

"The Theatre of Resonance"

CHOREA Theatre Association constitutes an awkward topic for a person trying to describe it from the standpoint of a companion critic or a theatre historian hunting for syntheses (and I have happened to be both in reference to CHOREA). They work so intensively that before you manage to watch one performance, they already present another. Moreover, they show their performances irregularly and in rather unexpected places and at unexpected times, and on top of that they keep surprising us with their artistic decisions and those relating to the repertoire, the boldness of their experiments and lack of inclination to remain even for a moment in one place that could be somehow defined, described and formulated. Writing about CHOREA is a constant approximation created with a sense of risk that before the text is ready, it is going to be largely out of date.

These 'grievances' are, of course, a tongue-in-cheek sort of praise. When CHOREA, the group whose core were artists associated for some time with Gardzienice and whose very name unambiguously reflects their ancient inspirations, was coming into existence, there was a fear that, with the Ancient Orchestra and Labyrinth Dances in its constellation, it would follow the path marked by the word 'reconstruction', which may carry certain essential values but also entails truly destructive consequences. When watching *Theseus in the Labyrinth*, my first 'Choreic' stage show (I stress the personal dimension of CHOREA's story since the only way I can tell it is as a story of my own meetings with the group), despite all the admiration I had for the beauty of the performance, I could not dispel similar doubts. A difficult financial situation of the group and lack of their own place did not bode well for undisturbed work. There was a risk that under the pressure of circumstances they would remain in a place that they know well and would not venture leaving the ruts.

On the other hand, the next performances I saw – *After the Birds* and *Bakkus* – came as a complete surprise. They also referred to the ancient times, music derived from antiquity, myths and texts, yet, there was not a trace of classicality in them. Possessing vast knowledge on ancient songs, having in their group instrumentalists and singers capable of performing them on a very high level, in their performances produced with Welsh Earthfall Tomasz Rodowicz in a way broke the works brought from Gardzienice and well known from the records already published at that time. What was left from songs and dances straightening out (perhaps even too much) the labyrinth paths were only fragments, ruins, transformed echoes slashed by the big-city noise, actions of people subdued to the rhythm of the metropolis. One could get the impression that CHOREA, while propagating the ancient triad, was at the same time running away from everything it makes bold use of dissonance, noise, amalgamates and sequences, it gives voice to the emptiness, it dances the lack.

The tension between harmony and an idealised vision of the ancient triad and the choreic practice of Rodowicz and his friends may be perceived as analogical to the tension between wonder and resonance described by Stephen J. Greenblatt. As opposed to wonder, or the force thanks to which certain objects 'convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, evoke an exalted attention', as Stephen J. Greenblatt writes in his *Resonance and Wonder*, resonance is directed beyond the work, into the world that it was created by

and towards the 'dynamic cultural forces' of which maybe even their creators were not aware, but which gave their creations the effectiveness that goes beyond temporary relevance.

Greenblatt made this distinction in a text describing museums and museum works, which obviously means that it requires certain reinterpretations when transferring it onto theatre. However, using this analogy seems particularly promising in the case of such theatres as CHOREA. Comments to the work on Gardzienice's *Metamorphoses* emphasised the use of metaphors of dancing images immobilized on ancient vases as well as hearing the music written in stone. To a great extent, this effort was made by precisely these artists who formed the core of Chorea after leaving Gardzienice. The whole work of the Labyrinth Dances and Ancient Orchestra was, after all, meant to restore the power of resonance to the remains of ancient culture exposed to the wonder of specialists, and make them resound in the contemporary times. Referring to scholarly commentaries for this purpose was not enough, even though they were studied and the assistance of their authors was used. The only effective way of evoking resonance could lead through the body and sound, movement and music (hence, the co-operation of Rodowicz with dance theatre groups seems so obvious).

In CHOREA's work, almost from the very beginning (perhaps with the exception of dancing shows), one could easily see an almost involuntary fear of everything that could change resonance back into wonder, make the regained incarnated vibration of ancient music become a museum exhibit inspiring not much more than nostalgia for the old times, when the Hellenists were able to heal the soul with music and dancing. In *After the Birds*, one could still come across this nostalgic tone, but the later direction of CHOREA's work is different: it is not aimed at reviving the sound of works that are heard of no more, but at evoking (also with their help) resonance in the contemporary ones.

This shift from the old which inspires wonder towards the contemporary resonance is of particular importance in the context of the choreic triad. Most previous attempts at restoring it fell into the trap of idealisation: if *choreia* was considered an ideal relation between arts, between the 'body' and 'soul', between singularity and multitude, between the man and the cosmos etc., then the aesthetics of its subsequent realisations almost inevitably became permeated with the eagerness to inspire wonder. This is how the aspiration of Renaissance scholars and composers to revive chorea gave rise to the opera, a theatre genre which is probably most prone to the mechanisms of wonder and musealisation. CHOREA's creators were from the start, as it seems to me, aware of that risk (perhaps it is the result of the experience of pushing Gardzienice into a museum niche and degrading them to the position of those who 'sing nicely'?). As a result, CHOREA developed its own version of unity in multitude, which did not refer to 'somewhere and sometime' but located the ancient in a truly contemporary world. The choreic character of the Rodowicz' group is postmodernist: it does not take offence at the multitude of media, means and tools, it does not juxtapose music and body with technology, it does not create another version of 'poor theatre', but boldly, and even cheerfully, takes advantage of opportunities offered by technology and perception skills developed under its influence. As a result, CHOREA's performances are complex and thickened environments, nets in which both actors and viewers are caught. If the ideal of ancient chorea was a comprehensive activity, then the Rodowicz' group does not renounce this ideal but complements it in a

truly contemporary way, seeking comprehensiveness which is required by the man of the early twenty first century immersed in world wide webs of mediatised connections.

Seeking contemporary resonance, CHOREA does not resign from a multitude of cultural references, including those to contemporary pop culture (usually cursed from the 'ethno-infected theatre'). More and more trivial 'ethnic' and 'original' vibes, also in music and movement (i.e. in what appeared to decide about the Rodowicz group's identity from the very beginning of its independence), were replaced with a modern language of numerous tones, surprising with the changeability of images, poses, scales and traditions. CHOREA does not seem to point in any way which of these 'traditions' is better. In search of the ways of vibrating the viewer/listener, it looks for the most effective tools and does not mind the ancient song receding into the background in the presence of a ballad croaked à la Tom Waits, a jazz improvisation or a rock phrase.

Furthermore, and in my view most importantly, the contemporary triad of CHOREA does not aspire to comprehensiveness, completeness, finiteness and perfection which in the West are traditionally associated with 'highbrow art'. Many a time, I have come across accusations that in terms of artistic craft Rodowicz group's performances are somewhat poor. The word 'poor' is not accidental here: it comes from the language of the artist that seems (at least so far) more important for CHOREA than Jerzy Grotowski, which may sound like a historical paradox, (after all, it was Grotowski who biographically influenced Rodowicz). This artist is, of course, Tadeusz Kantor, whose performances were said to be in a way imperfect, unfinished, incomplete. This feature is difficult to capture, and it is even more difficult to name it precisely, as one can be always suspected of the intention to give meaning to powerlessness, to appreciate scarcity. However, something else is crucial here: Rodowicz and his collaborators appear to me as people who consistently escape from becoming an object of wonder and, as a result form one of the most uncompromising theatre groups in Poland. I would say that their radicalism lies precisely in the stubborn negation and more and more precise destruction of everything that could become a source of wonder directed at the work itself. CHOREA consistently creates the art of resonance, which in this perspective could be seen as the opposite of 'fine arts', as we traditionally understand them.

Dariusz Kosiński