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 epicolicryic 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 epico-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 occidential theatre, and implemented it in the ensemble scenes. By evoking the oriental sequences from Dullin’s production, Robert Brasillach indirectly provides us with an even fuller understanding of Măniuțiu’s production: "...ce combat mané par douze figurants, ce ballet de la guerre dansé par des comédiens anonymes, tandis que surgissait, pareil à un guerrier d’Hokusoï, plié sous la lance immense et lourde, le bossu royal..."
THE FOUR TEMPTERS. All things become less real, man passes
From unreality to unreality.
(Murder in the Cathedral, part I)

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 Mânițiu’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
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 denouement,
human redemption stays under the
protection of the woman.

Actually, it is the whole dramatic
trilogy of Măniuțiu 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 Măniuțiu’s trilogy of the Double,
as can be found in all ideologies routed
in Salvation and in the cultural
descent, from Sophocles to Goethe:
‘Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan’;
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.