

KONSTELACJA LUNATYKÓW
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Didaskalia, Cracow, no. 106, 2011

CONSTELLATION OF SOMNAMBULISTS

Odin Teatret *The Chronic Life*; text: Ursula Andkjær Olsen and Odin Teatret; director and dramaturgy: Eugenio Barba; dramaturg: Thomas Bredsdorff; scenic space, music: Odin Teatret; costumes: Odin Teatret, John de Neegaard. Polish premiere: 13-16 October 2011

Studio na Grobli, The Grotowski Institute, Wrocław

The production was created within the framework of the project “Masters in Residence” carried out by The Grotowski Institute in Wrocław

Eugenio Barba dedicated *The Chronic Life* to Anna Politkovskaya and Natalia Estemirova, Russian journalists murdered by unknown assailants. The play takes place in the passage, like many shows by Odin Teatret. A small platform, closed by a wooden shed on one side, is placed between two stands for the audience, set against each other. The roofing is supported by two beams and a back wall with vertical interspaces through which warm light shines. The idyllic picture is spoiled by chains, hooks and springs hanging from the ceiling that evoke a torture chamber rather than a rural farm.

On the opposite side of the torture chamber there is a black curtain topped with an Indian ornament. This is a background for a black-dressed widow of a Basque officer (Kai Bredholt) preparing the revenge. Then it changes into a place of execution of a husband of a Chechen refugee (Julia Varley) and into a home chapel, where the woman cherishes memory of her dear ones lost during the war. In the final scene the curtain turns into a monumental gate with a golden lock. The gate is passed by a laughing Colombian boy (Sofia Monsalve) in search for his missing father in Europe, a man reconciled with his soul who made a sacrifice (the Italian street violinist – Elena Floris). In the middle of the platform there is a case covered with fabric, black as the curtain. It becomes a Christmas table (with a gun as a sign of the absent father), a flowered meeting place of the family, a bench in a waiting room, a boat, a door to the afterlife, a labyrinth, a coffin.

The Chronic Life is a play about human fate, about individual choices and vortexes of history, about variety of life and about existence facing eternal mystery, about the way circling around the grave. But also about Europe of the blind and somnambulists, sowing destruction, using violence (also against themselves), about dirty money, for which one buys human death, about passive waiting for a turn of fortune with a deck of cards next to the bed; about mercenaries, about the lack of forgiveness, understanding and compassion. About a place where the gods are still hungry for human blood. Why is it so that the stranger from a distant country, where the living and the deceased ancestors deserve honor and respect, looking for his father, cannot find any allies? This diagnosis of Europe is quite alarming.

The performance has been woven from poetic images. Among them appear references to mythology, biblical motifs, vice and crime chronicles, journalistic information. A play of distant associations, non-obvious analogies, contradicting meanings and metaphors create such a dense network that the audience is overwhelmed and helpless. Barba's production, as Nando Tavano described it, is an 'imagination in action.'

What binds these images is music. It is very diversified: there are traditional and contemporary melodies from different cultures, many different instruments can be heard. Yet each character also brings their own music, associated with individual vitality. It is emphasized here by songs, but also by sobs, screams, heart rhythm, knocking, wailing and silence. Collision of music with the images gives birth to unforgettable sequences – ironic and poignant. The personification of feminine charm – the Romanian housewife (Roberta Carreri, a distant echo of Marilyn Monroe) – after numerous suicide attempts, squatting against the wall of the torture chamber, sings Louie Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World* with a plaintive voice. A Danish lawyer (Tage Larsen), shaking off a hail of money from between cards of the legislative code, repeatedly intones Leonard Cohen's song *Everybody Knows*, and is joined by other characters. Although each of them have already experienced many atrocities, it does not change their attitude. The Colombian boy, connected to a detonator, ends his life with a song on his lips – yet his joyful, thankful *Benedictus* is disrupted by a scream attempting to crush fear. Musical rhythms intertwine with visual ones, they complete images and acting, grow as in a living organism, then go out to explode with double power. The text – poems by Danish poet Ursula Andkjær Olsen and parts added by the group – plays only auxiliary role.

The performance is based on actions of seven basic characters – the Black Madonna, the widow, the Chechen refugee, the Romanian housewife, the Danish lawyer, a rock musician from the Faroe Islands (John Ferslev), and the Colombian boy – supported by three side figures: the Italian violinist and two mercenaries (Donald Kitt and Fausto Pro). Each of them plays their own drama. These dramas correspond with each other, intertwine and diverge – they complement or contradict, sometimes openly conflicting. Sometimes all the characters engage in joint activities, other times harmonious action applies to couples or small groups. Each sequence is like braiding. The audience are the people on the shores of a lake trying to observe the waves made by ten stones thrown into water.

First the Black Madonna appears – on the upper, wide platform, a sort of *theologeion*, a god-speaking place. Iben Nagel Rasmussen in her elaborate robe looks like an Indian shaman, a dreamlike archaic goddess, perhaps Celtic Epona, dignified, somewhat demonic. She dances with a sword, with her magnified shadow as her partner, shaping space and giving it wonderful lightness. She gives an impression as if she was levitating. She ascends heavens, while walking on the ground. She stops by the torture chamber, standing on her widespread legs, laughing with a low, guttural voice. She whispers Hindu mantras, giggling like an overjoyed child, and tossing the rain of cards. Maybe the performance was conjured up just for fun of the capricious deity? The Madonna shows also a different face, more playful, but scary at the same time. She animates a doll of a soldier in a camouflage uniform. She places it on her lap and rebukes like a mother. At one moment she falls on the case like Ryszard Cieslak did in the flagellation scene in *The Constant Prince*. She returns as a figure in a shrine, to whom crowds of people are attracted; her red tongue swells with blood. The Colombian boy disputes with her like Jacob with the angel. The Madonna is the only person accompanying him on his way to the grave. When she sits down on the edge of the glass coffin, she becomes a soul, a guide to the land of the dead. She lays the boy in the arms of his dead father.

The widow of a Basque officer is caustic, elegant and unfashionable. Kai Bredholt used the feminine features (makeup, jewelry, lace cuffs) to create an image of a hard, stiff person of frozen sexuality. He sings in falsetto a song full of yearning and pain. At one point, the

Romanian housewife and the Faroese rock musician sat down at the Christmas table. Roberta Carreri sobs, John Ferslev ‘weeps with his body’ and the widow, staring at a candle’s flame, petrifies in pain. There is nothing but despair in her eyes. Her daily activities pull her for a moment of her eternal mourning. She understands pain of the Chechen woman. They dance together, holding images of the late beloved ones. She skillfully washes a corpse of her dear deceased one, and she reloads the weapon with a similar skill. She gives the gun to the blinded Colombian boy. To become like everyone, he shoots at the head of a doll. At this moment, in a distant point of the stage a suit falls down with a bang. Aiming with the gun at another man, we always kill our father. This is probably the most powerful moment of the performance. The widow only once goes berserk. She smashes a block of ice she used to cover a dead body of her husband. Money falls down. The housewife bangs the pan, the Madonna laughs and sticks out her bloody tongue, and the ice splits with crack.

The block of ice was carried in by the Colombian boy in a frantic race. With a similar expression he gets to his father’s grave – he tries to force the door to the afterlife, he lifts it, carries like a cross, falls and **raises**. However, the calls of the son resound hollowly in absolute silence. As the only seeker of his own truth he is not afraid to go down even to the grave. In this way he is totally alone, like the Chechen refugee – vigorous, plump babushka, wrapped in shawls, in many layers of golden skirts. She crawls out from under the black curtain, with a metal box, a pan and a stone, the only reminders of the lost world. She traverses the stage waving like a bird, vainly trying to rise into the air. There is no answer to her knock on the door. In the battle for her place she jostles against the eccentric lawyer. She touches with her forehead the Code placed against his forehead. A moments later, the lawyer takes her across a provisional walkway to a longed-for landing. Yet when he touches her arm with the book, a sound of a falling boulder can be heard. The Chechen woman walks away, limping.

The Romanian housewife dressed in the 1960s style, charming and attractive, can’t stop dusting. The cloths she uses are mainly a tool of self-inflicted torture. The housewife vigorously **rises** a pair of kitschy blue wings, as a sign of the desired flight, yet gradually they become a burden. She drags them on the platform like albatross from the Baudelaire’s poem. The intense understanding germinates between the housewife and the musician. The musician, dosing himself and the others some mysterious drops, molests the Chechen woman, and in the dance scene he whips the Colombian boy with a belt, yet giving blows only to himself

Suddenly, all the main characters enter the stage, moving around like the blind, each one in a different way, but all alone, immersed in a numb dance of the constellation of Oedipuses.

Eugenio Barba offered a puzzling session to the audience – he invoked the spirits of the future. The plot of the play – says the program “takes place simultaneously in different countries of Europe in 2031, after the third civil war.” Are the specters of the future too restless today to stay in the afterlife? And – if attracted to the stage – will they leave after the show and won’t oppress us any more? The director certainly does not believe that he can save the future generation by showing us such a cruel world. Perhaps he only diagnoses what is happening now. Did he make his production as a warning? And is it really telling us about future or perhaps about our present inner split – of us, the Europeans, and of each viewer individually? At the end of *The Chronic Life* the stage is empty, and the rains falls on the torture chamber. The fulfillment of the tragedy of Oedipus restores life of Thebes. Yet what kind of life will come into force in the society of somnambulists?