

MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

RITUAL, BELIEF AND METAPHYSICAL THEATRE

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I have often wondered why such great artists as Mihai Măniuțiu and Marcel Iureș were recognised so late.

The answer is simple: because they have permanently, vehemently, rejected digestive theatre, superficial theatre, – stubbornly waiting for the moment when their particular vision would be understood and accepted. They have a definite attraction towards apparently non-dramatic texts, difficult to stage, and waiting for their hidden theatricality to be wrenched, extracted, from their protecting epic-lyric flesh.

When conceiving the performance in a generic way, Măniuțiu and Iureș distinguish between *deux théâtres* (in Paul Valéry's terminology): the first belongs to Guignol, to amusement, and appears very theatrical; whereas the second relates to the Temple, namely the *ceremony*, charged with a deep epic-lyricism and therefore appearing non-theatrical. The two artists are constantly attracted by the second, the ceremonial type of theatre, which explains their choice of T. S. Eliot's tragedy.

Their production of *Murder in the Cathedral* gives a brilliantly conceived concrete expression to this consistent artistic programme. We are offered a sample of ritual theatre* descending from Artaud. It is now obvious that Măniuțiu's production of *The Week of Resurrection* was the first step in this direction. Ritual theatre involved going beyond the normal, into religious mystery and dramatic morality, using theatre as an instrument to turn a performance into a genuine and effective theatrical eschatology.

In his theatre trilogy, Măniuțiu reaches a religious and metaphysical vision: for him, it is an active rite with magical effectiveness, that relinks the relationship with primordial tradition and consequently with the essential myth of humanity. That is why his productions now attain sacred, trans-aesthetic dimensions. From this perspective, Eliot's text is transformed – simplified with careful rigour – into a scenario, primordial as any myth. As already stated, Artaud,

* In the light of comparative theatre, Măniuțiu's production of *Richard III* in 1993 reveals an unexpected connection with a French production of sixty years earlier. In the Romanian production, the ensemble scenes made a very strong impact when Richard's troupe of soldiers developed, as a leit-motif, a warrior ballet, with Japanese-like speed, precision and cruelty. It was in 1933, that Charles Dullin staged *Richard III* with the declared, pre-Artaudian intention of adding oriental elements to occidental theatre, and implemented it in the ensemble scenes. By evoking the original sequences from Dullin's production, Robert Brasillach indirectly provides us with an even fuller understanding of Măniuțiu's production: "...ce combat mimé par douze figurants, ce ballet de la guerre dansé par des comédiens anonymes, tandis que surgissait, pareil à un guerrier d'Hokusai, plié sous la lance immense et lourde, le bossu royal..."



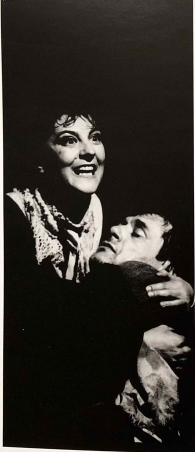
THE FOUR TEMPTERS. All things become less real, was passed
 From unreality to unreality.
 (*Murder in the Cathedral*, part D)

whose concepts are here given precise form, would have very much enjoyed this production of *Murder in the Cathedral*. The distance between stage and audience is annihilated, and becomes a kind of religious communion. Strange, primitive musical instruments create unusual and sometimes oriental sounds. There is cruelty here in the usual sense of the word, but there is also the essential cruelty of ritual theatre: the one that unveils the metaphysical – such an inhuman act: God is cruel in the scenarios He allows. During the contracted time of *Murder in the Cathedral* we are definitely taken out of the profane historical time and thrown into a sacred one that is deeply liturgical. This is why on stage we no longer see a physical reality, but a

metaphysical one, with transcendental forces confronting the essential principles: Devil and God. This is why in Minskiu's vision of it, *Murder in the Cathedral* portrays on stage the genesis of the human being. Since Genesis, there has been a double sign lying in the human being, reflecting two essential inclinations: one towards goodness and the other towards evil. An idea illustrated in the performance by a permanent active symbol: the continuous rain of blood-red grains, signifying the *Double*, the first Eucharist and the seeding of man – either with evil or with good. The production reveals a dramatic, ritualistic mystery, and therefore, being magic, a *miracle* naturally arises. The beginning of the *miracle* is at first concrete in the scene where the

CORPUS.
 He prays Thee, O God, for Thy silver deposited in all the corners of the earth,
 In the mine, in the mine, in the mine, in the mine, in all of Thy creatures,
 both the *Animas* and the *Animas*.

*Lord, have mercy upon us,
 Merciful Thomas, pray for us.
 (Murder in the Cathedral, part II)*



murderers rise from the dead, (its counterpart resurrection in *Richard III* is turned into a travesty). It ends in the final sequence when the mute woman – Becket's Double, 'poor in spirit' – is bestowed the gift of speech as she prays. As powerfully suggested by the performance's demouement, human redemption stays under the protection of the woman.

Actually, it is the whole dramatic trilogy of Mănuțiu that breathes beneath the eschatological sign of 'The Eternal Feminine'. The final peace is accompanied, announced and guarded by the presence of the woman, in Mănuțiu's trilogy of the Double, as can be found in all ideologies rooted in Salvation and in the cultural descent, from Sophocles to Goethe: 'Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hin', The Eternal Feminine draws us on.

Caligula and Drusilla purify themselves in the miracle of the lunar snow (an obvious feminine symbol); in dying, Richard reconstructs the androgynous, as he breathes his last embraced by his follower Anubis, who suddenly becomes his feminine messenger of death.

Finally, in *Murder in the Cathedral* the revelation of the divine comes upon the liturgical tears of a woman 'poor in spirit'. In ritual theatre the rest is silence, is recovery – not applause.