

# **Unveiling Illusion**

**How does the actor (and thus theatre) relate to illusion  
and its emergence?**

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## Thesis Abstract

### UNVEILING ILLUSION

How does actor (and thus theatre) relate to illusion and to the emerging of illusion?

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This essay is organized around two themes: the actor relating him/herself to illusion and the emerging of illusion. Even though the two concepts are intertwined, chapters 1 to 4 examine the first theme and chapter 5 the second theme. Two questions are at the heart of the essay: can the actor master the illusion, and where does the illusion happen? On the stage? Or in the head of the spectators? We will see that the issue gravitates around the body, because illusion is a phenomenon that, by its own nature, is evanescent and immaterial, whereas the actor has a physical body. The key question is then what to do with the body.

- Chapter 1 compares Plato's myth of the cavern with Corneille's play *L'Illusion Comique*, since both texts attempt to transcend illusion.
- Chapter 2 examines the historical period between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where theatre makers (Craig, Copeau, Stanislavski, etc.) transformed the actor's training and work.
- Chapter 3 presents the pedagogical work of Jacques Lecoq.
- Chapter 4 relates the creation of the silent mask performance *Lost Persons Area*.
- Chapter 5 responds to the second theme by questioning if illusion is really necessary.

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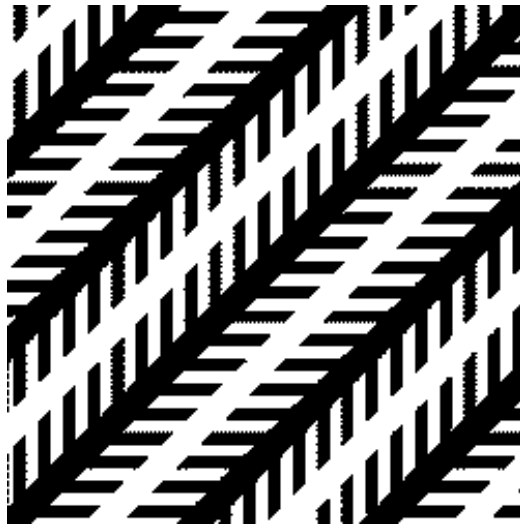
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**Introduction**  
**touching the infinite**



Zolner's optical illusion

Even though contemporary theatre is proposing a radical change of the theatre's fundamentals<sup>1</sup>, we can say that all theatre lies on the phenomenon of illusion, that is to say the attempt to make spectators believe that what is happening on the stage is in another space, in another time and that actors are not themselves but other people. Many theatre makers have dwelled on how to solve the actor's conflict, which consists of convincing spectators that the actors are someone other than their "real-life" selves. Nevertheless, even though pedagogical trainings helping the actor to appear to be someone else have flourished, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development of a pedagogy

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix.

of the space is still missing. What I mean by pedagogy of the space is the interrogation of the area in which the illusion is created, the interrogation of the reasons behind this phenomenon; why would a space want to pretend to be another space? Why would a space be lying? Why do humans need such artifice? And ultimately, why is it necessary to lie?

Academic texts are helpless in front of this problem, which is often swept away by simply acknowledging that actors embody the paradox of being and appearing, of lying and being truthful. Schechner presents the actor as a manipulator and compares him to the elephant bowing at the end of the circus trick in order to receive the applause of the audience. “The elephant bowing at the end of “his” act is not saying “thank you” although the spectators receive the elephant’s behavior as such and applaud even louder accordingly.”<sup>2</sup> And then Schechner wonders, what is the difference between the elephant’s action giving the impression of bowing and the actor really bowing at the end of the show? Academic texts don’t deny this contradiction, but they don’t go further into the question; they mainly recognize it and accept it as a fact, shutting down the debate and preventing a deep investigation of the phenomenon of illusion in western theatre. Moreover, it seems that nowadays, as a heritage of Brecht’s theories<sup>3</sup>, the term of illusion is something antiquated and relegated to “archeological” theatre, as if thinking in term of illusion is something shameful. In contemporary theatre, the drama has been fragmented in order to deconstruct the phenomenon of illusion and to bring

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<sup>2</sup> R. Schechner, *Performance’s Theory*, 1988, p. 316

<sup>3</sup> Bertold Brecht wanted the audience to watch the performance with a critical attitude. He believed that the experience of a climactic catharsis of emotion left an audience complacent. Instead, he wanted his audiences to use this critical perspective to identify social ills at work in the world and be moved to go forth from the theatre and effect change. For this purpose, Brecht employed the use of techniques that reminded the spectator that the play is a representation of reality and not reality itself, which he called the distancing effect, or *estrangement effect*, or *alienation effect*. Such techniques included the direct address by actors to the audience, transposition of text to third person or past tense, speaking the stage directions out loud, exaggerated, unnatural stage lighting, the use of song, and explanatory placards. By highlighting the constructed nature of the theatrical event, Brecht hoped to communicate that the audience's reality was, in fact, a construction and, as such, was changeable.

the performance to a border-line that blends everyday life situations with performance situations,<sup>4</sup> contesting the traditional tacit agreement (and thus division) between spectators and actors; agreement consisting in spectators knowing it is not “for real” but wanting to believe it is. Martin Esslin<sup>5</sup> explains that basically theatre depends on this acceptance and demonstrates this idea by quoting an anecdote where an actor playing Richard III was screaming: “A horse, my kingdom for a horse.” And from the audience someone answered: “I’ll bring you mine.” The actor then said:” don’t worry and come here, a donkey is enough.” And the whole audience burst out in laughter. According to the author, the spectator didn’t understand it was a fiction (or that the actor and the other spectators thought he didn’t understand it), and convinced that the poor king was really in danger he wanted to help him. The other spectators were laughing because he took for real an illusion. However in another text, *Metamorphoses* by Henryk Jurkowski<sup>6</sup>, the author presents the opposite idea, which is that what is magical about puppets and children is that the children, when they see the wolf, are not thinking “this is a piece of wood in the shape of a wolf so it should represent the wolf,” but it is the wolf himself. And as another (apparently) contradictory example, some directors have stopped asking actors to become someone else, transforming themselves, but they just ask the actors to accomplish a series of actions. The idea of the actor diving into the wholeness of a character is deconstructed into a performer executing tasks<sup>7</sup> (this last consideration will be examined thoroughly in chapter 4).

Facing the frustration of not finding exhaustive answers, I decided to undergo this examination in order to elucidate the implications of illusion on the stage: illusion with actors and illusion with dramaturgy. I mean by this that

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<sup>4</sup> Hans-Thies Lehman, *Le Théâtre postdramatique*, 1999, p.164

<sup>5</sup> Martin Esslin, *Anatomie de l’art dramatique*, 1979, p.106

<sup>6</sup> Henryk Jurkowski, *Métamorphoses la marionnette au XXe siècle*, 2000, p.87

<sup>7</sup> P. Zerilli, *Acting (Re)Considered*, Routledge, 2002, p.16

I have examined how actors deal with illusion and why it should be necessary to make use of illusion;<sup>8</sup> in other words why it would be good to lie?

This essay is organized around two themes: the actor relating him/herself to illusion and the emerging of illusion. Even though the two questions are intertwined, chapters 1 to 4 examine the first theme. Two questions are at the heart of the essay: can the actor master the illusion, and where does the illusion happen? On the stage? Or in the head of the spectators? In this part we will see that the issue gravitates around the body, because illusion is a phenomenon that, for its own nature, is evanescent and immaterial, whereas the actor has a physical body. The key question is then what to do with the body. The last chapter responds to the second theme by analyzing whether illusion is really necessary.

Despite the disagreement about the origin of theatre, I would like to refer to Schechner's vision that theatre is derived from ritual<sup>9</sup>. Theatre would then be connected with the division among the doers of the ritual, engendering two groups: one that is watching the ritual and one that is executing it. Those who are doing it are then becoming aware that they are in a representational situation, which leads to the actor's self-consciousness. The ritual, even if it focuses on a central figure or the protagonist, who as in most ritual, will change status during the ceremony, is a collective action where all participate and support it. The ritual helps the protagonist and helps the society as well, because it fosters the consolidation of the group. If the collectivity is divided in two, the theatricalized ritual loses its unifying force. Additionally, if the ritual ( usually taking place during specific periods of the year or of a man's life) starts being repeated, the protagonist, unable to repeat the metamorphosis each time<sup>10</sup>, will then fake it (or repeat the ritual's gestures but without the

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<sup>8</sup> Moreover there is the assumption that theatre uses illusion as if the phenomenon of illusion was only one and as if the way of using illusion was only one as well. In the history of western theatre, the relationship towards illusion has been always changing, modifying as well the work of actors.

<sup>9</sup> For further readings: Richard Schechner *Performance Theory*, p.112: *from ritual to theatre and back: the efficacy-entertainment braid*.

<sup>10</sup> The ritual is a transition to another condition, without any possible come back.

value, the reason, the commitment of a true ritual). Why then would the ritual necessarily have degenerated into a theatricalized form, since as I previously described the theatricalized form empties the ritual of its meaning? Moreover, why should the faking, which evacuates the essence of ritual, be accepted? Would this mean that illusion (to make believe) is a degraded form of something purer? As a vulgar version of something sacred?

David Mamet, in his provocative book *True and False*<sup>11</sup>, argues that illusion is not created by the actor on the stage but it happens in the head of the spectator. According to him the illusion is the result of a good text, coupled with clear diction and an elegant organization of actors in the theatrical space. The spectator receives these three elements and unconsciously combines them and generates the illusion. He defends this idea by describing an example taken from cinema; taking three sequences: 1) a general is screaming for support 2) a judge is reading the sentence 3) a boy is raising his head. If the editing puts first the general and then the boy raising his head, the impression will be that the boy answers to the call of the general and probably will volunteer as a soldier. But if the editing puts first the judge reading the decision of the court and then the sequence of the boy, we will think that the boy is condemned. Although the movement of the boy is the same, the meaning changes in relation to what happened before. Therefore, what is important is not the actor's intention behind the movement but how movements are combined and edited.

Illusion, in Italian; "illusione", comes from "illudere" which means to trick someone, to fool under false appearances. "Illudere" contains the word "ludere" which is the Latin word meaning to play. But to play with what? With appearances? With reality? With the audience? Moreover the word implies an active attitude of the subject that "tricks" the other one and not the passive attitude as Mamet proposed.

An illusion is a distortion of a sensory perception. Each of the human senses can be deceived by illusions, and visual illusions are the most well

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<sup>11</sup> David Mamet, *True and False: heresy and common sense for the actor*, 1997, p.9

known. We can have two types of illusions: the one that is consciously created because its effect on the spectators is known and thus possible to master, and the ones that happen unconsciously, due to uncontrollable elements. For instance: I see a person from behind, the silhouette resembles a friend of mine, I get closer to greet him, while the joy and excitement rise inside me. But then I discover that the person is not my friend and I am disappointed. The illusion works with the resemblance between two similar objects that can be confused. This explains how illusion functions, but not why. Why do I fall in the trap of this illusion? Maybe I am not aware of missing that friend and desiring to meet him: this would explain the cause of the illusion<sup>12</sup>. The reason could be searched for in an emotion or in a need that we are not conscious of, and that makes us see things that don't exist<sup>13</sup>. Thus the needs and the unresolved emotions lead us subtly to perceive things, situations, or meanings that don't exist, but that we wish would be real. But this is an aspect of illusion that depends on the subjective psychology and personal story of the watcher and thus is not useful for this investigation.<sup>14</sup>

Let us take the other type of illusion: the Zolner optical illusion<sup>15</sup>. It is a figure in which there are long parallel lines and each line has evenly spaced, small, diagonal lines on them. The small diagonal lines give the parallel lines the illusion that they are tilting in the direction of the acute angle (between the main line and each diagonal). This type of illusion doesn't depend on human subjectivity, since everybody sees it. Paradoxically the phenomenon is an illusion and at the same time is real because whenever you look at it, it is there. But where does it exist? There is first of all action, the two parallel

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<sup>12</sup> Of course this explanation cannot be applied to all types of illusions.

<sup>13</sup> It is known for instance, that someone who is craving for something tends to "see" the desired object everywhere. And we can wonder in such cases where the illusion happens, in front of the eyes or in the head of the viewer? I will come back to this query later.

<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless we may argue that the phenomenon of identification with the protagonist could rely on needs and unresolved emotions of the spectators who are projecting themselves into the character's situation. But I don't wish to go into this psychological aspect.

<sup>15</sup> See picture at the beginning of the introduction, p.5

lines, and there is another action, the diagonal, crossing lines. The combination of these two actions creates a third action that is not really happening, but that is seen, which is the distortion of the parallel lines. Are the lines conscious of the provoked effect? Or are the lines just “thinking” their own action, which is to be straight? If we replace the lines with actors, we can ask ourselves the same questions: how do actors relate to illusion? How do they create the illusion? And eventually, do they really create illusion? Actors have an emblematic and at the same time paradoxical relationship toward the illusion; they have to give the impression to the audience that they are someone else, another person evolving in a specific space, but an illusory space. In this perspective the work of mimes is the ultimate level of illusion; the actor without any external devices other than her or his body is able to "show" the audience an imaginary landscape; it is the miracle of creating "life" out of emptiness. However, even when the spectators are "forgetting" the very body of the actor and they are seeing another (the character embodied by the actor), they are still looking at the actual body of the actor. How could this be possible? To look at and not to see, meaning to look at something and seeing something else? To see the two parallel lines and at the same time to see them distorted?

Beside the attempt to answer these two questions, where does the illusion happen? And, is illusion necessary for theatre performances? The research aims to present as well the spectacle of illusion under different approaches:

The first chapter is a philosophical discussion on illusion and its potential or limitations. Plato's myth of the cavern is contrasted with Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*. The argument is then synthesized with a third proposition which introduces the problematic question of the body. That is to say, the body calls back to materiality, thus preventing the blooming of the illusion.

The second chapter develops the dichotomy between body and illusion and presents a historical phase, the transition from 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century, where theatre makers explored new ways of acting and dealing with the body.

The third chapter describes the Lecoq pedagogy which intends to surpass the “obstacle” of the body by transforming it into the generator of illusion.

The fourth chapter is a report on practical experiences during which I had the possibility of investigating physically the previously mentioned concerns. The seven depicted sessions focused on exploring where illusion happens. I tried to follow the assertion of Mamet and also to deny it.

The last chapter concludes by answering the following question: why is illusion necessary?<sup>16</sup> It also defends the idea of illusion as a tool used by theatre to question society.

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<sup>16</sup> Although the mask work is essential in my practice, I have decided not to include it in this research. This decision is not based on the fact that masks have nothing to do with illusion on the contrary, their relation towards the dichotomy illusion/reality is so complicated and twisted that I preferred not to dwell on it this time and leave this field of investigation for later.



## Chapter 1

### The body and the myth of the cavern



Andrew Wyeth, Christina's World, 1948

Plato is categorical towards theatre: it is a reductive imitation of reality, which is already a reductive imitation of the high world of Ideas. According to his perception, there is a world of Ideas, which generates everything in the world we live in. Therefore, our reality is but a copy of the world of Ideas, and since it is a copy, it is not pure but corrupted. The allegory of the cavern that Plato relates in book VII of *The Republic* (written in approximately 360 BC) shows clearly his concept. Let us imagine a group of humans enchained in a cavern with their gaze not oriented towards the light coming from the entrance of the cave but in the opposite direction, towards the wall at the end of it. Whoever is passing in front of the entrance will create

a shadow that will be projected on the wall. The enchained humans seeing only the shadow on the wall will take it as the only reality. Moreover, they will start discussing about the shadows and will try to predict their passages. Surely among those humans, some of them will gain respect because of their accurate predictions and certainly will gain power. If from that group someone is freed and turns the head and sees the light coming from the entrance and goes outside, the strong and blinding sun will hurt the eyes of that person. But when he or she gets over the pain, the eyes will adapt themselves to the new strong light and the person will see a reality that he or she never imagined could exist. But if then he or she comes back to inform the others, they will not believe him or her. They won't accept that what they took as reality is only a reductive imitation of a higher degree of reality. Plato concludes by telling that this person will be rejected by the group, which will prefer to grasp the shadows rather than to modify its beliefs. The fake reality (the shadows) is taken for reality because the enchained humans are used to it. Nietzsche goes even further and adds: "What is therefore truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms..... truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions".<sup>17</sup> Plato considers, however, that "truth" exists and, in the allegory, the adventurer represents the philosopher who is seeking and bringing "truth", and the bright sun represents the idea of Goodness, which shines over everything. Therefore, according to Plato, the "reality" in which we evolve is corrupted, is fake as shadows, because it is an imitation of something pure: the world of Ideas. And so, in the view of Plato, theatre (he says tragedy), which imitates the corrupted reality, is even farther from the world of Ideas. Tragedy doesn't bring people to a closer understanding of truth, but on the contrary pushes them deeper into the cavern by presenting shadows of shadows.

Despite this, Plato indirectly makes the apology of theatre, because he recognizes the strong impact that it has on humans and sees in this a great danger. In fact, according to Plato, on the stage, a character who is irritable

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<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, quoted by P. Zerilli, *Acting (Re)Considered*, 2002, p.9

and devastated by passions is more interesting to watch and has a greater impact on the audience than a character who is judicious and behaves without bursts of emotion. Such an excitable character is at the antipode of the ideal person who is not driven by the tempest of emotions but seeks instead to analyze every situation and respond to it in a rational manner. Therefore, the dramaturges who, according to Plato, are striving for the acclamation of the audience and thus are particularly aware of effects that collect applause, would insert in a play only temperamental, abhorrent characters who are supposed to be more alive and more captivating. So theatre, because of dramaturges' and actors' needs of being recognized by the multitude, can only indicate a wrong direction, instead of showing the difficult path of knowledge, it presents the reassuring world of illusion filled with hysterical characters.

In Corneille's *L'illusion comique* (written in 1636) we have the exact opposite point of view: a man of wisdom is living in a cavern and, with the help of shadows, he is "healing" other men. One of the men going through this session of healing is Pridamant, a severe father who is searching desperately for his son, Clindor, who left home ten years ago. Pridamant asks for help from Alcandre, the wizard living in the cavern. Alcandre answers that through an artifice he will show him what has happened to his son. Pridamant and Alcandre are looking at the "artifice", which shows spectres representing Clindor in the service of a brave man, Matamore. From now on the main action is driven by the specters, who describe the adventures of Clindor. Pridamant and Alcandre are relegated to the role of spectators commenting on the scenes performed by the spectres. Matamore reveals himself to be a coward and Clindor falls in love with Isabelle. But there is another suitor:Adraste. He surprises Isabelle and Clindor and a duel is engaged between the two men. Clindor kills Adraste and is condemned to death. Isabelle, however, manages to liberate Clindor from prison and they both escape. Again, Alcandre reassures Pridamant about the glorious destiny of his son. The last act shows Isabelle and Clindor metamorphosed: Isabelle appears dressed as a princess, but she is complaining about her infidel husband who loves another

woman. Enter Clindor, who by mistake confuses Isabelle with the other woman. Under the threat of Isabelle's suicide, Clindor, after having sung the praises of infidelity, promises to renounce the other woman and to be faithful to Isabelle. The other woman arrives, and Clindor resists her calls. However, the men of Florilame, a prince who is in love with Isabelle, enter and kill Clindor and the other woman. Pridamant is devastated in front of the sarcasm of Alcandre who finally shows Pridamant that his son is alive and sharing the profit of the just performed show. In the fifth act Clindor has become an actor and Pridamant sees him performing. The play ends with Pridamant extolling the virtues of theatre.

So in the play there is a man, Pridamant, entering a cavern in order to solve his problems. In the cavern there is a demiurge, Alcandre, who is helping the desperate man. Pridamant sees ghosts, spectres, "shadows" of his son that heal him from his sorrow. It would seem paradoxical to consider Alcandre as a healer, a kind of philosopher who brings light to humans, since he is the one who displays the illusions. However, he uses his power to drag the person out from a desperate misery. George Forestier, in his book *Le théâtre dans le théâtre*, analyzes the intertwining evolution of two actions: the one of Pridamant with Alcandre in the cavern, and the one of Clindor. The content of the "show" presented by Alcandre is an allegory of human life. We follow Clindor from his birth to his death and to his resurrection. Clindor is born the day he leaves his father's home. Then a series of picaresque adventures shape his personality and transform him into a mature person. In the beginning he is the assistant of Matamore, he is also like a young man discovering love. In the next act he takes over his master, he experiments with the seduction of a woman, he fights with a contender and during a duel he kills the contender. The fourth act is the experience of death; once in jail he meditates upon his coming execution, upon his destiny and in a dreadful vision he sees his death. In the fifth act he comes back resurrected and regenerated. From being an unconscious actor in the world (where the world is conceived as a big theatre stage) he becomes an actor conscious of being an

actor in the big play of humans. This interpretation helps us to understand the meaning of the illusion orchestrated by Alcandre. The spectator is a human being as ignorant of the human comedy presented in front of his eyes as is the actor (Clindor) who is representing it. But, while the actor reaches the “truth” by the experience of death, the spectator reaches it by becoming conscious of the illusion into which he fell.

It is important not to forget the philosophical vision of the world at the time when the play was written. The *theatrum mundi* is not a baroque invention, it was generated by the cultural revolution of the Renaissance. In a period where all values and ideas were criticized and replaced, the only element that could furnish humans with a sense of consistency was the idea of God. All the rest was conceived as unreal, deceiving appearances, relegating humans to a world of illusion. Two different visions defined the *theatrum mundi*, one religious and one cynical: it is either a big stage where God is the playwright, director and spectator, or the world is a big theatre where an absurd play is performed by agitated humans and where in the last act, there is *le coup de théâtre*, which is death. In both visions humans can only acknowledge the fictitious reality and accept to play in it.

*L'illusion comique* is structured as a play within a play; the adventures of Pridamant and Alcandre inside the cavern give the general structure to the whole play. They are the frame story (the first level of illusion) that allows the second story to be presented. The second play (the second level of illusion), which is the play inside the frame story, is the adventures of Clindor, the son of Pridamant. Corneille had the bright idea of introducing a third play (a third level of illusion), which is the story performed by Clindor as an actor at the end of the fifth act. The third story is a tragedy and the character that Clindor is embodying is killed. Pridamant and the audience don't notice the shift from the second story to the third story and take for “real” what is happening to Clindor during the third play, resulting in Pridamant being thunderstruck by witnessing the death of his son. The illusion of the third story fooled Pridamant and with him the audience. When Alcandre unveils the truth and

explains to Pridamant that his son is not dead but that he was acting as if he were dying, Pridamant expresses admiration for his skills of deception and celebrates theatre. The transition from the frame story to the second story are permitted by Alcandre, who being a wizard, has the power to create apparitions that show Pridamant the adventures of his son. The scenes performed in the second story start as a farce, then shift to comedy and finally, with the third story, they end as a tragedy. Corneille uses the different theatrical styles to show in a theatrical form the evolution of Clindor from an inexperienced young boy to a mature man. When the second play is performed, Alcandre and Pridamant become spectators and are put at the same level of the real audience sitting in the theatre. This has the function of bridging the gap between the audience and the actors of the frame story: the audience came to see the adventures of Pridamant, who entered the cavern (a dark space similar to the theatre) in order to see the adventures of his son. In a production of this play at the National Theatre of Finland (2004), Alcandre and Pridamant were in the same space of the audience and the “spectres” were acting on the stage. The leveling of the frame story with the audience reinforced the sense of “reality” of the first story in opposition to the second and even more so with the third. The illusion of the frame story is negated and Pridamant and Alcandre become parts of the reality of the audience.

It seems that Corneille inverted Plato’s myth of the cavern. In Plato’s myth someone is going out of the cavern and outside he/she understands the truth, while in *L’illusion comique* someone enters the cavern and inside he understands the truth. However both cases use a similar process; in a cavern shadows are creating an illusion taken for real by some watchers. And in both situations the watchers don’t fix their gaze to what they see but they must look behind; in the case of Plato’s myth they should look behind their shoulders and in Corneille’s play behind the scenery. Nevertheless, even though the process is similar and both cases work with the dichotomy illusion/reality, the intention is different. Plato wanted to analyze not the appearance of something, but the idea of it. It was a research about the invisible: the idea

dwells not in what is seen but instead in what is not seen. Instead, Corneille transposed onto the stage the concept of *theatrum mundi*, underlining the confusion between being and appearing, between living and acting, between reality and play. Nevertheless, in both cases, even though one wanted to seek the invisible and the other one wanted to cope with appearances, the “illusion” is used to point out what is false and what is real,

There is another school of thinking that proposes a third perspective<sup>18</sup>, which is a synthesis of the two previous ideas. It asserts that it is an error to consider appearance as an aspect of illusion. Appearance is necessary to the essence of things. Truth could not exist without being *and* appearing, that is to say, appearance is a sensible manifestation of the being<sup>19</sup>. Therefore it is not appearance in general that should be the object of reproach, but instead the particular way in which the appearance shows what art puts in material form the truth present in it. Usually art is considered illusory compared to the material, sensible world which is believed to be real and truthful. However, we can go against this assumption and, as Plato pointed out, claim that this whole sphere of the empirical world is not the world of real truth, but something that should be defined as an appearance and a bitter illusion. Authentic reality has to be found beyond the immediateness of senses and external objects. Truthful reality is in fact only in what is in it and for it; the substantial of nature and spirit that of course manifests itself through presence and existence, remains even in existence only for itself and in itself and in doing so it is truthfully real. In the common world, essential does appear, but in the form of accidents, atrophied by the immediateness of senses and by the arbitrary aspect in situations, events etc. Art takes the appearance and the illusion of this empiric and ephemeral world away from the truthful contents of phenomena and gives to them a more elevated reality. It is a total turnover of the traditional assumption that objects are real and art creations are illusory

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<sup>18</sup> This school of thinking presents a vision of the world that gets close to Hegel's theories.

<sup>19</sup> Once a child can recognize what is not him (and so the negation of him) from himself, he becomes conscious of himself. Therefore the negation of him



products. Art is then the ring that joins the external, sensitive and ephemeral with pure thought, it joins nature and limited reality with the infinite freedom of conceptual thought.

If we consider theatre, philosophers such as Hegel or Aristotle<sup>20</sup> asserted that the dramatic poetry (to be intended as the antique Greek Tragedy) is the finest expression of poetry and of art in general. It follows, according to what is above mentioned, that Tragedy and its manifestation (the representation of it) are bound together. Tragedy, therefore, cannot exist without actors embodying it. This deep interconnection between Tragedy and actors provokes a harrowing impasse: how are limited subjects supposed to express objective, infinite thoughts like Beauty? An actor is an empiric being

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is necessary to define his essence. Appearance works in the similar way; the appearance is the negation of the essence and thus necessary to the essence of the object to be recognized. This creates a dialogue, a continuous movement, between essence and appearance.

<sup>20</sup> Although Aristotle shares the conviction that Tragedy is the finest of art forms, the closest to philosophy, he doesn't consider Tragedy necessarily bound to its representation. On the contrary, he states that Tragedy can exist and produce its effect even without being performed. Tragedy is composed by six parts, which are: Fable, or Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Melody. According to Aristotle, the most important part is the combination of accidents that create the plot. Tragedy does not focus on the imitation of persons, but on the imitation of action and life; happiness and misery. Therefore the Plot is the pillar of tragedy, the other elements are consequences of it. At the bottom is the Spectacle: "The Spectacle, though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has least to do with the art of poetry. The tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors; and besides, the getting-up of Spectacles is more a matter for costumer than the poet. A tragedy doesn't need to be staged in order to produce its effect, the text of the tragedy is sufficient in itself. He considered that theatre is merely the place of accidents, of the sensible, of the ephemeral; theatre is only an external manifestation of the tragedy, that they are not intertwined. Concerned about the didactic result, he emphasizes the work of the poet; the Plot should be so strong and clear that "even without seeing the actions take place, the person who simply hears the account of them shall be filled with horror and pity at the accidents"(Aristotle, *On the art of Poetry*, trans Ingram Bywater, Oxford: Clarendon, 1920). Aristotle is worried by bad acting that would produce the opposite effect; many times, in the *Poetic*, he comments about incapable actors who are overacting. He concludes that criticism should not touch the art of the dramatic poet, but only that of the performers. And that Tragedy may produce its effect even without movement or action. Paradoxically theatre finds its highest and noblest expression through Tragedy, which can apparently exist without theatre.



that cannot embody concepts that belong to the immaterial, the immeasurable and abstract world of pure Ideas. This attempt to combine the Ideal with the imperfect generates the actor's paradox. The noble concepts that are supposed to be exposed on the stage, find themselves subordinated to the inclinations of the actor's body. Virtue, Goodness and other similar values are supposed to be pure and thus at the top of human aspirations; they are shining over the creatures and stimulating them to rise to a higher level of existence. But these Ideas become subordinate to flawed beings who cannot express their wholeness but only a narrow part of them. Tragedy engendered by theatre is subsequently constricted and even corrupted by its own generating medium: theatre. The actor embodies the contradictory attempt to gush out the vast and unbounded Ideas, to go beyond the flesh and organs, and at the same time to feel the empirical nature of the body.

The body then seems to be the obstacle preventing the complete embodiment of Ideals by the actors, the fusion of objective concepts with subjective experience. Would it be possible to have actors whose bodies could disappear, leaving only the soul visible?

**Chapter two**  
**The actor: shadow and flesh**



René Magritte, Ceci n'est pas une pipe, 1928-1929.

In Plato's myth the illusion is made by shadows on the wall and in Corneille's play the illusion is given by shadows, spirits, ghosts. Alcantre calls the apparitions not actors but spectres despite the fact that they are embodied by actors. In both cases the dichotomy illusion/reality is reinforced by the opposition shadow/flesh; the impalpability, the immateriality of shadows contrasts the concreteness of flesh. Even though the philosophy of Plato seeks what is beyond sensible reality, he cannot forget what we are made of; for in his myth, when he talks about the enslaved people forced to watch the shadows, he never mentions the pain of being enchained, as if the enslaved people were as immaterial as the shadows. But when the person is

freed and sees the sun, Plato describes the pain of being blinded and of going through this pain to discover the truth. At that point the person becomes concrete, made of flesh. Can we therefore conclude that actors who generate illusion have to be, or at least give the impression of being, immaterial? Like shadows or maybe like spirits?<sup>21</sup>

If the actors on the stage were only to produce signs, it would be possible to imagine them becoming immaterial, spirits that don't embody signs but become living signs. But actors produce signs and emanate energy, and this is the kernel of the problem; for behind the emanation of energy there is a body made out of flesh, muscles, and sweat, a slave of the law of gravity.

In 1811 Heinrich Von Kleist wrote a short text, *On The Puppet Theatre*, that indirectly treats the issue of this chapter. This text unconsciously opened the door to a radical transformation of the actor's work and training. The text, relating a pleasant and naïve discovery of a children's puppet theatre in a public park, is a pertinent essay on the possible development of the performer's competence. Heinrich Von Kleist wished that dancers (and I add actors) would observe and learn from the puppet's movements. He asserts that puppets have a more natural aptitude to be connected with their centers of gravitation. The advantage acquired from the automatism of puppets is the freedom from the fluctuation of inner intentions, the elimination of the metaphysical inertia proper to substances, and with it of any affectedness or affectation issued from thinking, which is unfortunately, unavoidable in humans. He concludes that puppets express grace, since grace "is present in the purest manner inside the human physical form that either doesn't have

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<sup>21</sup> Roberto Tessari in his book *Antropologia del teatro*, 2004, describes the legend of the poet Thespis (IV century B.C.) who had the idea to have a person demarked from the dancing chorus and to put on the face of this dancer a kind of funeral maquillage or mask. The protagonist (the proto-hero) was born. On the stage he was carrying the spirit of a dead person; he was a ghost. Theatre in its archaic form, is the theatricalization of the evocation of dead spirits: the actor embodying the spirit of the dead becomes a ghost who comes back among the living and talks about the mystery of life and death. *Antropologia del teatro*, p.53.

consciousness or has an infinite consciousness, that is to say; the puppet or God.”<sup>22</sup>

A couple of decades later the poets and dramaturges of symbolist theatre would reiterate the ideas of Von Kleist. Bored and even irritated by the spreading of naturalism in arts, they wanted to bring poetry back on stage. Ignoring the contrivances of the stage, galvanized by intellectual speculations about poetry and idealism, they dreamed of an invisible theatre where the soul would be magnified and the bodies forgotten. However, the actors, in such an esthetic vision, were reduced to mere uttering statues; the gestures were diminished to almost complete immobility, the face was frozen, the diction was airy, nearly chanting, and the whole was supposed to give the picture of beauty and harmony. Contrary to Von Kleist who proposed to “open” the possibilities of movement of the performers and thus to go beyond physical limitation: they were fighting against the actor’s corporality by stifling it. As Maeterlink put it: “Something of Hamlet died the day we saw him dying on the stage. The ghost of an actor dethroned him.”<sup>23</sup>

Edward Gordon Craig, following the footsteps of symbolists and aspiring towards a “purified” theatre, relentlessly condemned realistic theatre and actors (in his opinion few actors had the right to be called actors, the others were charlatans that shamed the profession). He was appalled to see these men and women let on the stage, exhibiting vulgarly to the audience what the author didn’t want to show openly but under the veil of his invention. Craig, as with other symbolists, was disappointed by human materiality, and tried to find a subterfuge with puppets. Craig considered that puppets to be first and foremost figures glorifying Creation, and that these figures had been degenerated into a human image. Thus he wished to bring back on the stage the worship Creation by presenting huge puppets (the Über-Marionette) symbolizing the divine. He rejected actors completely and replaced them with an inanimate figure: the “Über-Marionette”.

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<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Von Kleist; *On the Puppet Theatre*.

<sup>23</sup> M.Maeterlink, quoted by Odette Aslan, *L’acteur au XXe siècle*, p.118

The actor found himself in an apparent dead end how to overcome this impasse. Two solutions emerged from the fog of crisis and criticism in the theatre of the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup>: either magnify the invisible work of the actor's soul and imagination (in order to go beyond the actor's persona) to bolster the body in order to surpass its limitations. The solutions explored during that turn of the century, radically transformed the actor's work and training. These solutions reflected the changes in society: the eruption of research on the unconscious, the mechanization of life, and the division of labour. The job of the director grew in importance and power; the responsibility of the show shifted from the actors to the directors, and the latter were desperate to deal with actors who couldn't execute their instructions. They dreamed of reforming theatre and creating a new type of actor.

First a way was found by Stanislavski, who proposed that the actors draw from their own memories, imaginations, and experiences in order to "construct" a character. According to him, life is not a mere succession of measurable events and visible phenomena, but it is like an iceberg whose submerged part represents unexpressed emotions, ambiguous feelings, buried memories, imaginary constructions, and unconscious impulses. The act of speaking is not only the result of the vocal organs' work, but it includes inner images as well. His teaching stressed emotional memories and personal research on a character's biography. The character doesn't start existing when he walks on the stage or when he has a line; he exists before and after, that is to say he has a continuity. It is a pedagogy capable of developing an actor's subjectivity and mastering it.

The other way focused instead on the body of the actor. Theatre makers such as Craig, Copeau, and Meyerhold, tired of actors who were satisfied to declaim the text without any connection with the body, wanted to

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<sup>24</sup> In this article I won't linger on the origins, the reasons and the episodes of the vehement attacks that symbolists and other theatre makers were throwing on the classical theatre of that time. I am more concerned by the propositions and reflections on renewing and developing the art of representation.

explore a new training for them. And the mask became the springboard that led to the radical transformation of actor's training. In fact, one day, Copeau was working with an actress and asked her, jokingly her, to cover her face because he couldn't bear no more her facial mimicry. She put a rag on her face and continued the exercise with her face covered and without speaking. Suddenly, by hiding the face, her body became more expressive. Copeau saw in this episode a great opportunity to develop a powerful tool for actors.<sup>25</sup> He continued his research on the mask and the "masque noble"<sup>26</sup>; a special mask without expression that, on the face of the actor, would impose calm and silence, in order to make the body more visible.<sup>27</sup>

These two apparently opposite approaches, however, were dealing with the same concern: how can the actor put life in the lines that he or she has to express? Stanislavski proposed filling the text with a "subtext" that would enrich the information concerning the character. The subtext, composed of memories, and mental images, would add nuances to the basic text. When the actor would say a word (or even in the silence or in a glance),

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<sup>25</sup> Decroux pushed further by asserting that the face and hands are liars, while the torso expresses truth. This is why in his school (continuing the research started with Copeau) students were almost naked, wearing only a slip and a covered face, in order to let the visible torso be the generator of all movements and intentions.

<sup>26</sup> The masque noble will found its apogee in the pedagogical work of Jacques Lecoq who, focusing mainly on the mask work, ameliorated the masque noble and created the "masque neutre" (neutral mask).

<sup>27</sup> During the 20th century the body became a focal point, not only on stage but in the society as well. Surprisingly nowadays, while the standards of beauty are inhuman (anorexia for women and body-building for men), contemporary theatre companies often present distorted, "ugly" bodies on the stage. The Italians Raffaello Sanzio Societas showed a version of the Orestes trilogy with anorexic men, obese women, people without arms, and down-syndrome people. The Italian director Pippo Del Bono works mainly with "marginal" people: mad, fat, prisoners, tortured bodies and tormented souls. The Finnish director Eero-Tapio Vuori created a performance, "Katso Ihmiset" (2005), where the spectators met personally people that don't fit with the standard: transsexuals, alcoholics, a philosopher born without any arms, people with AIDS. Why is there the need to show what is outside the "normal" or accepted pattern? In watching these performances I couldn't restrain myself from wondering what is then a beautiful body? What is a normal body? And pushing further what is a human body? Finally: what is actually human? We could ask ourselves if a deformed body, which is considered ugly, would be a "non-human" body. Though the pregnant body is the most human body since it carries a human being inside, it is also deformed.

the word (or silence or sight) wouldn't be just a sound but behind the word there would be a luggage of images, memories and meanings that would charge the expression (in the sense that the whole body would be driven by the emotion, mental image, subtext, and thus the whole body would be alive). The other approach proposed to abandon the text; first to let the actor be in the situation, by improvising (in silence or with his own words) and then, once the physical partition and intention had been found, to add the written text. One went through the soul and the other went through the body in order to find a solution for the same (and eternal) problem: how can the actor give a believable impression of being someone or something else? Or in other words, how to transpose life on the stage?

### Chapter three

#### The expanded body that disappears: the mime work in Lecoq pedagogy.



The Neutral Mask

‘As the seeds are in the tree  
And the tree is in the seed  
Even so we are in the universe  
And the universe is in us.’<sup>28</sup>

The actors’ training in Lecoq pedagogy includes the discovery and the mastery of the body as well as the development of relationships between the body and landscape (the world created on stage). The actor, through specific

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<sup>28</sup> Kabir (Indian poet, 1398-1518). Translated by Surinder Sidhu



exercises, becomes "bigger", and paradoxically while he or she is evoking a surrounding landscape, he or she can be swallowed by it and disappear in it. And what the spectator perceives is not the physically present body of the actor but rather the illusion being created by the body.

**Before the action: the neutral body as a decided body.**

In conventional western theater, words and facial expressions are the common means to convey ideas and emotions while the rest of the body is more or less “dead”. Lecoq sought to bring the body to life through a powerful tool: the neutral mask, an expressionless mask covering the whole face. While wearing the neutral mask the actor cannot rely on speech or facial expressions but only on movements, physical responses and bodily attitudes. This mask forces the actor to discover first his or her own neutral body, a discovery that requires long training. The actor has to acknowledge the ways in which his or her everyday life has shaped his or her body and conditioned not only his or her movements but even ways of thinking. Even without any actions the body is already expressing something. As Grotowski put it, “the body has no memory, the body is memory”. All our past experiences and feelings elicited by them: joy, frustration, fear, etc., are physically inscribed in us. Training exercises should awaken the body memory. Grotowski considered exercises pointless if their aim was just to strengthen the body. Exercises should instead open a space of creativity by recalling the “memory” inscribed in the body. The neutral mask, like Grotowski’s vision, is not just a means of training. Working with it produces an extraordinary state of awareness, presence and creativity. But the neutral mask is not looking for subjective creativity: an action or a reaction is already a creative act. And the neutral mask doesn’t connect with the memory of the actor’s body, but rather with the memory of humankind. In fact the actor has to acknowledge his or her subjective memory

and idiosyncrasies in order to go beyond them and reach a level of complete neutrality. Thus the neutral mask allows the actor to find a basic gesture (or objective/essential gesture) which can be declined in infinite variations, expressing infinite intentions and thus deeper and less stereotyped emotions.

The neutral mask doesn't have a past. It always discovers the surrounding space for the first time. Thus there are no judgments in the response to external stimuli but simply physical reactions to them: the neutral body of an actor is a strong state of being alive, ready, and especially listening. In other words, it is a body poised to act and react. So, before an action, the actor has to bring his or her body to this level of readiness (on the edge of doing something, not yet engaged in an action, but determined to participate). That is to say, he or she has to have a "decided" body.

**The action: find the opposite and dilate the energy.**

When I jump I bend my knees so I can jump higher. So to increase the effect of my performance I first move in the opposite direction. If I want to slap, I first raise my hand, thus calling all the body to bring energy for that specific movement. Moreover by finding the opposite of an action, the action itself and the energy of the actor are stretched. It is not just to jump but bend and then jump; it is not just to slap but raise the hand and then slap. Therefore the performance is dilated, and through the action, the presence of the actor is dilated too. I can conclude that the two opposites are interdependent and belong to the same whole. An emotion or a scene can be expanded and intensified by its opposite too. The effect on a person being thunderstruck by terrible news can be reinforced if a joyful event has happened just a moment before.

The struggle to increase the energy of an emotion, a movement or just sheer presence on stage is the core of the actor's work. In everyday life one

can feel fleeting, overwhelming emotions, ephemeral peaks of intense sensations of being alive, but these dramatic moments are evanescent. The actor has to catch and inflate such extraordinary moments. He or she must be able to reach them whenever he or she wants, control them and maintain that condition for a long time. This involves an extraordinary effort of inflating not just one part of the body, intensifying one feeling, expanding one aspect of the presence or imagination, but rather the actor has to “expand” the whole body; muscles (energy), heart (emotions) and mind (capacity of imagination and compassion). This of course requires an unusual high amount of energy, what Eugenio Barba calls an “extra-daily” energy.

**Multiple actions: being in the scenery and embodying the scenery.**

The concept of the exercise called “mimodynamique”, which Lecoq developed, does not consist in miming reality, but in miming what lies beneath reality. The exercise is focused on the close observation of reality (animate and inanimate objects, animals, human beings) and on the study of tensions, forces and rhythms inside each phenomenon. The actor tries to embody the tensions, forces and rhythms that the phenomenon carries within itself, thus miming the dynamic of the phenomenon. The actor, through a purely physical process, seeks to convey the forces within the phenomenon, not just its appearance. This exercise allows the actor to go beyond daily habits and stereotypes and to be alert to all types of natural phenomena.

The mimodynamique of the forest is not the representation of a walk in the forest, but it is the embodiment of the forest, composed of such various elements as trees, birds, insects, squirrels, creeks, stones, lights and shadows, rhythms, different sizes, densities, colors, etc. and also the human walking in the forest.

Therefore the actor is both the human in the landscape and the landscape itself.

The actor weaves between being in the landscape and becoming the landscape. The spectators don't see the efforts of the actor, but through his or her efforts they see and feel the landscape. At that moment the body of the actor disappears into the virtual world evoked on stage.

“How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

“How can we know the body from the illusion?”

## Chapter four

### Seeking the illusion; from theory to practice



*Lost Persons Area*

In February 2006, in collaboration with Soile Mäkelä, I presented a mask performance at Teak called *Lost Persons Area*<sup>29</sup>. We rehearsed six weeks to prepare the show in January and February. Furthermore, in November and December, we had sessions that were defined as a pedagogical period where I could explore and put in practice questions and reflections concerning where and how illusion happens. I report on seven sessions where we mainly studied two questions: where does illusion happen? Can the actor master the evocation of illusion?

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<sup>29</sup> See the DVD attached at the end of this text.

## **How to create the illusion of another space: from one space to another**

### **Session 1 The space of imagination**<sup>30</sup>

The participants improvise on two given themes:

First theme: a professor is giving a lecture. He/she is so passionate about the topic that he/she “dives” into what he/she is describing and forgets that an audience is in front of him/her.

Second theme: you enter the room of your childhood and discover the objects of your childhood. The memory of that age will come back and take you to that time. As this happens, you begin to behave as a child wanted.

In both situations the actor is setting a first level of action (the lecture hall or the child room), which we will call level A. Then the actor will enact a passion (in the case of the teacher) or a memory (in the case of the child) that will set a second level of action, or level B.

The space of the improvisation is empty, with no objects, and no scenery. When the actor starts the exercise, he/she mimes the space in level A. In this level the protagonist (professor or person in the child’s room) behaves in a “reasonable” way, but while the professor is talking or the person is remembering, the level B emerges and the behavior changes.

A question immediately arises: how can we show the different levels? What should an actor do in order to enter into level B? How is it possible to show a different space? Let me describe what one of the actors did during his improvisation on the professor’s theme: when he/she was talking about his topic, a hockey player, he started changing the rhythm of the voice, the bodily posture was modified, in fact before his body was mainly in the vertical axes,

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<sup>30</sup> This exercise was the first exercise I did in the Lassaad theatre school, 6 years ago. I had not done it since and this was the first time I share it with others. Despite this I have never forgotten the exercise and I think it contains the essence of theatre.

while afterwards the body was off from the vertical and normal axes, the energy increased, the more he was “diving“ into the topic, the more he became alive until he forgot where he was and became the hockey player. The space of level A was replaced by another space, a hockey rink, corresponding to the space of level B. Level B was the space of the imagination and level A became the level of “reality”. When he came back into level A, into his real life, he went for a moment into his passion, maybe into his dream of being a talented hockey player winning the world cup. A contrast between reality and desire was enacted, and the further he would have gone into level B the harder and more painful it would have been to come back.

In level A the actor was closer to an everyday energy (let us say a lower level of energy), the body position was vertical, but when he went into level B, his body was emanating more energy (higher level of energy), and the body position changed from the everyday axis. The transition was therefore shown physically. When the spectators see that the protagonist is changing the rhythm, the energy, and the bodily posture, they feel that something is happening, something curious. It is somehow strange to say that the illusion (level B) was granted when the body became more present, more energetic.

The exercise presents a similar structure of the theatre within the theatre; two levels of illusion are presented and, because of the second one, the first level (the frame story; here the class room or the child’s room) is taken by the audience not as illusion, but as reality.

#### Comments on the improvisations:

The transition from level A to level B is delicate and crucial. This is the moment where the actor can bring the audience with him/her into the other level. If the spectators “believe” that the professor is so passionate as to be transported into another level of reality (B), they will accept everything and they will enjoy seeing the passionate professor evolving in his dream: at that moment everything can be enacted on the stage.

Comment on the opposition A/B:

Is it necessary that a relationship is established between levels A and B? If we take some plays presenting the structure of a play within a play, a relationship is not always established. Sometimes the play inside the play has no effects on the frame story; like in the *Bourgeois gentilhomme* of Molière. However, in my opinion, I prefer when the play inside the play has an impact on the frame story. It deepens the meaning of the play, giving the sense that theatre (or illusion) has an impact on reality, like a ritual has an impact on everyday life.

### Session 2, Continuation of the space of imagination

The session was dedicated to examining how to achieve technically the transition from level A to level B and how to come back to level A.

First step: the actor enters a room, sees a toy, manipulates it and eventually becomes the object. Then the actor experiments with the shifts between holding the object and becoming the object.

Second step: The actor enters the room and plays with the toy. The more he/she plays with the toy, the more he/she becomes like the toy. The actor identifies with the object and it is as if the toy becomes alive.

Third step: The actor plays with the toy and when he/she becomes like the object, the space changes and becomes a natural landscape where the action of the toy takes place, completely abandoning the room.

Fourth step: The actor enters the room with high energy (as if he/she were a child) and plays with the toy (and becomes the toy and the space changes).

Step 2 to 4 help to develop the ability to enter level B.

Fifth step: The actor enters the room as an adult, sees the toy, starts playing with it, becomes like a child, then like the toy and then the space changes.



Sixth step: the dramaturgy of the scene is organized. The adult enters the child's room and sees a first toy (level A). Then he sees a second toy and, as he starts manipulating it, a little bit of "childishness" appears (a little bit of level B, but immediately back to level A). Then he sees a third toy, and this time he cannot restrain himself and plays with the toy; he becomes the child, then the toy, and then the space changes (level B). At the apex of the scene the adult abruptly stops playing, and notices what he is doing. This is the moment where the level B affects the protagonist; the actor goes back to the level A, but something has changed. The protagonist has gone through an experience that has changed his mood.

Comment on the session:

In this exercise the actor was capable of creating the illusion, mastering it and destroying it whenever he or she wanted. Moreover, with a clever dramaturgy, the illusion had a reason to exist. This last discovery influenced strongly the rest of the work.

### Session 3 The space of memory.

The rehearsal room was divided into four parts, which were called boxes. In each box, the actors were asked to remember and to act out a scene from a specific day of their own past:

Box 1: A scene from November 18<sup>th</sup> 2005

Box 2: A scene from November 18<sup>th</sup> 2004

Box 3: A scene from November 18<sup>th</sup> 1990

Box 4: A scene from November 18<sup>th</sup> 1980

The first step was to travel from one box to the others and repeat the action as if you also had the age of that particular day. Then the task was to enter the box and, through a movement or gesture, the memory of that day would emerge and the actress would let herself fall into the memory (level A

to level B). Of course the main concern was how to show physically the memory. The first solution was to slow down the movement of the action until reaching an almost complete stillness. Then the head, the gaze, and the focus would move away, while the body would still keep the posture. We discovered that it was necessary for the actress to do an action physically and not just remain in a vertical posture in order to show the recall. If the actress were standing vertically, it gave the sensation that she was thinking but not that she was “entering” another level. Then when she entered the memory (level B) she could again speed up the rhythm, and change energy.

Comment on the session:

The coming back was also a delicate transition. We discovered that actually it is this moment which can justify what happens previously. If the actor “comes back” to level A as if nothing has happened, the recall is swept away. But if the actor “comes back” to level A and something has changed, or at least she acknowledges something has happened, the recall is justified (like in the exercises presented in the sessions 1 and 2).

#### Session 4 The supernatural space

We then we tried to experiment with what would happen if, when the actress was in one box and was acting out the scene of the past, the space changed (meaning the type of space where the action was happening). What would happen to the action or how would the action be affected if the space was changing, as if something super-natural was happening? The actors would do a simple task such cleaning or writing a letter, and then, while they were executing the task, the space “changed”. It gave the impression that something else was happening, but it was something very abstract. Maybe the space changed too much: little, subtle transformations would have been more effective in giving the sensation of the arrival of a supernatural presence. The coming back to the normal situation was again very delicate and crucial.

The idea is similar to shifting from level A to level B. If level A refers to “reality”, level B refers to the inner space of the protagonist; either a memory or a passion. In both cases, in level B the protagonist shows his hidden desires, he shows an aspect of his personality that in normal life (level A) he would conceal. Here it is again a question of shifting from one space to another, but this time instead of going into level B, the protagonist would discover another dimension, a supernatural one, which we called level C. The space and time in level C is not modified by the protagonist himself, but by an external element; an angel, a spirit, death. However, the dilemma is how to make credible that a person made out of flesh and blood, and with a palpable materiality, can be assumed to be an immaterial presence such as angels or spirits. Does he or she have to walk in a particular way, move in a particular way? In the exploration we discovered that in order for an action to become credible it is necessary that the reaction supports the action. In other words, the action requires a reaction in order to become effective. Then, even though it is an external element that modifies the space and time, it is again the protagonist who through his acting and movement creates the feeling that something uncommon is happening. At that point the audience can accept that the second actor embodies an immaterial presence.

In almost all the improvisations, the actors were first establishing a situation in a specific space in which they were doing a simple task. Then, through altering the focus of the gaze they gave the feeling that something unusual was happening, (at first small reaction and then bigger), while continuing with the task. At same point the change of space affected not only the physical position of the actor but also the accomplishment of the task, and the actor had to change the rhythm of his movements. At that moment the second actor, embodying either a spirit, death, an angel or the devil, could enter on stage and interact with the protagonist. Then the supernatural presence would leave and the protagonist came back to level A. Here again, as with the coming back from level B, the return is delicate because it is the

moment that can justify what happened just previously. Level B and C can exist through level A, as if the illusion can exist because there is reality.

Comment on the moment of transition from A to B and from A to C:

Except in the case of the exercise of the teacher, in all the other situations a similar phenomenon was happening: before entering the new level (B or C) the actor was slowing down the rhythm of the scene in order to accelerate and thus increase the energy. In the situation of the teacher the transition happened gradually, as if the teacher was entering step by step into the water of level B and not diving into it. Just by physically slowing down, it was possible to create the sense that something was happening, and thus to command the attention of the audience. It is like diving: in order to dive, it is necessary to jump and in order to jump, it is necessary to take a step backwards to gain the momentum. Lecoq called this phenomenon “appel de mouvement” (the call of movement); it is the same as what Barba defines as “the opposite movement” or Meyerhold as “otkas” (refusal).

### Session 5 The space of illusion

So, until now, we have acknowledged the importance of the body energy in creating the illusion, and to shift into a new space. In this session we went further and focused more on the gaze.

This exploration started with the exercise of the 9 attitudes, which is composed by a sequence of nine physical postures (that were defined by Jacques Lecoq).

Starting position: the actor stands upright, legs in a wide stance, arms pointing down but not tense.

First attitude: the samurai. The actor bends the legs, the torso is still vertical. The actor is looking in front.

Second attitude: the table. The actor tilts forward from the pelvis so the spine and the head are horizontal. The actor looks at the floor.

Third attitude: the harlequin. The pelvis pulls backward, the torso rises of 45°, the weight of the body shifts to the left leg. It is a position of reverence. The actor looks at the floor on the right side in front of him,

Fourth attitude: “fente en avant” or the diagonal of melodrama. The weight of the body shifts to the right leg, the torso stays exactly the same 45° angle and the whole body is in a diagonal, from left foot through the spine to the top of the head. The actor is looking at the horizon on his right side

Fifth attitude: diagonal of tragedy. Without shifting the legs, the actor rotates the chest 180° towards the sky. The actor is looking at the sky.

From now on the attitudes are repeated but towards the other side, like a mirror.

Sixth attitude: diagonal of tragedy. The actor shifts the weight to the left leg and turns the chest towards the sky, now opening to the right side.

Seventh attitude: diagonal of melodrama. The weight is on the left leg, the chest rotates to the left. The actor is looking at the horizon on his left side.

Eight attitude: the harlequin. The actor is looking at the floor on the left side in front of him.

Ninth attitude (exactly as the second): the table.

Back to the first attitude: the samurai.

In this sequence of movements the actor has to go off the vertical axis. The unusual postures raise the expressiveness of the body. With the torso, which is the center of the emotions, going off the vertical axis, the whole body finds itself in a position expressing desire, fear, excitement, rejection, or other emotion. The actors explored the nine postures shifting from one to another. However, even though they varied the rhythm, and the tempo of the movements, the exercise remained technical. We then asked to find a motivation that would lead from one posture to another one. The idea to use the gaze as the instigator (or motor) was proposed. The actors experimented with this option: first the head turned in the direction of the next posture and then the body moved. Suddenly the exercise became alive; it wasn't technical

but immediately a kind of story was performed. The actor saw “something”, which stimulated a body reaction. Then by modifying the rhythm and the speed of the head and the body, the audience had the impression that the actor was emotionally involved in a story, created by different things he was seeing. Illusion was strongly connected with the gaze of the actor. It seems that the audience sees through the eyes of the performer, or in other words: the audience sees what the actor sees and the body is the channel of this communication. It is not actually what the actor is really looking at that is important, but the reaction provoked by what has been seen. It is the reaction and therefore the body in (re)action that tells if the object is scary, desirable, small, big, slow, fast, peaceful, threatening, etc.

These five sessions demonstrated that Mamet’s claim is wrong. Illusion happens on the stage and not in the head of the spectator. It is the actor who creates it.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> At this point I was wondering if the illusion is actually something to be searched far inside the actor. I mean: maybe what is called “illusion” is a space inside the actor. Rehearsals would help to model this inner (and invisible) space, so that it can be projected. The illusion would be the physical manifestation of a world that the actor carries in him. Talent is then the ability to open the door of this inner space everywhere and to be able to impose this inner space on the surrounding space; in other words to transform the space. This idea was supported also by my experiences as a storyteller and as a butoh performer. The storyteller has a story inside him that he shares with the audience that surrounds him. Through the words the audience is brought by the storyteller to an imaginary space where the tale happens. Inside the circle made by the audience and the storyteller, the space of the fiction takes over the real one. The space is transformed by the storyteller. The butoh performer is driven by strong images that are placed inside his body. For instance, the legs may move like cotton, the chest like fire and the arms like pollen. Although the butoh performer is not preoccupied with establishing a connection with the surrounding space and with the audience, the inner world inscribed in his body radiates. It is as if the more the concentration goes inside the more it spreads out.

### Session 6 Actors vs Performers

Until now, in all the sessions the actor was, let's say, acting. He or she was pretending to be in another space. I wanted to examine what happens before acting, when the actor is only doing.

This session was dedicated to exploring the threshold dividing performers from actors. The exercises were inspired by an article of Michael Kirby: *On Acting and Not-Acting*. In his article, Kirby tries to define all the different steps that lead not-acting to acting. He basically draws a line from not-acting to acting and places on it the different attitudes of performing and acting. He concludes that acting starts when pretending is involved. When the person pretends to be somewhere else, someone else, or mimes objects, it is then possible to speak of acting. When the person is doing an action, but without the intention of giving the illusion of being somewhere else, someone else, it is defined as performance.

We explored this shift from doing to pretending with an exercise that I will define as simple action/complex action.

1) I asked the participants to bring an object and to perform an action with it. Basically the task was to present the object to the others. (Simple action)

2) I asked another actress to repeat exactly what the first actor did, the same action with the same object. (Again simple action)

3) The actress repeated the same action and I asked her to change her quality of moving. I proposed to use one of the elements that we had worked on, for instance, wind. (Not so simple action)

4) Then the actress had to repeat what she did before and change the motor<sup>32</sup> of her movements. The motor could be located in the knees, in the pelvis, in the chest, in the head. (Medium action)

5) Then the actress had to repeat what she did before while imagining herself to be in another place; in front of the sea, in a forest, or in a dark room. (Almost complex action)

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<sup>32</sup> The motor is a term that defines the source generating the movement.

6) Then the actress had to add an emotion when she was presenting the object.

7) Finally the object was removed, and the actress repeated the action with everything except the object. At this point we could say that the actress was embodying a character, in a specific space, with particular emotions and relating to something. (Complex action)

We finished the exercise by juxtaposing two performers: one doing the simple action and the other one the complex one. I asked the performer (doing the simple action) to leave the object on stage before going off and I asked the actor (doing the complex action) to notice the object left behind. It was a surprise to see a strange bridge appearing between the two different actions, when the actress had still in her hands the mimed object and was noticing the real one; the story was brought to another level. When the actor was presenting the mimed object, the audience took it as a real object. The mental health of the character wasn't put into question, but when at the end the character is faced with the real object, he is faced with the dilemma between reality and illusion, between fantasy and crude materiality.

Another noted element was that when the two actions were performed, the complex action drew more the attention of the audience and when at the end the bridge was established, it fed the character of the complex action. The complex action was more interesting, I think, for two main reasons: firstly because the character was emotionally committed to the action and secondly because the object (that generated the whole story) was missing, requiring more attention to the quality of the movements that create the illusion of having something in the hands. It is probably related to the mystery of not showing everything and letting the imagination of the audience fill the gaps.<sup>33</sup> In doing so, the audience becomes active and participates in the creative process, enjoying a kind of pleasure of in seeing what is not there.<sup>34</sup> But in the

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<sup>33</sup> Does this assertion bring me back to Mamet's claim?

<sup>34</sup> Another example highlights this quality of omission. In an exercise, two actors held a two-meter stick between them. The stick was placed at the head, then the chest, then the pelvis. The task was to move without dropping the stick. The audience



case of the juxtaposition of the two exercises (simple action with complex action) as it was mentioned, the status of the character with the mimed object changed with the presence of the real object. When the actor was acting the scene alone, we were touched by the character and we were “seeing” the invisible object. When the scene was coupled with the simple action and the real object was left on the stage, at that point our idea of that character changed (even though the actor was repeating the same action). The presence of a single object changed our opinion of the character, and this example would defend Mamet’s principle<sup>35</sup>. But what really made us see the invisible object in all situations was that the character established a relationship with the mimed object or space. Even with the last example, at the end the character had to notice the real object, and only at that point, when a connection was established, the status of the character changed. We were suddenly more interested not in seeing the mimed object, but the emotion associated with it. This last reflection implies that illusion has to be supported by a relationship or a kind of connection (I will come back to this observation later in this chapter).

Until now, the main concern was to explore the actor creating different spaces or showing imaginary objects, but now it became interesting to analyze as well the actor and what occurs in his or her body. In fact another question that the exercise raised was *when does acting start?* According to

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watching the exercise was focusing on the actors’ efforts to keep the stick from falling. Then the stick was removed and the actors moved, imagining that the stick was still there. At this moment the audience saw something completely different. Even though the actors were focusing on “holding” the imaginary stick, the spectators were imagining that a dialogue was happening. They weren’t seeing two actors but they were paying attention to the dynamic of a conflict, watching who was dominating and who was dominated.

The examples supporting this quality of omission are innumerable. I remember, for instance, an impressive show of the Peking Opera where whole scene was happening on an imaginary boat. Without having water or boats on the stage, they were able to transmit the flow of the water and the rocking of the boat. The illusionary landscape was created just by two actors without any other device.

<sup>35</sup> Since it was the combination of the actor’s action with the presence of an object left on stage that generated in the head of the spectator a new impression of the whole scene.

Kirby's definition of acting<sup>36</sup>, there is acting when there is pretending. However when I tilt my pelvis a certain way and I reduce the length of my steps, I can give the impression of being old, even though I never pretended to embody an old person. If I continue for a long time to walk with such a posture, gradually I will notice that my way of thinking and looking around changes. I will start thinking (and therefore behaving) like an old person, even though I never "decided" to think like an old person. I can wonder if I am still doing or if I have fallen into the realm of pretending<sup>37</sup>. In a performance the action is clear and the performer doesn't wander into the dilemma of what to transmit. When the performer Gina Pane<sup>38</sup> in her performance "L'escalade" was climbing a ladder whose rungs were embedded with blades, she wasn't pretending to be hurt and to bleed. The pain was real and the blood as well. The more she climbed the more pain and blood. But when an actor pretends to be hurt or to be older or younger, the problem sneaks away; since we are in a body and we have a body, it is not possible to dissociate the thoughts from the body, they are fused together. The way of thinking influences the body attitude and the body attitude influences the way of thinking, or in other words: the thoughts are in the body. A physical change can modify thinking, as in the above mentioned example of "becoming" old. Or consider the Feldenkreis method, which functions exclusively on the idea that mental idiosyncrasy can be surpassed by a physical approach. Specific exercises concentrating on finding the fluidity and subtlety of movements, and by loosening muscular stress and articulation blocks it works directly on the

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<sup>36</sup> M. Kirby, On acting and not Acting, article presented in: Acting (Re)Considered, P. Zerilli, 2002, p.40

<sup>37</sup> A person wanted to demonstrate that shaman practices were false and relied on unjustified beliefs. To achieve his plan he decided to follow the practice that an aspirant shaman must complete and then to reveal to everybody the secrets that shamans jealously keep. However, during his practice, he turned out to be a good shaman, by far better than others. He gained honor and respect and never revealed the shaman's secrets." An anecdote of Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted by R. Shechner in "Performance Theory", p.258-259.

<sup>38</sup> Gina Pane (1939-1990) Her performance work focused on the body mutilated by culture, history and art. Masochistic and highly controversial, Pane's performances were deeply disturbing.

neurons. So an external action can alter an internal attitude, and vice versa: the gestures of a shy person are fundamentally contained and controlled, with the arms close to the body while a bold person does bigger movements and has the chest open, and so on. Therefore, since an external device may influence the actor's thoughts, we can wonder if the actor is completely controlling the evocation of the illusion. This argument will be developed in the following session.

### Session 7 The Kuleshov effect

David Mamet's argument, presented at the introduction of this text, is a phenomenon better known as the Kuleshov effect<sup>39</sup>, which is mainly applied to cinema. Kuleshov explains that by changing the editing of the same shots it is possible to create different meanings. Even though I doubted the possibility to apply cinematographic laws directly to theatre, I wanted to try and explore Mamet's claim. First I experimented with a simple dialogue:

Character A: My head is somewhere else!

Character B: You will see her again.

We can conclude that A is in love with a woman, that the woman is not here. It can be a kind of romantic love story.

What happens if the order is inverted:

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<sup>39</sup> "The 'Kuleshov Effect' is the name given to a cinematic montage effect demonstrated by Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov around 1918.

Kuleshov edited a short film in which shots of the face of Ivan Mozhukhin are alternated with various other shots (a plate of soup, a girl, a child's coffin). The film was shown to an audience who believed that the expression on Mozhukhin's face was different each time he appeared, depending on whether he was 'looking at' the plate of soup, the girl, or the child's coffin, showing an expression of hunger, desire or grief respectively. Actually the footage of Mozhukhin was identical and rather expressionless every time it appeared. Kuleshov used the experiment to indicate the usefulness and effectiveness of film editing. The implication is that viewers brought their own emotional reactions to this sequence of images, and then moreover attributed those reactions to the actor, investing his impassive face with their own feelings. It is therefore not the content of the images in a film which is important, but their combination. The raw materials of such an art work need not be original, but are pre-fabricated elements which can be deconstructed and re-assembled by the artist into new juxtapositions." Wikipedia encyclopedia.

Character A: You will see her again

Character B: My head is somewhere else!

Here we can conclude that B doesn't think about the woman that A is mentioning, maybe B is in love with another woman or maybe he is worried about something else. The situation becomes a vaudeville.

In a third situation, by changing the second line, the meaning is twisted again:

Character A: You will see her again

Character B: I hope not.

In this situation B is angry at the mentioned woman. This can fall into a melodrama.

And in a fourth possibility:

Character A: My head is somewhere else!

Character B: I hope not.

I leave you the pleasure of imagining the possible conclusions that this dialogue communicates.

Before continuing with this consideration I want to introduce another example. This time it is not a dialogue, but rather a kind of monologue that I overheard once in an airport. The person was a fifty-year-old man: "Yes, the plane from China was late. I almost missed the connection. No, now I am in Helsinki. I will be in Milano in about three hours. Don't worry, I will come to see you. When I will arrive, I'll take the car, go home and then I'll come to you." At this point I thought the man was in love and despite the long flight, the jet leg, and the fatigue, he wanted absolutely to visit this person (who, apparently, didn't want to pick him up from the airport). I tried to understand if the interlocutor was a man or a woman. The man concluded: "Stai tranquillo" (stay calm), with the male declination. And triumphant, I deduced he was gay and in love with an indifferent man. But I was intrigued because he finished the call by saying "stay calm". Maybe the other man was afraid of planes and therefore was worried about him. Then the man made another phone call: "Yes, I am arriving. Yes I called daddy. Everything was fine but

then when I was hanging up he started crying again. I'll see him. Bye." The mental image that I was constructing of this stranger changed completely in two sentences, from a lover begging the attention of an indifferent man to a worried son. The mental image (here comparable to Mamet's vision of illusion) was modified by the amount of information the man was giving. But in this situation I wasn't watching at the man, I was only listening to him. The presence and energy of the body can modify the meaning of the text, but I couldn't see what his body was expressing. In fact, acting can influence enormously the final meaning of a dialogue. For instance, I used the following dialogue as an exercise to understand the basic difference of acting energy between tragedy and comedy. The students develop a "tragic" scene and a "comic" scene using the same dialogue.

She: What happened? Does it hurt?

He: No, it is nothing, I slipped.

She: But, what is this? Blood?

He: I lost control. Maybe I broke my leg.

She: I am afraid it is more serious than that.

When the actors have to play this dialogue on the comic tone, the tempo is fast, the body energy is high. The dialogue becomes a pretext for the two characters to flirt or touch each other. What they say and what bodies express are totally different things. The man is not at all suffering and the woman is interested in something else. When the actors perform this dialogue on the tragic tone, the tempo is much slower, the energy of the body doesn't burst out, but it is more contained and sustained. Perhaps something more terrible than hurting a leg has happened; the actors don't say what it is but the audience feels the tragic event.

In both situations the dialogue is a pretext to tell something else. In the case of the comic is the body which expresses it, and in the case of the tragedy, it is the silence (sustained by the poised body).<sup>40</sup> In both situations

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<sup>40</sup> Henri Bergson in his book *Le Rire*, (1900), stressed this aspect of the body. He commented that the tragic poet avoids everything that could bring our attention to the

there is a gap between the literal meaning of the dialogue and what the character truly says along with the words. This gap, or conflict between words and body, creates a tension that raises the interest of the audience. But in such conflict (words versus body) the attention goes to what the body expresses, and this will be taken as what the character really wants to tell<sup>41</sup>.

Considering the subordination of the text to the body energy (in the sense that the same text can generate different meanings according how it is expressed), in the next step I focused on the body itself and tried to analyze the effect of different combinations of the same actions. I gave eight actions:

- To cut the grass
- To call someone
- To designate a place
- To fall
- To raise the head
- To refuse
- To accept
- To indicate a person

Each action was defined precisely; the beginning and the end, the intention behind it, the emotion, the gaze.

Then the actors, without imagining a story, composed a phrase with these eight actions. The result was quite abstract. It was difficult to extract a clear meaning from each phrase. However some combination of actions

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materiality of the hero; whenever a bodily worry intervenes, a comical intrusion has to be feared. This is why heroes in Tragedies don't drink, don't eat, and even avoid sitting down. To sit down during a tirade is to recall that we have a body. Napoleon noticed that it is possible to shift from tragedy to comedy only by sitting down. He wrote in his diary: "She (the Queen of Prussia) talked to me with a tragic tone; Sir, justice! Justice! She continued with this tone, which strongly embarrassed me. Finally, to change her mood I beg her to sit down. Nothing cuts better a tragic scene, for when we are seated it becomes comedy.

<sup>41</sup> There is the assumption that words are volatile and deceiving, that it is difficult to tell openly problems or feelings. Usually, resistance is avoided by veiling concerns with a metaphor, or by saying only part of it, or nothing at all or even the opposite. While it is taken for granted that it is more difficult to hide the reactions of the body, there is the belief that the body will reveal deep inner feelings.

created an interesting dynamic that didn't necessarily transmit a clear meaning, but nevertheless engaged the attention and the imagination of the audience.

Then I asked the actors to modify (randomly) the rhythm of each action. This was the first step where the actors could use their own creative energy, but still I asked them not to imagine a story behind the phrase. The result was surprising, even though the actors weren't adding emotions to the movements, it gave the impression that every action was generated by a specific feeling<sup>42</sup>. When the actions were slow they gave the sense of sadness, or doubt, sometimes even desire sometimes. Fast actions, on the other hand, gave the impression of fear, anger, excitement and so on. The actors were focusing only on changing the rhythm and the audience was feeling emotions. This modified as well the reception of the phrase; it wasn't something abstract anymore, it felt as if there was a meaning behind it<sup>43</sup>.

Then I asked the actors to find out what kind of story they were telling and to adjust some actions if it necessary. They could magnify or reduce movements, or keep the dynamic of the movement and transpose it. The result was three completely different stories, with three different moods. The first story was about pregnancy and the fear of losing the child. The second was about a dead friend, the sadness of his absence and the rage against God. The third was about a person struggling with her own hesitations and desires.

Even though the exercise gave interesting results, I have the impression that the Kuleshov effect is not transportable (in the current form) to theatre; at one point the theatre actress has to "take on" the action, that is to

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<sup>42</sup> Or maybe it shows that the audience is eager to see emotions on the stage.

<sup>43</sup> Here I would like to mention the result of some experiments I have done in a "laboratorium" in the USA. We were exploring abstract movements and "behavior" style. The task was to read a letter informing about terrible news. On one side of the room an actor was reading the terrible letter in a "realistic" style, (what we called "behavior" style) and on the other side the actor was expressing the terrible discovery with abstract movements. I noticed that when an emotion is supporting the movement, the movement is not anymore "abstract". The audience doesn't see strange and meaningless actions, but a strong emotion finds its way out. The emotion justified all kinds of movements, because the audience was not looking at the movement itself but at the expression of the emotion through the movement.

say to make a relation, a connection with the phrase, to insufflate it with a personal intention. It is only then that the action from a cold and abstract execution of movements becomes an expressive and touching scene. In this situation, similar physical impulses created different intentions and thus stories. The stories may not follow a linear logic, the combinations may be closer to the world of dreams with unconscious associations, but the actor finds an internal logic that holds the phrase.<sup>44</sup>

What can we deduce from these results? The fifth session (and part of the sixth session) showed clearly that the gaze is essential to the mimed space (of the illusion) or with the mimed object. This connection creates a reaction in the body that qualifies the kind of relationship (desire, fear, etc.). What is important then is not the illusion itself but the relationship established by the actor. Sessions one to four confirm this argument. The second part of session six showed how a physical modification is able to influence the psyche of the actor. And session seven illustrated how a sequence of actions can from a cold execution of them, become a story that a character is living. In the physical partition there was a moment where the actor let himself be influenced by what the body proposed and could establish a relationship with the physical partition. In this light, I have to disagree with Mamet's idea. I think that illusion is not happening in the heads of the spectators, but must be generated on the stage. The actor has to establish a relationship with the space, with the mimed objects, and with the actions.

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<sup>44</sup> It would have been interesting to test the different phrase in different settings. Does the third phrase generate a different meaning if it is performed in a jail or in a jewelry shop? If the second phrase is performed in a grave yard or in front of a naked woman? And what about the first one, does it change if it is a woman or a man performing it? And what about music? Can music influence the phrase, generating different impressions? Or does music influence the mood of the audience but not the type of illusion?

I have the intention to pursue this research with a project that I am developing with Teatteri Naamio ja Höyhen. The project; *Take Out Ophelia*, is an itinerant performance/experiment featuring a tragic chorus in unexpected places. The project is a derivative of the *Ofeliakone* performance and it places the physical chorus outside the usual theatrical context. It reuses and remodels material from *Ofeliakone*, and thus explores the spectrum of different meanings depending on the surrounding.



At the beginning I was wondering when illusion happens, and whether it is possible to master it. Quickly the body became the kernel of the problem. It has been possible to demonstrate how the actor can generate and control illusions. It is important to underline that it is the relationship the actor creates with the illusory space or mimed objects that brings the illusion to life, and it is the transformation of the protagonist (the actor) provoked by the illusion that draws the attention of the audience. Through the magnitude of the protagonist's transformation the audience understands the importance of the illusion. For instance, a minor event will provoke a small reaction while a major one will perturb the protagonist deeply. In both examples, we are more concerned by what the protagonist feels. Let me describe another exercise that depicts clearly this last concept. I got the idea for this exercise by observing in the street a woman with a dog, both were immobile and both were looking intensely in the same direction. At one point, from the end of the street, someone appeared, probably the person they were waiting for. The woman remained still, poised, the whole body attracted by this presence, while the dog started moving, wagging its tail, barking, showing happiness. Would it be possible to have the same dynamic where the protagonist is frozen by such a big emotion that it is another character that shows it? A kind of transfer of emotion? We staged the following situation: a person enters with a letter<sup>45</sup>. The person enters while reading the first page of the letter which creates an emotion (any emotion). When he/she reaches the bottom of the page there is a "but" and on the other side the letter tells something else that modifies the first emotion. Then the character leaves the stage with this new emotion. Here we discovered that at the end it is not important what is written in the letter but the emotions that it provokes on the reader. Then we modified the situation by introducing a second character on the stage. Again the reader enters with the

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<sup>45</sup> The letter is either a blank page or invisible. What is written on the letter is not important. In fact, we discovered that the letter is less important than what happens to the character; the transition from one emotion to another one. Of course, these are considerations related to these exercises. In a more complex dramaturgy, the content of the letter increases in value.

letter associated with a first emotion and then when he/she turns the page, the shock of the other information is so strong that the character immediately freezes dropping the letter. While the first character is still frozen, the second character intervenes and curious to know what could have been written on the letter, he/she reads it. At that point we have the transfer of emotion: the second character, while reading, feels/shows the emotion that froze the first one. Gradually we have a second transfer of emotion: the first character comes back to life and the second one “gives” to him/her the emotion back. The emotion is provoked and carried by the letter, when the second character gives back the letter he/she gives back the emotion that the letter provoked as well. Then the first character leaves the stage with the new emotion and the second character stays. At this point we had a surprising discovery. The focus traveled from the first character entering with the letter to the second one when he was reading the letter, and then back again to the first one. But at the end, the attention went to the second character who was left alone on the stage to express something. For a short period he was under a strong emotion that had nothing to do with his life (it was the letter of the other character), so when he came back to his own normality (meaning the normal life of the character), this normality had another value, he could look at his normal life with a new perspective. Either realizing that at last his life is not so bad or on the contrary that nothing happens in his life, and so on. Through the illusion of the letter, not only could the character express another’s feelings, but ponder about his life as well. The first character was governed by destiny (the letter), while the second one was more like a spectator experiencing the life of the first one (and through this empathy he could consider his own life).

Coming back to the main concern; can the actor rule the illusion? In several situations, yes, but as we could see in other circumstances the illusion “modifies” the actor, for physical modifications of the body attitude influence the psyche (and the actor feels the transformation from inside). Nevertheless, in both cases, the actor tunes himself consciously or unconsciously with the process of the illusion. Even in the phrase, the physical partition, it was

necessary to close the gap between a random sequence of actions and motivation (a kind of story or fiction). When the actor was able to find the key that could bind him to the movements, the sequence of actions went from an abstract combination to an organic story.

Another element that propelled this research is the reason for illusion. The need to justify illusion wasn't the starting point but it became a crucial factor. In sessions one to four we saw that the staged illusion was interesting not for itself, but because of the transformation that it could bestow on the protagonist. The protagonist starts the scene with a specific mood or status and through the development of the scene, a fictional situation based on the mechanism of illusion (a metaphoric version of the quest of the hero), the protagonist ends with a new mood or status.<sup>46</sup> This last argument is the theme developed in the last chapter.

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<sup>46</sup> We had a similar experience of an illusion allowing the discovery of something else. During the study and exploration of illusion, we developed a series of exercises, and situations that ended up defining the characters and building the structure of the show. The work of transition from one space to another generated a show divided into three planes: the space where the play was happening, a hospital room; the space of memory, the character's recall; and the divine space, the place of dead spirits. The Kuleshov exercises coupled with masks delineated the characters' motivations. I asked the actor to repeat the phrase wearing the expressive masks used for the show; in one situation a character was evolving in concrete space in front of us with concrete actions. In another the scene went to the psychological level, expressing hidden memories, and in the last, the scene became mystical.

**Chapter 5**  
**transformation as truth**



Pablo Picasso, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, detail, 1907.

The play *L'oiseau bleu*, by Maeterlink (written in 1909), is a good example of a lure helping to understand the truth. Two little children decide to catch a blue bird, which is supposed to have magic powers and thus could heal a sick girl. The blue bird can reveal the great secret of the world and the secret of happiness: the person who catches it will know everything and will see everything. Before the two children go on their quest, a witch gives them a diamond to facilitate their expedition. The diamond can tear down the veil of

appearances and show the truth of things. In their mission, they visit six symbolic places: The Land of Memory, the Palace of the Night, The Forest, The Graveyard, The Garden of Happiness and the Kingdom of Future. And in the different places they visit, they see the bird and catch it. But immediately after the capture, a delusion follows: the blue bird of Memory became black, the one of Future became red, those of the Night die, and the one of the Forest flew away. The children start thinking that the blue bird doesn't exist at all. However, in the last scene, the blue bird appears where they never thought it could be: in their own house. So the children can now save the sick girl, but again the elusive blue bird flies away. Nevertheless, the promise of happiness and revelation of the world's secret that the blue bird carries is fulfilled little by little. With the help of the diamond, they see behind the veil of appearances, they see the soul of the things. The blue bird promised an immediate knowledge, but through the quest of it, through different adventures, the two children reach what they were looking for: convinced that it was necessary to catch the bird to obtain happiness, they undergo strong experiences that change their existences. The blue bird was a lure, but at the end they see their house, their parents, and the world in general in a different way: they learn to appreciate the richness of their lives and the love of their parents. The essence of the revelation's process is then a modification of the gaze, and the lesson of the blue bird consists in becoming aware of how to look at the world. The central question regarding this blue bird becomes secondary. Does the blue bird really have magic powers? At the end, this question doesn't concern us anymore; the transformation is the most crucial element. The quest of the bird (of a lure, of an illusion) is necessary to permit the transformation of the protagonists. The blue bird could be compared to a trickster god. A trickster god aims to disorient humans, but not to let them wander in the darkness, but in order to always remind them not to be fixed with the visible but to look behind the stitches of the apparent reality. For instance: a trickster god walks on the border dividing two villages. The god walks in such a way that the inhabitants of each village can see only one part

of the face, and one face of the god is red and the other one is blue. When the god goes away, inhabitants of one village start claiming that the god was red while the others claim it was blue. And they start fighting, and even killing each other. The purpose of the divine visit was not to engender a war, but to make visible a threshold. The landscape is defined by boundaries, which are threshold inhabited by trickster gods. If the humans see only the boundary, they will be unable to see behind the borders, but if they see a threshold (instead of a boundary), they may have the chance to cross it and undergo a transformation. Not only is the landscape sprinkled with thresholds, but even a society or a human life as well is made of thresholds.<sup>47</sup> In the *Blue Bird*, the two children visit several mythical places, and unconsciously they cross thresholds that provide them with the possibility to undergo a transformation.

I would like to introduce a last example to support the importance of transformation; The *Commedia dell'Arte*. According to some theories, *Commedia dell'Arte* is the theatrical transposition of an old ritual: the trial of Winter. At the end of Winter, a puppet made out of wood was built; a puppet that embodied Winter. Then the villagers accused Mr. Winter (the puppet) as being responsible for all the bad fortune of the past year; a symbolic trial was then organized where Mr. Winter was accused by the villagers and where someone would take his defense. Finally Mr. Winter was condemned and burned; through this ritual the villagers beseeched the renewal of life and fertility. *Commedia*

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<sup>47</sup> “The marginal/liminal landscape discussed by Barbara Babcock-Abrahams and Victor Turner is a gray, uncertain area, a point of connection and transition between specifics of culture and myth. It begins as a boundary, a line or region that simultaneously marks intersection and separation. When the boundary is crossed, or opportunities are offered for its crossing--as in the discovery and negotiation of a pass over a range of mountains--it becomes a threshold. Further examination reveals that every threshold is bound to a matrix of subordinate thresholds, all of which not only exist as closed systems but interact in infinite combination, from the broad, mythic limen that joins the cosmos and the world of the People to the most subtle transition in culture or individual thought. A society that moves from a hunting and gathering to an agricultural way of life, for example, experiences a complex interaction of thresholds that range from the larger transitions in technology, ritual, mythology, and art to the reaction of a single member of that society to the introduction of a new tool or mythological motif.” From *Trickster: Shaman of the Liminal*, by Larry Ellis

dell'Arte works on a similar level: two young lovers want to get married but someone forbids it, usually the father of one of the lovers who has other plans for his child. The young lovers represent the renewal of life, they are fertile and can procreate, while the father and whoever else precludes the marriage represent winter. They represent winter not because they are against the marriage, but because they are archetypes each representing a sin<sup>48</sup>. In the classical structure the father is Pantalone, the old, powerful, greedy character. Others that can be his accomplices are: Dottore, a pedant and ignorant scholar and Capitano, a braggant and cowardly soldier. These sinful characters are then in opposition to the lovers, who bring life and are therefore virtuous. The lovers are ready to change, to assume a new status, in other words, to undergo a transformation, while the opponents are blocked by their fears and will do anything to stop the transformation.<sup>49</sup> It is subsequently a fight between death and life; the third and last act is usually the trial of the sinful characters where they must abdicate and allow life to go on.

We can infer, therefore, that it is not the phenomenon of illusion in itself that is interesting but what illusion can provide. The phenomenon of illusion finds its apogee when it facilitates the transformation of a protagonist. At that moment, the audience focuses on the metamorphosis and forgets the process of bringing the metamorphosis on the stage through the illusion.<sup>50</sup> The world of shadows (reusing the expression of *L'illusion Comique*), of sounds and visions, is brought to life in an art form such as theatre despite human corporal

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<sup>48</sup> The term sin should be understood as something that disrupts the normal course of the life cycle.

<sup>49</sup> Henri Bergson demonstrated in his book *Le Rire* that society is always in movement and obliged to adapt itself to changes, so people must also have this flexibility of adaptation, of transformation. This is why all elements that show physical stiffness or mental stiffness are source of laughter. Stiffness or mental rigidity prevents adaptation and obliges the person to repeat mechanically the same action and behavior. The audience then laughs and sees in the "rigidity" the possibility of their own destruction, should they fail to adapt.

<sup>50</sup> A good actor is one who is able to make the audience forget him/her while emphasizing (or blending with) the performed illusion. I want to add, a good illusion is one that disappears leaving only the transformation visible. Theatre is a process of transparency that unveils the inner dynamic of life.

limitations and the necessity of working with material forms. In fact, these figures and manifestations don't emerge in art just for themselves or for their own fleeting images; they aim to satisfy more elevate spiritual interests, since from the depth of consciousness they are able to evoke in the spirit a sound and an echo.<sup>51</sup> In this way the sensory in art is spiritualized, since the spiritual appears in it.

Let us invert, the question: can transformation exist without illusion? A prosaic answer could be that if Hamlet were to die for real on stage this would mean that we would need a new actor to play the role. Since at the beginning of each performance the actor has to start again, it is necessary that radical transformations, such as marriage or death, have to be simulated.<sup>52</sup>

Maybe we can find a more complete answer by investigating performances that eliminate illusion. Let us examine *Messiah Game* by Felix Ruckert.<sup>53</sup> The show, through a free interpretation of scenes from the New Testament, explores sexuality, eroticism, violence and power. Felix Ruckert is not interested in simulation but in the concrete experience of eroticism and violence. This becomes even more poignant when the audience understands that it is not just a game and that the performers are truly living what is happening on the stage; towards the end of the show some performers volunteer (or at least it seems so) to be whipped. During this scene, at any moment the performer is free to stop or to continue, until the moment when the pain is sublimated into dance. Does the action really experienced on the stage have a stronger or deeper impact on the audience than a simulated action? In the case of an action really done, the action itself becomes the focus

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<sup>51</sup> Since Antiquity mimesis has signified a representation that incarnates and imitates the reality. However, at the origin the word mimesis is “mimesthai”, meaning “to represent through dance” and not “to imitate”.

<sup>52</sup> I keep the discussion of illusion on an abstract and somehow extreme level. It would be interesting to examine as well all the intermediary levels, when the actor is pretending to be in another place, but as himself. And then as another person, and then with other emotions, and so on.

<sup>53</sup> Felix Ruckert, German choreographer who does not shy away from extreme solutions when examining taboos, boundaries and conventions. His controversial dance pieces focus on sexual desire, power struggles and submission.



of interest. In the case of *Messiah Game*, the reason why a dancer is whipped is not questioned. The attention converges on the action of whipping, on the pain and on watching her ability to endure the pain. During the whole show, there was no explanation or exploration on the reasons of relations such as dominant/dominated, or on sadomasochistic relationships, or on the need for erotic games. If we consider Medea killing her children, the play doesn't stress the actual action of killing (moreover the children are killed offstage) it evaluates the causes that oblige Medea to do this horrible action. The "everything real" takes away the question of what causes generated the performed action, and the audience can only have a gut reaction to what is on the stage. If Medea really kills the children on the stage, or if Hamlet dies for real on the stage, those actions would be so strong and unbearable that they would overcome all the others. All the questioning, the dilemmas, the journey of thought would be annihilated by the horrific action. By using illusion to distract the attention, thinking and appreciation of the transformation is allowed.

Violent rituals, such as a sacrifice, are supposed to calm and channel the aggressiveness of the group, clan or society. The scapegoat draws all the rage of the people who then, appeased, can continue to live together. The ritual doesn't contest or analyze the origin of the violence<sup>54</sup>, but it identifies an object, such as an animal, a weak person or a king, on which the violence is discharged. The act of sacrifice consolidates the collectivity, it doesn't put into question the reasons of violence, but it pacifies the souls<sup>55</sup>. The action of sacrifice is so strong that it takes over everything. By removing the act of

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<sup>54</sup> Violence has to be intended as negative feelings that can lead to the destruction of the group, clan or society.

<sup>55</sup> It implies that in humans there is a negative energy that is always present and that needs to be channeled somehow, otherwise it becomes destructive. These negative energy, or violence, increases by itself until it reaches a moment of apex where a sacrifice is necessary (otherwise the society can be destroyed). For further reading: *La violence et le sacré* by R.Girard.

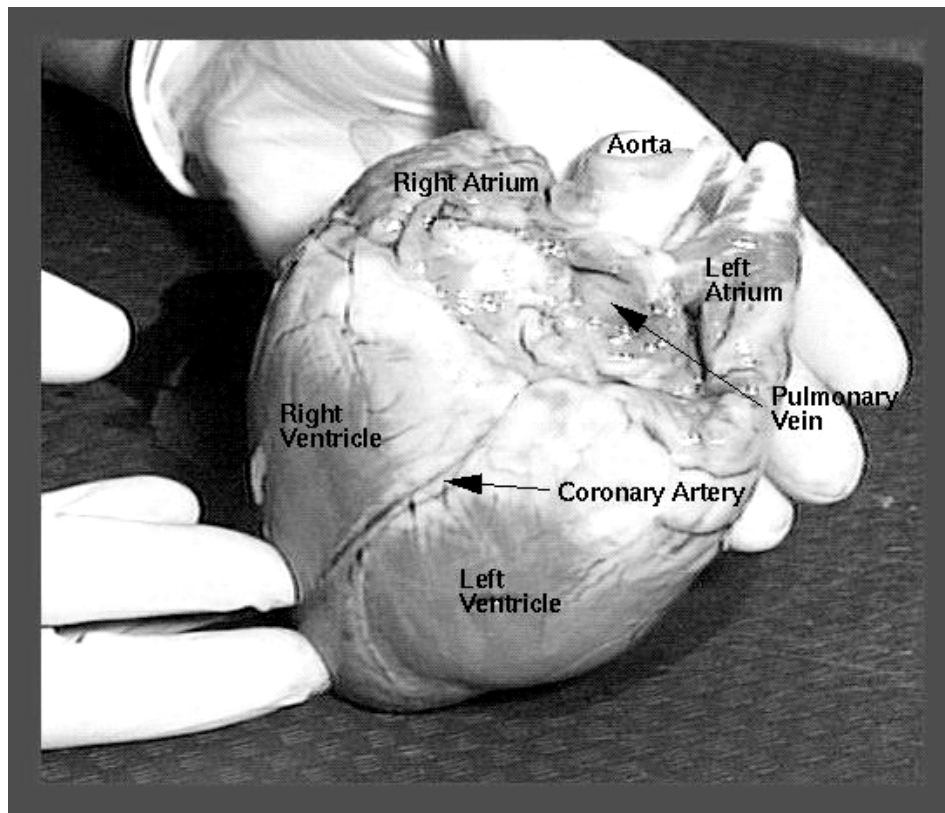
sacrifice with the subterfuge of illusion, theatre<sup>56</sup> can question the reasons and consequences of such acts. Illusion is a strong tool for examination.

Illusion is then not only a ruse to present a transformation or a trick to allow the actor to repeat the same action each night, but it is also a stratagem that allows reflection, as if omitting the crucial point were a better way to see it. Let's go back to the question presented at the beginning: is it good to lie? Maybe the use of the word lie is excessive but surely illusion helps to show the wound hidden behind the stitches, to stage the hidden dynamics of life. It's the same as in the cartoon where, in front of a palisade, children wishing to play behind the palisade draw a human on the fence. This human became alive and, since he was an invention of the imagination, he could do whatever he wanted. So he drew a door on the palisade and opened it, creating a real passage in the palisade and letting the children go through it.

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<sup>56</sup> Here lies a huge difference between theatre and ritual, for ritual tends to bind and conserve while theatre wants to question society (although it can also bind a community as does a ritual).

**Appendix**  
**Illusion and contemporary implications**  
**(possible development of this research)**



dissection of a pig heart, 1995

This investigation was limited to the field of theatre with a particular accent on the actor's work. But this tension between illusion and reality is present all the time in our contemporary Western society. We are surrounded by objects that are massively reproduced by mechanical devices. They are the reproductions of the reproductions of something of which we probably don't

know the origin, and we probably don't know either where the original is, when it was created and for what occasion. As Baudrillard pointed out, it is difficult to distinguish the real from the simulacrum ever since the latter took over in our every day life. Furthermore, the invasion of images produced by media such as television and the Internet are putting on the same level all types of information, news, fictional stories, violence and mutilated bodies, blurring the distinction between them. The spectators confined in their apartments with their receptors of images, passively watch a tempest of realities that are supposed to happen somewhere. The appearance of services proposing simulated experiences that produce, according to the advertisements, a stronger sensation than the real experience, are reproductions overcasting the originals, illusions more enviable than reality. Theatre has left the stage and "theatricalized" life: fashion, art exhibitions, media, music, television, films, politics. The postmodern theorists in consonance, with deconstructivists, and post-colonial writers, are defending the inconsistency of reality, its fragmentation, saying that everything is moving and thus reality can be reduced to mere language. A new version of the baroque *theatrum mundi* is presented. This is why theatre people reversed the assumption of theatre as a place of falsehood and consider it now as a place of resistance against our technology and culture of simulation. It is a place where feelings, phenomenological thoughts, lived experience and death are faced.

The increasing presence of virtuality in industrial societies signals the inability to recognize illusion from reality. The virtual world offers the sentiment of escape from daily obligations and so provides the illusion of living a more intense life, closer to the "real me", that finally, since it is possible to concretize the inner desires that every day life stifles, is real. Moreover the media, putting on the same level news with fiction, participates in this confusion. In this view, society can slip back into the baroque vision of the *theatrum mundi*. Nevertheless, even if in the panorama of contemporary performances we can observe a similar phenomenon of fusion among art

disciplines as in the baroque period, the relation towards illusion is completely different. In the baroque theatre there is no escape from illusion and thus it is necessary to live with it. Theatre of that time took delight in inventing mirror games where illusions were multiplied.<sup>57</sup> But from the apotheosis of illusion, of the baroque period, we went to the contemporary attitude of “refusal to act”. For instance the play *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Müller is composed of four monologues and a short dialogue, stressing the rebellion of the oppressed body against what the Western and patriarchal power have done to it. It is “de-dramatized” in the sense that there is no action in the usual sense (a linear evolution of a story), but not only this: there is also no character in the usual sense as well. At one point in the script a stage direction says: *the actor of Hamlet puts on makeup and costume*. A traditional stage direction would have been: Hamlet puts on makeup and costume. What is the difference? It is not the character Hamlet who puts on something, but the actor. Does this mean that the actor is no longer embodying Hamlet? But he is still acting on stage. Does it mean that the actor is breaking the illusion of the play? But the text does not evoke any kind of illusion, in the sense of being in another space and in another time. And we can even wonder if the actor could ever embody the character Hamlet, since the first sentence of the play is: *I was Hamlet*. Is he really Hamlet, or the dead spirit of Hamlet or the actor (who embodied Hamlet)? This allows us to say that in the contemporary theatre there is a tendency to flee from illusion, to refuse to pretend. Theatre aims to be the space of experiences really lived; the actor shouldn’t act anymore, but live truthfully in experiences and the emotions.

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<sup>57</sup> See the analysis of *L’Illusion Comique*, chapter 1.

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