed by Brogi. He was surrounded by the three screens on which the graphic images were projected, live video and pre-recorded video processed by Pierpaolo Magnani; under the platform was Paul Pasteris, who developed in real time the functions and data of the exoskeleton. In addition, each movement recorded by the motion capture activated a scenic element and what the spectators saw was a live connection between movement and graphic derivation. Some signals of this interactivity were more explicit, others more hidden, the starkest example of the integrated relationship between technology and graphic image on stage being perhaps the one representing the characters of Eleutheria and Uncle Pissenbock⁴: the two appeared in the form of stylized, colored faces and worked like real digital puppets. They were manipulated by the data glove, and so the two faces corresponded to Latini's hands, his left hand controlling Eleutheria and his right hand Pissenbock. The only element that remained detached from this relationship of action and reaction was his voice, which stood out as another determining factor guiding the representation. The first time the two characters appeared, Latini turned his back on the audience; with his hands pointing upward their faces appeared, Pissenbock to his left and Eleutheria to his right, and while we witnessed the manipulation of the two graphics through the actor's hand movements we also heard the characters speak. The coinciding of speech and graphic movements led us to immediately identify that voice with that character. The fact that Latini obscured his face for a few minutes like a ventriloquist heightened the sense of autonomy of the two voices. The fact that the spectators could connect the interpreter's gestures to the graphic derivations made the technology part of the stage text, part of "what was seen," fitting in with the elements the spectators took in during the play (in addition to the *fabula*, observing the video, listening to the soundscapes).

4. An important part of the play were Pierpaolo Magnani's videos. Besides the kind of graphics we have described above, there were direct shooting, editing, interactive scenes and film clips of different composition. The screens surrounding the scene were three, and the kinds of videos just listed sometimes appeared simultaneously, occupying several background sections. Now we'll give two examples of how these media were used dramatically in the play.

4.1 *Pissendoux and the free men, opening scene*. Corporal Pissendoux and the free men were played back in video on two different screens: first we observed Roberto Latini bending his body at a ninety degree angle with his face aimed downward, and immediately on our right appeared the live video of his face; when the free men were evoked in dialogues with Pissendoux, on the opposite side there appeared a video-installation in which Roberto Latini was shown repeatedly and simultaneously with constantly changing garments and performing movements that differentiated each figure (one danced, another sat, another played with a tinted monocle). We observed, therefore, as the actor played several roles simultaneously, whether through a process of transfigured features (Pissendoux) which detached itself through a multiplication of the variables of the original pattern (the free men). To sum up, Roberto Latini used the video to separate the characters in question from himself by projecting them outside of his body.

This process of detachment occurred substantially for all the characters of the story except for Father and Mother Ubu and the jailer who appeared in just one scene in the second half of the play: here the element of separation, the filter that the actor placed between himself and the jailer, was a microphone lifted from the exoskeleton microphone, which the interpreter used to broadcast his lines.

4.2 *Speech of Father Ubu to the convicts and his arrival at Suleiman's court*. The last part of Roberto Latini's *Ubu incatenato* focused on the rise of Father Ubu as a convict at the head of the slave people, which leads him to Suleiman's castle to beg for imprisonment on a flood plain for himself and his followers. The scene was introduced

As for Pasteris's role, Latini stresses: «The actor on the stage is helped by a computer technician who in the staging is placed beneath the stage [...] this presence serves solely and specifically to manipulate the various motion capture functions of the suit and to do so in real time during the play. The dialogue between actor and technician is constant».

⁴ We use here the names of Alfred Jarry's characters but alert the reader that in Roberto Latini's staging «Pissenbock, Marquis of Grandair» is translated as «Pisciainbocca, marchese di Granché» and «Pissendoux, Marquis of Granpré» con «Pisciadolce, marchese di Qualcò».

by Mother Ubu, who invites her husband to harangue the prisoners. After a moment of uncertainty⁵ comes the sound of a metronome beating at high speed, Father Ubu dominates the stage and on the central screen a double appears, the graphic representation of a crash test dummy that replicates Latini's/Father Ubu's gestures.

This scene used video to narrate, through a well-defined dramaturgy, the metamorphosis of the actor's body and the transformation of the character he was embodying. Its virtual presence guided a broader action where other presences congregated, other bodies that described a cohesive movement of outflow (from prisons, from virtuality), culminating in a final disappearance (at sea) without bodies and without voices. The choice of an off-screen voice for the graphic puppet of Suleiman led us to think about the fact that we had come to a predetermined, inevitable ending, the climax of Father and Mother Ubu's slave adventure. At this point the actor could only *listen* to that voice and divest himself of his motion capture cage, regaining possession of his body and unique presence.

The videos of this sequence were a paroxysm of virtuality of the whole play. If before the relationship between Roberto Latini and the characters was closely connected, as we have seen previously, now the virtual world created by the actor became autonomous, and he could not help but set himself free in turn.

At the end of the Suleiman scene, Roberto Latini went beneath the stage through a trapdoor and from there read the last lines of *Ubu enchainé*, in which Father Ubu declares that he will be master only of himself. In this passage we read not only a metaphorization of the concept of freedom, but also a direct reference to the actor's work. Everything that took place on stage ran through him and his manipulations before the use of technologies. Scratch the artifice, what remained was the actor. A naked voice without technological cages, but still able to express itself and reveal its presence.

A guiding voice

In this analysis we have mentioned in several places how voice intervened in the relationship between the actor, the technologies and the graphics, at both the perceptual and dramaturgic level. Basically, the voice was separate and free from the technological machine and created a level of action parallel to the body's. While had to be built up with the actor's gestures thanks to motion capture, Latini's were voices which saw the convergence of entire bodies that shaped a distinct virtuality associated with the graphic one. The single element "enchaining" that voice was the microphone, which the actor abandoned at the end of the play along with his exoskeleton, but the use he made of it was mostly devoid of effects, and the phonetic transformations we saw were the exclusive work of the actor.

Father and Mother Ubu were the only characters played directly by Roberto Latini. All the others were separate from the actor and equipped with a virtual body that manifested itself in the onstage video. The gap between the actor's *physical-body* and the *virtual-body* of the characters was essential for understanding the function of voice in this play.

While Roberto Latini had the two Ubuses coincide with both his body and his voice amplified by the microphone, all the other characters had voices with specific colorations, rhythms and tonalities. The impression was that, in the detachment of the virtual image from the central body, the actor-puppeteer felt an urgent need to strengthen the bonds that bound him to that character, establishing a condition by which the spectators had to constantly turn simultaneously to Latini (voice and source of the action) and to the projections that appeared on the three screens to truly encounter the work's supporting actors.

Roberto Latini's voice was therefore a guiding voice, which indicated to the spectators the close relationship to the central character of the work – Father Ubu – as compared to his derivatives, including Mother Ubu, who distinguished herself from her companion by the addition of an "r" between the syllables, which expanded Father Ubu's mispronunciation "merdra" which Jarry created from the very beginning in *Ubu roi*. All the other characters originated from the actor to the extent of becoming external projections and other voices. Various types of noises linked one scene to another, trills, burps, cries to attract attention, jeer, etc., completed the background of a theater to listen to as well as to look at, tightening the knots around the initial offering of a radio-viewing.

⁵ When Father Ubu tries to begin his speech he finds himself as in a fit acting out a scene from Giovanni Verga's *Cavalleria rusticana* in which Turiddu asks Santuzza to be left free to do what he likes when they're not together. This scene interrupts Father Ubu twice, until Roberto Latini appears "in person." The actor-character, observing with amazement, "lays the scene aside" with a gesture and comments «Oh... the theater». We may say that this is his most important line as a verbal change from the original text, which adds "content" and shows, by subtraction, the presence of the actor.