Against Illustration: Falling Bodies – Seen and Unseen

Prof Richard Gough

In Pieter Breughel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (origin and attribution now disputed but the ‘original’ painted in 1560’s, exhibited in the Musse des Beaux Arts, Brussels), one has to look carefully to see Icarus. The painting appears to be of the (then contemporary) Netherlands landscape, coast, sea and distant town; the sun is setting and in the foreground a farmer is plowing (oblivious to any event), in the centre a shepherd surrounded by his sheep looks up to the empty sky and then finally one sees, close to a fisherman busy at shore, two legs flaying in the sea - the micro second before disappearance, almost comical and seemingly disproportionate to the sailing ship nearby; a fall to earth, a dive of calamitous proportion, the death of Icarus who dared to fly to close to the sun.

A micro second later the scene would have appeared ‘pure’ landscape/seascape, Icarus drowned, still falling, unseen, beneath the water, life and labour continuing regardless…

More obvious, dare one say, ‘conventional’ paintings illustrate the myth thus:

Breughel might even have painted this, or this, or this but he chose this moment, this micro second, the moment before this and this and then this:

In the poem Musse des Beaux Artes W H Auden writes of how the Old Masters depicted suffering amidst everyday life and how banality continued: ‘dogs go on with their doggy life’ – in the shift to ekphrasis he expounds:

*~~[In Breughel's Icarus, for instance]:~~ how everything turns away*

*Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may*

*Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,*

*But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone*

*As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green*

*Water, ~~and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen~~*

*~~Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,~~*

*~~Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on~~.*

This single image painted five centuries ago seems to me to capture all the possibilities for the dramaturge in the contemporary theatre on a de-centred stage, where events are purposely and efficaciously positioned off-stage, offside, sub-score: where the imagination of the audience is engaged through devious and tangential strategies, where illustration is avoided and the world is made image (not word). Where historical time is collapsed (classical myth set in contemporary landscape); the spectacular is staged within the everyday, the miraculous ruptures the mundane.

But in seeing Icarus drown I think also of his father, Daedalus (no doubt still flying, more cautious in his trajectory, not seen in this painting), the master craftsman the builder of the labyrinth - but first the builder of a dancing ground for Ariadne: through Daedalus I reconsider the work of the dramaturge: Daedalus – doing ‘clever work’, a work of craft and precision, invention and mischief, and the dramaturge’s role as labyrinth maker.

I wish to explore the creative strategies of the dramaturge detached from the word - beyond text, off script; the dramaturge not as an extension of literary advisor (with extended responsibilities and sensibilities) but as a maker of theatre with a visual poetics, a counterpoint to illustration, an organizer, a co-creator, a compositor of complexity - a constructor of labyrinths for the imagination of the spectator.

I see the traditional dramaturge himself/herself at a moment of *anagnorisis*  (anag nore is sees)– becoming suddenly aware of the reality of the situation in a changed landscape of performance. In classical dramatic poetics, *anagnorisis* is the moment in the plot at which the character recognizes his or her true identity or discovers the true nature of the situation. Within an expanded field of theatre I imagine the conventional dramaturge’s fear of *anagnorisis* and the new dramaturge’s delight in the alternative possibilities in role and function, still reinventing itself in a theatre no longer dominated by the word and the dramatists text now needing to operate in an aphasic mode.

Almost 40 years ago Eugenio Barba said to me – about my early work in Cardiff Laboratory Theatre: ‘you are brilliant excavators but poor engineers: you delve wonderfully into your minds and bodies but create weak structures for the imagination of the spectator’. As a nineteen year old, naively making experimental theatre that was non-narrative, visually and musically driven, and purposefully illiterate *and* as a son of an engineer, I was somewhat dismayed by this judgment and struggled to understand what he meant. On return to Wales I asked my father about the work of a structural engineer, he spoke of bridges and tunnels, connecting one land mass to another, of strength and yet elasticity: I thought of deviant trajectories, short cuts, juxtaposition, the rupturing of old, well-trodden pathways, routes and roads, the intervention of new connective tissue, the potential velocity in connectivity.

In relation to theatre, only later did I understand the need for subversive structure: dramaturgy as a form of bridge building or tunnel excavating, a linking of sections in unpredictable ways – mutating, adapting, betraying. Creating routes through material beneath foundations, in subterranean conduits, channels and canals, and in the air (in the imagination) above material through suspension bridges, viaducts and gravity defying arches. Dramaturgy as the generation of infrastructure and inter-structure, the craftsmanship of the engineer combined with the spatial and temporal vision of the architect.

In the new expanded field of theatre the role of the dramaturge is to organize complexity, not to reduce, simplify or diminish complexity, rather to enhance the complexion of complexity. To establish networks and a matrix of meaning within the web of the performance for the imaginings of the spectator – to lace threads through the fabric of the performance, in the weft and weave, like channels of irrigation, canals and aqueducts, subterranean streams, to nurture the interstices between modes and operandi, to attend to and care for the inter, evoked, proffered and promised in the inter-medial, in the inter-cultural, through the inter-weaving by the inter-disciplinary; to integrate without reduction by means of imbrication and interlayering; through intertwining.

Punchdrunk are one of several British theatre companies who have pioneered and advanced the form of ‘immersive’ theatre, where the individual spectator becomes participant/explorer by determining their own route through a super-saturated performance environment (a complete scenographic and performative world, inhabited, peopled and haunted).

Sometimes immersive work can be structured as a one to one encounter – your own bespoke, solo expedition through a labyrinth - meeting figures, performers, characters in bewildering succession, often disturbing, certainly disorientating, another world, no need to suspend disbelief, as reality itself has been abandoned, rather one needs to give up all hope, to enter, to surrender and be taken on a journey. Inhabiting installations, performance chambers and scenographicaly rich compartments, one constructs a necklace of performance experiences where you the journeyman, the traveller are the central protagonist; faced with choices in route and destination, you shape direction, in sequence and outcome, you make choices along the way (with unknown, unforeseen dramaturgical consequence), these are seemingly random, opportunist, serendipitous but inevitably pre-destined and foretold.

The Colombian director Enrique Vargas and his company, originally from Bogotá, Teatro de los Sentidos (Theatre of the Senses) were early exponents of this rapidly emerging form. Their production *Ariadne’s Thread* toured the world in the early 1990s and consisted of a highly elaborate, complex and pitch dark labyrinth, with an individual audience member entering every five minutes and embarking on their solo journey, which depending on choices, routes taken and actions made, might last between 60 and 90 minutes. Thirty performers inhabited and animated the labyrinth and although well aware of the presence of numerous figures and shadowy figments, and the hands of many guides, misguides and tormentors, only 3 or 4 characters would be directly encountered. Vargas explored the five senses throughout all his work and especially wished to undermine the privileging of sight, of the ocular of the visual, this extraordinary production explored the olfactory an the connections between smell and memory, on this journey one had to follow ones nose.

It was like being led blindfold around the souk here in Tangiers, having to trust ones guide, taken through delightful sweet smelling districts of the souk, then through back alleys into abattoirs with the stench of offal, blood and death, then through dark passages into the spice market, across to the herbalist with oil of argon gently massaged to forehead, then body measured and bundled into a box first the smell of leather or old books and then realizing you are being laid out on a slab with a mountain of ice in the fish market with strange companions and in an auction whose language you cannot understand.

In *Ariadne’s Thread* you encountered smells of delight and disgust and took a journey to reach the Minotaur at the heart of Daedalus’ labyrinth – Daedalus the master craftsmen, the engineer, proto dramaturge. This one-to-one immersive theatre with clear pathways and navigational routes had a strong dramaturgical structure, although not in any traditional sense of dramaturgy.

The UK based company Punch-drunk have had great success with several productions since *Masque of the Red Death*, and most recently *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (taking inspiration from Buchner’s Wozceck). *The Drowned Man* has now ran for 12 months, a three hour marathon occupying four stories of vast post office sorting depot next to Paddington, each level of the building being the size of a football pitch.

This is an installation of unprecedented scale and most significantly of exquisite detail; the scenographic vision lying behind this work and the generative motor of the company is profound and literally awesome. The conceit is that you are entering a film studio with numerous sets and workshops *and* you are also entering the town, the motel, the caravan park, the forest and the desert that lie on the outskirts of the film studio that surround and lend backdrop for the films. BUT the reality is that you can open envelopes containing love letters of the stars, that you can discover shards of information pasted on the back of a prop, that you can read the medical records of Woyzeck, rummage in the leading ladies wardrobe – generally immerse your self in this complete and total world where all the detail and detritus is assembled.

These are not painted sets nor hollow props they are real environments made more real (super-real) by the detail and abundance of objects that clutter them, thousand upon thousands of objects gathered over a year in preparation and meticulously positioned, each space emanating an identity that is manifest in its very material being – an investment of labour and artistic endeavor that is almost unimaginable. This is the signature aesthetic of Punchdrunk, this and the fact that all audience members have to wear a mask and thus become anonymous, neutral, uniform, a crowd, a brave explorer alone and occasionally a cluster, a small group shuffling together as a semi-cautious, semi-courageous expedition. In *The Drowned Man* you don’t enter individually but in groups of twenty or more, often split from your theatre-going partner you enter an industrial elevator and are expelled on to one of the four different floors and left free to wander. The sequence and thus the sense you might make of the experiences (and how, if you are familiar with it, you might connect to the already fractured texts of Buchner’s Woyzeck) rests entirely on the journey and the choices you make, only at the very end is the full company of 300 audience/participants gathered to witness the final sequence.

It is possible that each individual attendee might have constructed an entirely different, yet plausible narrative, constructing a sequence of meanings and a network of associations that is highly personal, subject to how curious, courageous and adventurous they were in their own expedition – here the audience member is not just co-participant but actually the licensed (surrogate?) dramaturge of the piece, the person charged with making sense of the components of linking and suturing, of imagining and inhabiting, given permission to curate, re-order and edit, speculate and fabricate the meanings and possible readings.

Curiously, however, I feel that in *The Drowned Man* the dramaturgy is weak (unlike in *Ariadne’s Thread*) – perhaps purposely so – so as to allow the individual audience member the possibility to inhabit this unoccupied space, this role and function. In one sense I was overwhelmed and the immersion was overwhelming, what if the burden of this labour is in itself too great, what if I want the dramaturgy to be done for me and for the immersion to be on the level of engaged protagonist purely in the imaginary world – even if comfortable ensconced in a chair the mind free to wander, to be ignited and enflamed within the imaginary. Punchdrunk’s work is, in my view, generated powerfully by a scenographic and choreographic vision not necessarily a dramaturgical one.

Once again to turn to Tangiers it is like wandering in the Medina, with no guide or map – a labyrinth once again, for the newcomer or tourist wholly disorientating, fascinating and exhilarating, especially if embarked alone. One gets lost, one passage seems to lead you back to a little square you visited moments ago, you come across a familiar lane, you see the barber, or the café once again, you witness the same old lady talking to her friend by the carts next to the fountain, you glimpse the sea, you see the shadows flickering on the wall as the ceiling fan casts the light through the shutters on the window, you walk the tiles you walked before, you recognize the pattern and the patina they lead you elsewhere this time, you are back by the Mosque; you desperately, urgently try to construct a map of this medina to grasp its geographical dimension but really you are totally lost within it, and the narratives you construct around it – you need a young child, who knows this square mile - this, their home, their habitus, to lead you out but most of all you need to find the young child within you - to surrender to the experience and make more fabulous the encounter… you need to find the playful, mischievous dramaturge lurking within.

But you also need the energy and stamina for the journey, the meanderings and repetition. Sometimes an intense distillation can be prepared for you making it more focused, more intimate, exquisite and beguiling. I turn now to the polar opposite of a super-real, densely populated, super-saturated Punchdrunk production to a performance that involved no actors, not a single spoken word and only five panoramic painted sets (although off stage, in the pit, a choir and orchestra). At the Volksbuhne in Berlin in February 2014 a new work premiered, lasting only 45 minutes, it comprised the revelation of five enormous painted canvas backdrops with additional creaky wooden sets and objects – scenery in a very traditional sense, something one imagines from the 1890’s or even earlier.

This was *Klang der Offenbarung des Gottlichen* [Gurtliche] – The Explosive Sounds of Divinity - described as a ‘theatre play’ by Ragnar Kjartansson (the Icelandic multi medium performance artist) with compositions by Kjartan Sveinsson (formerly of the ethereal-sounding Icelandic post-rock band Sigur Ros), performed by the German Film Orchestra Babelsberg and the Film Choir Berlin.

The Volksbuhne described the production as:

*A “super-romanticist” quest, a theatrical, dramatic and minimalist musical play in search of a long gone world to make new discoveries and maybe find beauty*; *paintings without narrative, symphonic majesty without aspirations, nothing but essences and sensations, a music production – a symphony with tableaux vivant’.*

The production was in part inspired by Sir Hubert van Herkomer’s 1890’s experiments in ‘pictorial music plays’ – again the Volksbuhne proclaims:

‘*It was von Herrkomer’s artistic vision to dissociate theatre from drama: ceremony replaces text and narration, and song takes over spoken word’*

This dissociation of theatre from drama has great resonance to alternative dramaturgies and a renewed role for dramaturge. *Klang der Offenbarung* was a play of sound and light (Inspired by the novel “World Light” by Iceland’s Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness), literally in the way the light shifted across and within the sets and a play of light and illumination in one’s own imagination, in the onlookers mind, contemplative in spirit; guided and soothed by the music it was a humble invitation to reflect on the miraculous outdoors, nature, wilderness, rugged terrain, ice and fire, night light and aurora, through tableaux vivant - indoors, on stage, so obviously constructed, mechanics abundantly apparent, so like a child’s Victorian toy theatre or a magic lantern show… wholly ‘unreal’, unpretentious and magnificently, convincingly so.

In this play without words, without a single actor on stage the dramaturgy was powerful functioning beyond set and scenery although dependent and cascading from the scenography.

The role of alternative dramaturgies is not confined to an operation within the real or the immersive tendencies of current theatre practice, nor within the complexities forged with new media and technology, nor in the inter-medial or postdramatic - it can be rediscovered, re-formed in the old technologies of theatre and in the traditional genres freed from the tyranny of the word.

And in conclusion and by deus ex machina I return Icarus to the sky - Icarus ascending - hoping that Dedaelus will be rejuvenated and his skills as an engineer as a builder of dancing grounds and labyrinths can be a sign and guide for alternative dramaturgies.

ENDS

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