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Polyphonic Characterisation in Bernard-Marie Koltès's *Night Just Before the Forests*: An Exploration of Michael Chekhov's Feeling of Form.

In 2018, I directed a theatre production of *Night Just Before the Forests* by the pathbreaking French playwright Bernard-Marie Koltès (1948-1989).¹ I did two versions: the first was with graduating students of the BA Acting (Collaborative and Devised Theatre) programme at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London, followed by a production with a multinational cast for the Macau Arts Festival in China in May 2018.² I approached the text as a sound composition; the show was led by the sound design and its dramaturgy.

This work forms part of a broader consideration of character that I'm developing, called polyphonic characterisation. The basic idea is that the complex, conflicting parts of a personality or character might be more effectively conveyed if they are dispersed across several performers rather than represented and portrayed by one actor. In one of my earlier productions of *Othello*, I explored the character of Iago with multiple actors to convey the ever changing face of Iago, who presents one face in public and quite another in private. I approached the character as a type of seething organism whose psychological manipulation and excess cannot be contained in just one body.

This exploration is rooted in Michael Chekhov's principle of a feeling of form and proposes that we consider character in an expanded way. If Chekhov was little interested in naturalism and encouraged his students to seek bold, expressive theatrical forms, my work on polyphonic characterisation is in line with this impulse. *Night Just Before the Forests* is a total engagement with Chekhov's ideas on form where questions of formal composition and scenographic design drove the creative process and production.

I'll discuss here three aspects of the production: character, musical composition as well as live sound and staging.

1. Character

¹ The play was originally written in French, published in 1977. I wrote a new translation into English for this production.

² For photographs and films of the two productions, see www.sineadrushe.co.uk.

The playwright Bernard-Marie Koltès is widely recognised to be one of the most significant post-war avant garde European playwrights and *Night Just Before the Forests* is one of his early plays written in 1977, in the aftermath of the Nicaraguan war and the rise of the far-right in France. It's a one-person play written as a stream-of-consciousness appeal to an uncertain audience, delivered by an isolated young man in a hostile city; he has no name, he's not clearly identified, he's a misfit, a delinquent, on the run.

It's implied in the text that the character is a foreigner, an Arab, an immigrant, and there's no doubt that Koltès is exploring political relations between French and Arab cultures, in particular the exploitation and oppression of Maghrébin immigrants from Algeria and Morocco. What I wanted to do here was to de-essentialise the voice of the protagonist without losing a sense of the violent postcolonial history that resonates in the play. The key experience of an immigrant is the sense of being marginalised, dislocated, not belonging, unable to settle down or put down roots, unstable, restless. And this reverberates in the tone of the play. The character is searching for a way somehow to be himself, because he doesn't have the luxury of being able to rely on a stable, pre-established identity. For Koltès a character, like a place or a country, is not a point of departure but a construct or result; it's a role that's assumed and is always up for grabs or able to be contested. 'The whole of an individual', he wrote in a letter a few years before *Night*, is 'constituted by different "forces" which confront each other [...], a force coming from above weighed down upon a force coming from the ground, the character fighting between the two.'³

I believe that this fighting, shifting, insecure experience is commonplace for many immigrants in political situations all over the world, now more than ever, and so I thought *Night* is best read as a dramatisation of a more general human condition, and is best served if we avoid the easy complicity we'd get if it was played by a single actor with a clearly specified Arab identity. As a result, I cast the play with five actors of different genders and nationalities/ethnicities – refracting the monologue into a polyphonic work for five performers – in the hope of telling a more universal story.

This is justified when we follow the progression of the text. The opening of *Night* seems quite definite, demarcated by violence, prostitution, poverty, sexual vulnerability, and so on, but over the course of the play both the character and his situation become progressively decontextualised and less circumscribed. The voice that emerges is one that

³ Koltès Bernard-Marie, 'Lettre à Hubert Gignoux', 7 April 1970, Koltès 2009, pp.114-116.

could belong to almost anyone, a universal protest, an admission of vulnerability, a cry for help.

2. Musical composition: Bach fugue

The play is really one whole thought, over sixty pages, with no full stops. It's a stream of consciousness, and although it is spoken aloud, it's possible that in fact, it's only inside his head; it's never completely clear. Koltès said he wrote the play 'like a Bach fugue, where the themes are first presented and then inverted.'⁴ So I began to really think about what a fugue was – it's the development of the simplest musical idea by a specific number of voices that imitate each other. An idea or theme or subject is introduced, it is answered by a second voice which reproduces the subject but transposes it – either with exact transposition or slightly altered tonally. There may be two, three, or four voices, each one either introducing a new theme or offering another answer. After all the subjects and answers are introduced by various voices, the fugue experiments with them all in a variety of ways, called counterpoint. In counterpoint, we have a variety of techniques: canon, augmentation, diminution, inversion, stretto. Canon is when different voices play the same music starting at different times so that they overlap; augmentation happens when the subject repeats in slower notes; diminution repeats the subject in quicker notes; with inversion, the subject is turned on its head; in stretto, the subject entries are squeezed together so they overlap.

I did not examine the text looking exactly for these contrapuntal techniques, but I was guided by its rules; above all, what was important is that a fugue is not linear and it doesn't lead to a resolution. Instead it's an exploration of an increasingly dense and complex space created through variations of its motifs. Things begin to stack up and layer on top of each other rather than progress. Many of the themes which appear all through the play are laid out in a sprawling rush in the play's opening lines: encounters, idiots, the rain, a corner of the street, running, wet hair and clothes, mirrors, the need for a room for the night:

You were turning the corner of the street when I saw you, it's raining, we don't look our best when it rains on our hair and our clothes, but still I took the risk, and now that we're here, I don't want to look at myself, I should dry off, go back down below and tidy myself up – my hair at least so I don't catch something, ok so, I went down earlier to see if I could tidy myself up, but down below there are idiots who park up down there: the whole time I'm drying my hair they don't move, they stay as a pack, they lurk behind me, biding their time, so I came back up – just

⁴ Koltès 2001, CD.

the time needed to take a piss – with my wet clothes, I'll stay like this, until I'm in a room: as soon as we're set up somewhere, I'll take everything off, that's why I'm looking for a room, because at home, impossible, I can't go back there – not for the whole night mind you – that's why you, when you were turning the corner of the street over there, when I saw you, I ran, I was thinking: nothing easier than finding a room for the night, a part of the night, if you really want to, if you dare to ask, in spite of my wet clothes and hair, in spite of the rain that limits my options if I look at myself in a mirror – but it's difficult not to look at yourself, even if you don't want to, there are so many mirrors round here that you've got to put them behind you.⁵

As the play progresses, further motifs emerge: beer, whores, comrades, cold earth and cemeteries, grass, rats, doves shot at in the forest, a girl called 'mama'. Each of these themes returns in recurring variations throughout; they accumulate and reverberate without ever resolving.

So I set out to stage the play as a fugue for five parts or voices. I began to think of this as a 'stereophonic' articulation of character where the first person singular can be split into distinct component strands, that come together and split apart. And because the monologue is the unfolding of a restless, troubled mental state, where thoughts come hurtling in one on top of the other, I was searching for a way to stage this formally, almost literally: I wanted to stage a mentality or a mental state, rather than represent a fictional character in person, physically and naturalistically. And in this text, I realised that it is the musical rhythm of the text that conveys the emotional state of the character – rather like the way in Shakespeare's plays, the verse and iambic pentameter carries the drama (incidentally, Koltès loved Shakespeare and wrote a translation into French of *A Winter's Tale*⁶); the crescendos, the diminuendos, the repetitions, the reprises, the going round in circles, the return to the same points, in other words, the text's dynamic and contrapuntal *form* creates the emotional intensity. Rather than search for the character in the usual ways that actors and directors do – psychologically – I explored the musicality and composition of the text to see if the character could emerge from that. My aim was to de-psychologise the methodology in order to better find the psychology. I wanted to evoke the character's psychological precariousness in the room in an expanded, spatial dynamic rather than localised in the body of one actor. In this sense, I am expanding Chekhov's notion of the 'imaginary body' where the body of the

⁵ The excerpts are my own unpublished translations. You can read a version of the same scene in English in the published version of the play in Koltès 2004, p.3.

⁶ Koltès's translation was published in 1988.

character is imagined and evoked in the theatre space *between* the actual bodies of the actors, rather than inhabited or ‘sited’ in any one of them.⁷

From one of my first readings, I heard the beginning of the play as a quiet solo aria, and the end almost symphonic, although the whole piece is more chamber-like than orchestral. In the end, the character’s emotional intensity is matched by a rhythmic accumulation of all the motifs in the play that come crashing on top of each other:

I say to myself: ok, I get up, I leg it along the corridor, I leap up the stairs, I exit the underground, and outside I run, I still dream of beer, I run, of beer, beer, I say to myself: what a fucking mess, opera tunes, women, cold earth, the girl in the nightdress, whores and cemeteries, and I run, I can no longer feel anything, I look for something like grass in the middle of this mess, doves fly away above the forest and soldiers shoot at them, the buskers beg, the well-dressed thugs hunt baby rats, I run, I run, I run, I dream of the secret shared song of the Arabs, comrades, I find you and I grab your arm, I so want a room and I'm all wet, mama, mama, mama, don't say anything, don't move, I'm looking at you, I love you, comrade, comrade, I looked for someone who might be like an angel in the middle of this fucking mess, and you are there, I love you, and the rest, beer, beer, and I still don't know how to tell you, what a mess, what a fucking mess, comrade, and then still the rain, the rain, the rain, the rain.⁸

Prior to this final climax, which was played by a single actor, the character recounts an experience of being mugged in the underground and this was played across the whole ensemble quintet. Here is how we broke down that section of the play:

A: ok don't be idiots, you give me back my money, we'll go for a drink, we'll talk about it over a drink and sort it out together,
B: they keep looking at each other as if they didn't understand, and then, bit by bit, looking at each other, they come to some kind of agreement, they start to speak, louder and louder, so that everyone can hear them, still not looking at me:
C: what does that guy want?
D: is he looking for trouble or what?
C: who is this guy?
E: why is he such a pain?
B: they push me towards the door:
C: we'll throw this queer off at the next station and smash his face in –
B: so, I say to them,
A: ok you give me back my money, right, and we'll leave it at that,
B: but they say:
C: queer, just you wait, and we'll smash your face in –

⁷ Chekhov’s tool of imaginary body involves the actor visualising the character’s physical body in detail and incorporating this image into their own body. The actor inhabits this imagined body which is different from their own body. He also refers to this process as ‘imitating the image’.

⁸ For a different translation of the same scene, see Koltès 2004, p.26.

B: no-one reacts, no-one believes the stuff about the money, everyone believes the stuff about the queer, and I'm thrown off at the next station without anyone lifting a finger, and when they've finished smashing my face in like the last of the queers, they take off with my money

E: (even though I'm yelling and no one believes me),

B: and, I don't move right away:

D: above all, mate, don't get worked up, sit down on the bench, don't move, stay there –

[D makes a painful sound into the mic and it is caught live in a long reverberation that resounds underneath the rest of the scene]

B: and in front of me I see, I am sure that I see:

C: a girl in a nightdress, long hair down her back,

B: she passes in front of me

A: with her fists clenched

C: in her white nightdress,

B: and right in front of me,

E: her face distorts,

A: she starts to wail,

B: and continues along to the end of the platform,

C: her hair all tangled,

A: her fists like that,

C: and her nightdress,

E: well, all of a sudden, me

A: I've had it up to the teeth,

E: this time that's it, I can no longer hold back,

A: I've had it up to the teeth,

A: with this whole world, with everyone with his little story in his little corner, with all their faces, I've had it up to the teeth with all of them and I want to lash out, the lady up there hanging onto the rail, I want to hit her, and the Arab who is singing to himself his thing for himself alone, I want to hit him, the busker making a racket behind me, at the far end of the corridor, the old crackpot opposite,

[The long reverberation continues quietly underneath the text, now with the following additional sounds made live by the actors on mic: E breathes, C sniffs and snuffles, B sings an Arab song and D cries]

E: I've had it up to the teeth with them and all this mess, with the girl in the nightdress at the other end of the station who's still wailing, and well, I'm going to lash out, I want to punch, mate, old women, Arabs, scroungers, tiled walls, train carriages, ticket inspectors, police, punch ticket machines, posters, lights, this bloody smell, this bloody noise, I think of the litres of beer that I had already drunk, and that I would have drunk again, until my stomach bursts, I kept sitting there with this desire to lash out, mate, until everything finishes, until everything stops –

[reverberation and ensemble noises stop dead]

E: and then, all of a sudden, everything stops for good: the trains stop running, the Arab is silent, the lady above stops breathing, and you can no longer hear the girl in the nightdress sniffing,

everything stops suddenly, except the music at the far end, and the old crackpot who has opened her mouth and starts singing in the most unbelievable

Ensemble: unbelievable

E: voice, the busker at the far end makes a racket playing the same, out of sight, and she sings the same, they answer and go together as if they had rehearsed it, unbelievable

Ensemble: unbelievable

E: music, (something from opera or some shit like that), but so strong, so together, that everything really stopped.⁹

In order to make decisions about how to divide the text among all five actors, we took a range of approaches: sometimes we tried to follow the motifs and map those through with one voice as if they were instruments in an orchestra. At other times we made choices according to where we felt a shift in tonality, rhythm or atmosphere or what we might call musical ‘key’. In this sense, we worked explicitly with Chekhov’s tool of objective atmosphere. We came to think of the text itself as a piece of music to be played rather than a play to be acted, or a character to be portrayed. The actors’ scripts became scores and I wanted these to be aesthetic artefacts in themselves, visible to the audience on stage, and from which the actors occasionally read [fig.1].

In Macau, we experimented with different languages spoken by the cast – Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean and English – all of which have a different character, alphabet and aesthetic. The paper the scores were printed upon was water-marked, as an echo of the rain [fig. 2]. As part of the set design, we suspended one over-sized section of the text from the grid, and at a climactic moment in the play, all the actors read from it [fig. 3, 3A]. We made the metaphor of chamber orchestra/actor as musician explicit. The actors had music stands with their text scores placed on them; when speaking, they spoke off-book directly to the audience; when they weren’t performing, they followed the text, like musicians might [fig. 4].

In my preparation for the production, I had been inspired by a classical music concert by Quatuor Zaïde, an all-female string quartet at Wigmore Hall, London. In the first two pieces by Mozart and Haydn¹⁰ the musicians struck some of the familiar poses of classical musicians: exchanged smiles, raised torsos, the joy of being carried away by the music together. The atmosphere was polite, restrained, pleasant. The second half was String Quartet no.5 by Bela Bartók. The music was so dramatic, discordant and so physically demanding and vigorous that the musicians became totally embodied, as if rooted to the ground. In a Chekhovian sense, it was if the musicians shifted from the upward direction in space to the

⁹ For a different translation of the same scene, see Koltès 2004, pp.24-25.

¹⁰ The concert was on 27 March 2016. The programme was Mozart String Quartet in C K157, Haydn String Quartet in F, Op. 50 No. 5 ‘The Dream’ and Bartók String Quartet No. 5.

downward direction, from the thinking centre to the will centre. It seemed as if they only had the capacity to concentrate on getting their fingers round the notes. Parts of their bow strings started to come off, their hair started to fly about. In the first half of the concert, the audience sat back, lulled into an admiring sense of beauty; in the Bartók piece, the audience became highly alert. I wanted to see actors engage and ‘play’ with a text in a similar way. This concert helped me appreciate the full range of dynamics: loud and softs were extreme, they used pizzicato, bounced the bow on the strings, played with the wooden part of the bow, employed harmonics, the mute, high vibrato and then purposefully no vibrato at all. I, too, wanted to access the same amount of extensive range.

3. Staging: live sound and space

One of my aims was to take this idea of the text as a composition to its full conclusion. I didn’t want to represent this man in the street in the rain. I wanted to evoke him ‘symphonically’: as an energy, a psychology, a presence, a voice of many parts, a psyche, not so much seen or watched, as heard, felt, experienced.

In this way, the image of the chamber orchestra came to shape the aesthetic of the piece and our scenography overall. We designated five ‘stations’, to mirror the five actors; each station had a chair, music-stand and a script-score. We also worked with the idea of immersion in the round, that the character was everywhere in the room and nowhere: a mobile voice that never settled. The play is a one-on-one conversation, the character directly addressing one person, so I wished to avoid the audience sitting as one mass or ‘block’. The audience needed to be exposed in the encounter, so we placed them on isolated seats all around the theatre, facing in different directions. This configuration speaks to the mirror motif in the play as well as echoing something of the forest mentioned in the title of the play, which is the forest of Nicaragua. In this layout, the actors were physically very close to spectators, brushing past them, almost touching them; they worked with talking very specifically to one audience member at a time, picking people out, identifying them and trying to make a particular connection with them, never scanning them as a group [fig. 5].

On a very practical level, in this surround landscape the actors needed to work with microphones so that they could be heard as they moved through the space in all different directions. In addition to that, working with mics felt important because *Night's* protagonist sometimes speaks in a terribly intimate or confessional voice.

At one point in our rehearsals, I had thought that the most logical conclusion of this proposition would mean in fact that the performers never moved at all; they should all sit or stand behind a desk with scripts and microphones and ‘play’ the text in that way, just like musicians. The actors were excited about that idea and keen to try it, but we were too far into the rehearsal process to make such a dramatic change in configuration. I also realised that the 360 degree surround, immersive side of the work was essential because it destroyed the usual frontal relationship we have to performance. This is what would serve best the evocation of a person’s inner world rather than an end-on, staging of a fiction.

Another important aim was to encourage the audience to relax about and eventually let go of trying to look at the performers, to stop trying to see everything, to listen simply and feel the swell of this internal voice wash over them. I wanted them to have the experience of dropping inside the character’s head and drown into the chaos and jumble of his thoughts alongside him. Working with live amplified sound felt the best way to create interiority and a psychological rather than a realistic landscape.

As a result, the sound concept was devised in collaboration with German sound designer Niels Lanz who worked with the choreographer William Forsythe for twenty-five years on his live sound production.¹¹ Niels’s idea was to work with headset mics on the actors, plus some condenser and dynamic mics at the stations. He created what he called a quadraphonic system of speakers in the air, and some on the floor [fig. 6].

The text has no scenes, so we divided it text into twenty-four movements or chunks, according to where we felt a shift. We gave each movement a title and, as mentioned above, determined an objective atmosphere for each. In addition, we worked with an effects machine (Eventide Orville signal processor), determining a particular effect for each movement. The language of the play is a mix of the poetic and the vernacular – again almost Shakespearean – so the effects helped lift us into surreal and extreme terrain. We tried never to repeat an effect, unless we wanted to emphasize the repetition. Our guiding rule was that everything was live.

Niels and I devised a set of guidelines:

- Each movement should have a guiding idea or principle.
- Each movement should offer something different in terms of sound, dynamics, configuration in space across the stages.

¹¹ www.nielslanz.de

- Each movement should have a specific directionality in the speaker system – sometimes travelling around the surround, sometimes full surround, sometimes in one speaker only, or two.
- Not every actor has to perform in every movement (although they will always be seen in the space).
- A movement can be played across several stages.
- One actor can speak the text of the character while the other actors might also perform the 'sounds' of other characters or places mentioned in the movement, as a soundscape.
- Allow for as much dynamic and dramatic change as possible while still keeping a sense of the rhythmical flow of the text: the text never stops.

The sound effects we worked with were varied in nature. There is an implication that the character is gay, and in one moment of the play he tries to emphasize his strength, his masculinity, aligning himself with his father, rather than the apparent weakness of his mother. Here, a female performer played this part of the text – already problematising his sexuality – and her voice was filtered through a pitch shifter, making her sound ‘male’.

At times, we created an atmosphere or soundscape live, a memory space where the sounds of the girl ‘mama’ evoked both bad and good thoughts in him. Here, one actor recounted the story while a female performer evoked the laughter, whispers, seductions of the ‘mama’ character, her voice filtered through a simple delay. We also played with the same effect sometimes going through different mics.

In addition, we created atmosphere through live ‘foleying’. One actor evoked a sound of the metro by blowing into the mic which was captured live and then looped and played back immediately. At another moment, an actor crushed pieces of paper to evoke the scrunching leaves when the character fantasizes about being in a forest [fig. 7]. This particular sound was played through the speakers on the floor under the seats of the audience. For the opening of the play, using the paper of their script-scores and their own bodies – the materials of our design – the actors created the rain, one of the major motifs of the play. Here, we captured a live loop of the foleying rain and played that back immediately to create a double layer of live action and real time recording.

When we were exploring the rain, we struggled with the fact that our rain didn’t really sound exactly like ‘real’ rain, until we realised that it didn’t need to; it needed to evoke a building tension above all. We realised that our world was an explicit theatrical world and once rain was mentioned in the text, and our captured loop was reprised later, then the

audience would understand. Indeed, the rain in the text is a metaphor for tears or sorrow, for oppression, for drowning, for outside elements that we cannot control. The actual rain sound at the top of the play needed to set up a kind of trembling, destabilising, unsettling atmosphere that suggests someone is about to explode.

Of course, sometimes we used no effect and worked instead with the human dynamics of the actors' voices and what the specific combination of voices was: solo, duet, trio, quartet, quintet. Through these configurations, we tried to express the specific psychological emphasis or trait in a specific movement. Sometimes we played simply with a chorus, where various parts of the character were in synchronicity, rare moments where the character experienced some clarity or certainty.

Conclusion

In creating this sonic, contrapuntal performance across as full and diverse a vocal plane as possible, I hoped to evoke something of the psychological instability of the protagonist and to suggest that a stable, fixed identity is a luxury this character cannot afford. By exploding traditional notions of character, embodiment and representation, I'm positing that in reality characters and people are complex and resist unilateral specification. We're made up of multiple, jostling parts and facets rather than a coherent unified whole.

In my production of *Night*, I'm not throwing out the idea of character altogether, but simply proposing that a polyphonic approach to character better conveys the restless yearning and disorientation of the immigrant's plight; this character is a chorus of fragmented parts that wrestle and resonate with each other in harmony and dissonance.

My practice as a director is rooted in Michael Chekhov's principles. The expansive, polyphonic approach to characterisation that I explore in *Night* is inspired by Chekhov's own experimental, interdisciplinary approach to theatre-making. Here, I foreground the question of form, and by placing it at the heart of my dramaturgy, scenography and methodology, I hope to offer a more expressive and playful understanding of character psychology.

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