The Third Body

In a scene in the recent premiere of the performance piece Bi ne bi (Would Would Not, actor Marko Mandić “accidentally” quoted me. I turned to my neighbour and jokingly said: “He’ll see what it means to publically quote a critic…” Well, promises are made to be kept!

The quotation was from the text “To Catch an Actor” and, in fact, was well-chosen since in the scene, Mandić speaks precisely about how to catch an actor and goes even further: how indeed to catch Marko Mandić. It has to do with the well-known (though still exciting) relationship between existence and the role, between the human “base” and the actor’s “superstructure”. Mandić illustrates the problem with his on-stage onanism. Then he candidly discusses his (failed) experience both in connection with the intimate business itself and in connection with the stage and his theatrical performance, and why he tackled this “hand job” in public at all (albeit partially hidden by a screen). Despite the fact that we attribute to all actors the quality of narcissism, a quality that is best released during public performance, it appears that some pleasures are best reserved for other situations. An activity as intimate as self-gratification has nothing to do with the pleasure taken in mastery or control; it has nothing to with the increased attention that the actor receives in his place on the stage, the focused scene as it were; it has nothing to do with the exploitation of an a priori position of power that is the result of exhibition in this highly viewed and examined space. Rather, it has everything to do with contact with the self, with what we termed above as “existence” or the human “base”.

As Mandić teaches us in his performance, physical comfort as an initiator of subsequent “spiritual” appeasement cannot be mastered in the same way as manipulative pleasure arising from primal narcissism. We won’t examine this closely as it would bring us too deeply into the field of “physiology”. Instead, it would be more interesting to examine what Mandić shows us: that the problem on stage is not to find a role, that is a variation on desire in which the actor’s controlled distance (from the self) is reflected; but instead the problem on the stage is for the actor to find a connection with the self. In both traditional and contemporary theatrical performances, it is not difficult for an actor to be a performer representing him or herself. What is a difficult is to simply be the self. Is it no wonder then that the recognition that emerged from the actor’s failure to reach a climax in front of an audience ended with the literal statement: “It is hard to be Marko Mandić!”

If we have gotten completely used to our role as audience member, then we might say that the failure of the actor in this situation does not interest us. But the failed encounter with the self is a legitimate theme of contemporary performance practice. Not to split hairs: but what else but this reflection is expressed, for example, in many of Hamlet’s speeches? But the consequence of the failure of the actor is also the absence of audience enjoyment (this unfortunately was true of the performance discussed here). What is much more productive – at least from the perspective of the audience – is the manifestation of a dynamic, or the conflicting tension between two poles, between the existential and the functional, the existential human base and the superstructure or the transcendence of a character or a role; first exhibition and then resolution that can give literal “birth” to a third original category. In other words, the actors presents to the
audience his “third body”, which is neither himself or his role, but instead a self that is permeated with theatrical existence, a creature in contact with the audience which is sometimes more than the self alone but also sometimes less than both the self alone and the role. Because the actor’s performance is something that is his alone and he encounters something that comes out of the role alone, as well as something that springs from the combination of the two, the actor is more a creative witness than a mere reproducer of texts.

And what is this “third body” of Marko Mandić like? True, it is elusive. I do not know why, but it always makes me think of the paradox of the tortoise and Achilles. First, there is something of substance in him, like a vehicle or a medium, that is always ready, mobile, eager to take on for us (and for himself) the ballast of the role. It seems that in his case there is a constant conflict between the physical base and the corpus (the body) of the role, a struggle between the self and alienation, between awareness of the instant and the urgency of a path that is receding into the unknown. Not fear, not at all, more constant courage, though the gravity of the actor is also preserved on the stage; no metamorphosis, no external transformation, but a completely present manifestation of the fateful struggle against death, the painful awareness of the drama of life, and at the same time of submission. That sounds like a criticism, but it is not: this submission is not a priori and is never final. It is a submission that passes into the structure, into the “flesh”, or more precisely into the voice.

This submission is the reverse side of the struggle; it is a shield that, like a menacing threat, adheres to the actor’s body and protects it against defeat. Above all, what Mandić brings to the stage is ceaseless sincerity (in the sense of being stripped bare) and vulnerability (in the sense of being wounded), and precisely this is his new “third” way. He doesn’t calculate, he doesn’t manipulate: it is born of the confrontation with his own physical predisposition and the type of role he is given. In this way, the Mandić stage phenomenon ceaselessly vacillates between various spaces and times: at times it stagnates on the periphery; at times it is anchored in the core of the space itself and determines the axis; at times it slowly emerges from the womb, from the era of childish reassurance (and rapture); and, at times Mandić is almost as if without skin, an endless aperture defending everything that exists and everything that the role and the stage present.