

**9303-SIG**

**THE SIGNIFICATIVE  
POTENTIAL OF MUSIC  
IN THE THEATRE:  
*towards a new concept  
of signification***

**dissertation  
by  
Zachàr  
Laskewicz**

# The Significant Potential

LANGUAGE

TEXT

MUSIC

THEATRE

## of Music in the Theatre

*Zachar Laskewicz*

### Chapter 1.

“We are discovering that stage space need not be spatial but that sound can be a stage and music can be a dramatic event and scenery can be text.<sup>1</sup>”

— Jindrich Honzl

In order to demonstrate the scope of this paper, it is first important to pose a number of questions relating to the areas that will be explored:

What is theatre?

Can theatre communicate?

What is text?

Is text language?

Can text communicate?

Does theatre have to communicate through text?

What is music?

Is music a language?

Is music text?

Can we communicate through music?

Can we discover this communicative form in the theatre?

Is music theatre?

The questions are broad and perhaps unanswerable, certainly now in the beginning of our explorations. The intention here, however, is to demonstrate the breadth of field that one must undertake in order to be able to consider these entities side-by-side, as forces that have the possibility of communicating through one another. My intention in this paper is to find points of connection between text, music and theatre; more particularly to explore the significant potential of ‘music’ in the theatre, and these questions have been

---

<sup>1</sup> Jindrich Honzl, “Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre,” *Semiotics of Art* (MIT Press 1976).

asked merely to set the stage for the sort of areas I will be discussing. By examining various attitudes to these terms that have existed through history, I will demonstrate contrasting ways in which the terms can be rethought, contrasting particularly with Western logocentric notions of text and communication, and music as an ‘abstract’ communicative form. The ultimate purpose is to create a new communicative system that involves the use of fundamental points of union between text, movement and music in the theatre.

It is first important to determine the relationship between music and language, to determine first if music can signify, if it has the potential to transfer meaning. To what extent is music a language, what radically distinguishes it from verbal language? According to Kristeva the similarities between the two systems are considerable. Verbal language and music are both realized by utilising the same receptive organs. They both have writing systems that indicate their entities and their relations. But while the two signifying systems are organised according to the principle of the difference of their components (particularly sound differences), the fundamental function of verbal language is the communicative function, and while it transmits a meaning, music is a departure from the principle of communication. It does transmit a ‘message’ between a subject and an addressee, but it is hard to say that it communicates a precise meaning. In fact, according to Stravinsky music is “powerless to express anything at all: A feeling, an attitude, a psychological state, a phenomenon of nature.”<sup>2</sup> Discussing the notion of ‘musical communication’ is certainly problematic, considering the degree to which it is based on cultural conventions. In Western culture we define music as an ‘abstract’ communicative form, one that knows no form outside itself. It is my personal contention however that this attitude is unique to Western formal music based on conventions inherited from the classical era. In this paper we will hopefully extend the notion of music considerably by analysing attitudes to music in other cultures. Before opening the argument into too many arenas, I would like to point out that according to older (in fact ancient) theoretical attitudes, music was never meant to be abstract and was used freely in combination with other mediums as a means of expression and communication. This discussion, particularly collision between Western and Eastern thought, will form the basis for this paper.

In Western culture, music is seen as the antithesis of literary forms involving the use of language, and this certainly includes theatre. According to Roland Barthes this notion of ‘antithesis’ is a privileged figure of our culture, a notion that “regulates our whole morality of discourse,”<sup>3</sup> being clearly demonstrated by our tendency to make certain distinctions, ‘art’ and ‘life’ being the first in an

---

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Language: The Unknown* (Columbia University Press 1989): 22 - Semiotics.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, “A Lesson in Writing”, *Image, Music, Text* (Fontana London 1977).

almost unending list: ‘intelligence’ and ‘creativity’, ‘artist’ and ‘layman’, ‘music’ and ‘literature’ even ‘good’ and ‘evil’. A clear distinction certainly exists between notions of ‘composition’ in music and in the theatre. However, I would like to point out that creation in the theatre is not nearly so different to musical composition as is generally considered. According to Elizabeth Burns, drama is in fact not a mirror of action: “It is a composition.” Dramatists ‘compose’ words, gestures and deeds to form a play.<sup>4</sup> Traditional drama, then, is not in fact a glimpse of real life situations, it is ‘composed’ behaviour that is set before an audience according to a set of strictly determined cultural constraints. This is a strong point of connection between musical and theatrical communication in Western culture. It is my contention that the compositional possibilities in the theatre go far beyond the representation of interaction between recognisable human entities. Antonin Artaud himself was questioning these notions more than seventy years ago: When discussing the difficulty of character definition and narration of logical thought through a language of gestures, postures, dance and music, he asked, “but whoever said theatre was made to define a character, to resolve conflicts of a human, emotional order, of a present-day, psychological nature...”<sup>5</sup>

It is important now to make some theoretical distinctions about how it is possible to communicate in the theatre. As we will demonstrate, communicative possibilities are actually highly open, but depend largely on the ability of the present audience to understand the conventions involved. A ‘convention’ is simply a mutual understanding about the meaning of action, which includes gestures and speech. Such an agreement is clearly essential if people are to understand each other’s actions, gestures and words, and certainly extends inescapably into social life. We are however more aware of them in the theatre because of the presence of “composed behaviour”; it is when we suspect that behaviour is being composed according to a grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions that we regard it as theatrical.<sup>6</sup> The performance of all forms of music (whether it is part of a primitive African rite or a tie and tails classical performance) is also bounded by such conventions. These conventions are preserved and propagated through social education and culture.

In terms of semiotics, ‘theatre’ is taken to refer to the complex phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and the systems underlying

---

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality* (Harper and Row Publishers 1973): 4. Conventions of Performance.

<sup>5</sup> Antonin Artaud, “To André Gide”, *Artaud on Theatre*(ed.) Claude Schumacher (Methuen Drama London 1989): 4. The NRF Project

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality* (Harper and Row Publishers 1973): 4. Conventions of Performance.

it.<sup>7</sup> The transmitters of signification become the bodies and voices of the actors together with their accessories (costumes, properties, etc.), then elements of the set, electric lamps, musical instruments, tape recorders, film projectors, and so on. The signals transmitted by these bodies - movements, sounds, electrical impulses - are selected and arranged syntactically according to a wide range of signification systems and travel through any number of the physical channels available for human communication, from light and sound waves to olfactory and tactile means.<sup>8</sup> Possibilities for the adoption of different communicative forms in the theatre, as has been demonstrated, are great.

In any case, an important distinction that faces the researcher in theatre and drama, particularly semiotics, is that involved with the textual material: That produced in the theatre and that composed for the theatre. They will be from here on in referred to as the 'performance text' and the 'dramatic text' respectively. The dramatic text is the form in which dramatic performances are most commonly communicated in Western society; involving the use of text that is strictly demarcated to the meaning of the words, and sometimes (prevalent in absurdist drama) in the difficulty of making oneself understood through language. All other possibilities of performance are considered beyond the level of the author, and is labelled 'interpretation' by the directors and actors, who must grapple to interpret a series of strung together morphemes and present it as a cogent meaningful whole. Performances based on this rather amorphous interpretation of previously written text is certainly problematic. Artaud was perhaps one of the first theoreticians of the theatre who was to question the dominance of the dramatic text: He pointed out that "the power of words to create their own music according to the way they are pronounced" is "already a subordinate aspect to the dramatists and one to which he no longer pays attention in creating his plays."<sup>9</sup> The notion of the performance text, however, opens theatre up into the world of performances whose genesis grows not from such an incomplete medium as the dramatic text, but a myriad array of other forms. This method of analysis has surfaced a number of times in twentieth century thought, and is now considered a standard form in performance theory. For example, Otakar Zich, a writer in the Prague structuralist school, refused to grant automatic dominance to the written text, which takes its place in the system of systems making up the total dramatic representation.<sup>10</sup> According to Artaud, it was necessary to find a performance text that could adopt a number of different languages simultaneously:

---

<sup>7</sup> Keir Elam, *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (Routledge London 1980): 1. Preliminaries.

<sup>8</sup> Keir Elam, *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (Routledge London 1980): 3. Theatrical Communication.

<sup>9</sup> Antonin Artaud, "Mise en scene and Metaphysics" *Artaud on Theatre*: 5. The Theatre and its double.

<sup>10</sup> Kier Elam, *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, (Routledge London 1988): 2. Foundations.

“For me the question we are faced with is of allowing theatre to rediscover its true language, a spatial language, a language of gestures, a language of cries and onomatopoeia, an acoustic language, where all the objective elements will end up as either visual or aural signs, but which have as much intellectual weight and palpable meaning as the language of words. [...] And we must find a way of marking, like on a musical stave, with a notation of a new kind everything that will be composed.”<sup>11</sup>

It is clear then that the performance text opens communication into the realm of semiosis and away from the purely linguistic. Artaud, who dreamed of recording this performance in a new language “similar to musical notation” has demonstrated to us directly the possibility for the adoption of musical communication in the theatre. As already mentioned, notation is one similarity between music and language, and this opens the possibility for the exploration of the musical score as a performance text, where theatrical elements are freely adopted and notated in a musical form. In the composition of new music, a composer is free to design his own notation, or at least freer than a playwright who is restricted in the confines of the dramatic text. This questioning of the musical notation media has been an important element of my own work: When the composition is exploring a different element of music as a communicative form, it is exploring also language as music, and this has resulted in the invention of new types of notation that fragment the traditions of the strictly culturally determined media, the intention being to create an entirely new way of writing performance texts. This has been an important element in recent music-theatre pieces, and the compositions that have adopted Indonesian musical forms and instruments requiring an entirely new attitude to notation because of the contrasting nature of this music.

Unfortunately, because of the restricted nature of Western conventions, the complete possibilities of the performance text are not adopted in the theatre. Here every theatrical element has a more or less immutable place, allowing little scope for variation or violation of the strictly demarcated divisions. As a result the performance text is presented as an already produced and bounded object which the spectator observes, rather than constructs, from his permanent lookout point.<sup>12</sup> In the case of the theatre, the communicative forms involved function merely to reinforce the dramatic text; a gesture or a movement underlies or follows a vocalisation so that the meaning of the sentence is brought into dramatic life. This is equally, if not more true, for forms of Western music-theatre, particularly opera where the ‘libretto’ (the opera text) is realised in a theatrical sense for its meaning (always some kind of rolling narrative). What renders opera still more absurd is the distinction that exists between the

---

<sup>11</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre*: 4. The NRF Project.

<sup>12</sup> Kier Elam, *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (Routledge London 1988):3. Theatrical Communication.

‘librettist’ and the ‘composer’. The composition of the music is based on certain strict conventions that result in singing styles that simply cannot be understood and the adoption of abstract music forms that have mostly no connection with the subject matter.<sup>13</sup>

This is demonstrative of that Western tendency to make distinctions, resulting in many different artistic communities who are specialised in one particular skill. As such, we go to a music concert, the ballet, opera or even an exhibition of painting or sculpture in order to admire the skill of a particular artist. According to Eugenio Barba, this tendency in our culture to make these distinctions “reveals a profound wound, a void with no tradition, which continuously risks drawing the actor towards a denial of the body and the dancer towards virtuosity.” To an oriental performer, a distinction for example between dance and theatre seems absurd, as it would have seemed absurd to European performers in other historical periods, to a jester or a comedian from the sixteenth century, for example.<sup>14</sup>

To begin our historical perspective, we can go directly back to the Ancient Greeks, whose philosophical and scientific writings still play an important role in our societies and educational systems: We feel that we have inherited a great deal from their culture. This is certainly true of the theatre, and studies of the Ancient Greek dramatic texts and the existing theoretical works plays an important role in theatrical education. In truth, by example of our own theatrical traditions, we have no conception of how the Greeks saw their theatre, and in particular their attitude to music, which is certainly alien to that prevalent in Western musical culture. In ancient Greece, according to Harry Partch “the noblest purpose of music was to enhance drama.” Dramatists were frequently the composers of the music for their words. Consequently the modern scholar reading ancient drama gains only a fraction of the total result. To the Greeks the words are but part of a complex art form that weaves poetry, music, acting, and the dance into a profound moving unity.<sup>15</sup> Aristotle himself, in his theoretical works, relegates language to a subordinate position in the hierarchy of dramatic elements and insists on its subjugation, in particular, to action.<sup>16</sup> Western drama, however, bases its theatre on the realisation of previously written speech events (the dramatic text). Although we sometimes feel today that we have

---

<sup>13</sup> An obvious example is Verdi’s *Aida*, which is set in Ancient Egypt but expresses itself through the classical Italian opera form.

<sup>14</sup> Eugenio Barba, *The Secret Art of the Performer* (Routledge London 1991): Introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Partch (1901-1976) was an important American composer, instrument maker and performer specialising in music-theatre.

Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music* (Da Capo Press 1979): Chapter 1.

<sup>16</sup> Kier Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (Routledge London 1980): Dramatic Discourse.

inherited our traditions from the Ancient Greeks, the truth is that we refuse to believe that what they had is lost forever, and have inherited instead traditions growing from nostalgia for this loss.

The fragmented nature of feudal Medieval Europe supported a number of different performance traditions in addition to the theatre that had evolved from the church. Groups of performing artists travelled from kingdom to kingdom, singing, dancing, acting; performing theatre, telling stories, and singing songs. Distinction between different performance genres still certainly did not exist for these performers who were, however, largely outcasts of society. Even in the courts of the elite in society, however, it was expected that one would have the ability to write poetry, set it to music, and then be able to perform it, as well as being skilled in a number of other arts. These attitudes were most likely influential for the creation of more distinct theatre forms such as the ‘Commedia dell’Arte’, street theatre where the performers sang, danced and recited. The process of making performances was based on collective devising of the story, the text and movement composition, and concentrated on the contribution and the particular conventions of each character, of each mask. However the essential ingredients were dance and acrobatics, an ‘energetic language’ of action and movement. So the actor not only had to speak, sing and play at least one musical instrument, but also had to be a dancer and acrobat.<sup>17</sup> These performance forms that created no distinction between dance, circus and acting, forms where texts were freely declaimed musically or through pantomime, were totally standard. This was not to last, as will be demonstrated in the remaining part of this paper.

The Catholic church was to play an important role in the historical calendar for the development of language, music and theatre, a role that would largely involve power, domination and restriction reflected by the strict Catholic moral code. People that lived in the middle ages had a fundamental conception of melody as movement of the voice, and they had an understanding of a continuity between melody and speech, demonstrated by the practice of referring to the performance of the sacred chant as “speaking,” as well as “singing.”<sup>18</sup> This was to gradually change: According to Harry Partch, it is possible to ascribe the ‘independence’ of music to the beginning of the Christian era: “It became a language in itself” made up of ‘motives’, ‘subjects’, ‘phrases’, ‘questions’, ‘responses’, and ‘periods’, a language that for the first time had no meaning outside the musical form: From the early days in the history of the Western church, the chants were sung in Latin, a language that none but the learned clergy understood. This could be interpreted as a bid for power on the part of

---

<sup>17</sup> Nicola Savarese, “Nostalgia or the passion for a return”, *The Secret Art of the Performer*, (Routledge London 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Leo Treitler, “Reading and Singing: On the Genesis of Occidental music-writing” *Early Music History* 4.



the church, rather than an opportunity to communicate with the divine through music. The Christian era “sowed the seeds” which “choked out” the vitality of words, and the Christians heard only “praises to the only God, which they knew were praises to the only God, but which they heard in a ‘timeless’ language they did not understand, and so required no alert and intuitive attentiveness on their part— only simple passivity.”<sup>19</sup> The Mass therefore with its use of closed musical communication provided only one option: Devotion and quiet passivity.

What occurred, however, in the development of this music is particularly interesting, presenting a dual stream that is particularly significant for our discussion. In both cases, the tendency was to elaborate the music and the text, elaboration that became eventually intricately complicated. On the one hand, the musical element developed away from the text. This occurred over hundreds of years, and by the fourteenth century the melodies were so transformed that the texts had been totally abandoned. The music was adopted in both high and popular culture in various different forms. These forms were influential for the development of the music that we know today.

More interesting than what happened in the development of the music was what developed through the elaboration of the textual element. Possibly as a reaction against the dominance of a Latin text that had little communicative significance, texts became added to the chants. This process was known as ‘troping’, and as melody was not differentiated from the declamation of words, resulted also in melodic elaboration. Troping was in essence an elaboration of the chant melody which would result in the disproportionate lengthening of a single note, and the insertion of another text/melody which could in effect comment upon the original chant. The ninth century saw the introduction of ‘dramatic tropes’. These tropes had originated a century earlier as standard musical embellishments of the liturgy, sung antiphonally by cantors and congregation. Eventually, parts were distributed to identifiable characters, and the parts of the church became representative for places where the biblical episode was set. It was now recognisable as a dramatic performance. The most highly developed of these tropes, the Easter ‘Quem quaeritis in sepulchro’, usually took place in the chancel where a sepulchre was installed on the north side. The choir represented the assembly place of the disciples from which Mary and Peter and John set out on their journey to the empty tomb.<sup>20</sup> These tropes made something new happen between the performers and the spectators, something where the audience were not required to sit and be lulled into passivity by soothing music, but where they could directly take part in a performance that had the possibility of communicating something cogent, a new relationship between performers and

---

<sup>19</sup> Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music* (Da Capo Press 1979): Chapter 1.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality* (Harper and Row 1973): 3. From Ritual to Drama.

spectators. The church soon recognized the danger of such communication and banished these performances from the mass forever. This theatre existed for a time on the side of the church, and eventually developed from there into the 'fairground booth' theatre of the round which we remember today. The very act of banishing the theatre from the church, allowing only the abstract musical communication of the Latin texts to remain, is an important schism that puts the first link into the chain when trying to explain the current state of affairs in Western culture.

Unfortunately *Commedia dell'Arte* and other comparable forms that had grown naturally from the ancient understanding of the relationship between text and music, were to prove not so durable as forms that were introduced during the artistic 'flowering' of Europe, connected more with the elite in society; those that had the wealth and could afford to support extravagant new artistic ventures. The sudden economic boost and the flourishing trade that emerged was accompanied by a new interest in art. When the wealthy families began to support artistic ventures, it became highly fashionable, and the world of the artist became suddenly lucrative. Despite the many wonderful things that happened for the artistic world in Renaissance Italy, it is during this time that the attitude to art became popular, an attitude which understood that art was a highly specialised field for only certain talented individuals who were recognized as specialists in a certain field. This extreme specialisation certainly had an economic factor: Your work first had to please your benefactor before any one else, and a great deal of 'art' catered for the decadent tastes of the incredibly wealthy. This extended to many art forms beyond those related to the visual arts: For the first time the label of an 'author' (of a particular kind of literature) and a 'composer' (of only music) became recognized.

We can particularly thank Renaissance Italy for the opera tradition: Opera arose out of the attempts of a group of artists and scholars to recreate Greek drama, which was believed at the time to have been sung and not spoken. This misdirected nostalgia has resulted in the conservative traditions of opera that we have inherited today. At the same time architects, with a similar misdirected nostalgia, designed theatres that were based on ancient Greek models. This resulted in the well known and discussed 'proscenium arch' theatre, which soon became the standard model for theatres around Europe. Even today we are still haunted by the stigma of the 'proscenium arch'. Renaissance Europe was also responsible for the separation between the actor and the dancer, and therefore the creation of ballet as an independent form.

Opera in Europe became quickly very popular among the upper echelons of society, supported by nobility and wealthy men who could afford such extravagance. By the eighteenth century, the traditions of opera as an elite form

had become deeply entrenched; social conditioning certainly played a large role in determining the make up of the audience. For instance, where you sat in the elaborate opera houses was indicative of your social position, and the opera itself became a social event where the music and the performance lost its significance. This has become reflected in contemporary performances of the great Italian opera: Opulence, extravagance and decadence based on a strong awareness of social distinctions.

Initially opera grew from a desire to drive towards a unity and cohesion in music and drama, seen in the 'ultimate' form in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner, who said over his work "We have to recognize Speech itself as the indispensable basis of a perfect Artistic expression." Wagner, in essence, was reacting against the Italian opera tradition that had preceded him, but although his theory is admirable in the least for its breadth of scope, the means in which he tried to achieve them provided no possibility for real success: Prescribing the symphony orchestra as an accompaniment to the subtle drama of spoken words is a situation which goes the limit in human contradictions.<sup>21</sup> Further than that, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* theory indirectly claims that there is no specific, unitary dramatic material but that there are diverse materials which must be kept apart and treated side by side, which is in effect not in fact a fusion, but a more specialised recognition of distinctions. *Gesamtkunstwerk* has been widely questioned by artists and theoreticians throughout the twentieth century, particularly from the schools of theatrical thought. Kandinsky, in the creation of his revolutionary stage work *Der Gelbe Klang* ('The Yellow Sound') denounced *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the extent that it only served to unify by external means.<sup>22</sup> According to Jindrich Honzl of the Prague structuralist school Wagnerian theory conceals rather than reveals the essence of theatrical art: "It surrounds theatre with so many other arts that the special quality of theatricality dissolves and disappears."<sup>23</sup> Grotowski also in his famous theoretical document *Towards a Poor Theatre* talks about challenging the notion of theatre "as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines" by creating a theatre stripped down to its simplest form.<sup>24</sup> If the intention of Wagner was to create a true unity between music and theatre, then it is my contention that he failed and is responsible for the extended prolongation of an elite form, one that fails absolutely in any sort fusion and in fact creates a deliberate and impassable chasm between music and theatre, as well as supporting strict literary and performance traditions.

---

<sup>21</sup> Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music* (Da Capo Press 1979): Chaper 1.

<sup>22</sup> Kandinsky and Schoenberg, *Letters, Pictures and Documents* (Faber and Faber Ltd 1984).

<sup>23</sup> Jindrich Honzl, "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre", *Semiotics in Art*: (MIT Press 1976).

<sup>24</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre Drama Praxis H106 Course Reader 1990*.

The Western definition of ‘art’ as something separate to life has evolved from a tendency in Western culture to search for a higher state of expression that is something quite distinct from life, another ‘state of nostalgia’ trying to recapture the Platonic conception of perfect beauty. According to Antonin Artaud the “mental weakness of the West” is where man has confused art and aesthetics: “to believe that one can have painting used only as painting, dancing as a plastic form alone, as if one wanted to cut art off from everything, to sever links with mystical attitudes...”<sup>25</sup> These very particularly Western notions of expression through ‘artistic’ or ‘elevated’ means simply do not exist in many ancient cultures, where defining categories are not necessary because expression through some creative means is an essential part of existence and is designed to have appeal to all elements of society; here there simply exists no word for ‘art’. A clear demonstrative example is the Balinese culture: Dr. David George in his article on Balinese Ritual Theatre<sup>26</sup>, discusses the intimate relationship between the complex religious rituals and the theatre forms (integration of dance, design, music); they are one and the same.

The existence of music as an autonomous category has grown specifically in Western culture, and it was brought to an extreme state at the turn of the century by the ‘serialists’ who through serial form were seeking to find the ultimate solution for the expression of an ‘abstract’ music - totally detached from reality as we know it. To make the music value free, and to present it as a ‘universal’ human communicative mode, a music was formed in which no foundation for structure could be found except within the music itself, free from any reference to function or expression. This is represented also in the performance of ‘formal’ music with the musicians dressed in a strict black and white uniform in order to make their visual presence as standardised as possible. However, just as there are cultures with no word for art, there are certainly ethnic-based cultures where it is simply impossible to find something like ‘abstract’ music, just as not all languages recognise the word ‘music’.

In contrast to the extreme abstractness of Western music, we are of course left in the theatre with what at face value presents the opposite: Theatre based on the interaction between human characters, naturalism, where the words are discovered only for their semantic meaning and where we are required to come to the better understanding of particularly human processes. Roland Barthes asks us to consider the Western theatre of the last centuries while he is discussing the Japanese form of puppet theatre, Bunraku: “Its function is

---

<sup>25</sup> Antonin Artaud, “Oriental and Western Theatre”, *Artaud on Theatre*; 5. The Theatre and its Double.

<sup>26</sup> David George, *Balinese Ritual Theatre*, *Popular theatre course reader H292* (Murdoch University).

essentially to reveal what is reputed to be secret ('feelings', 'situations', 'conflicts') while concealing the very artifice of the process of revelation (machinery painting, make-up sources of light). The Italian stage is the space of this deceit, everything there taking place in a room surreptitiously thrown open, surprised, spied on and realised by a hidden spectator."<sup>27</sup> He is discussing here the distinction between the 'inner' and the 'outer' in Western theatre, representative of the same 'separation' tendency that can extend to all levels of the theatre: Writer/director, music/libretto, musician/actor even character/actor.

It is now certainly clear which sort of cultural traditions we are grappling against, but the question is with a such a grim state what are the possibilities for the future? By examining in more detail forms of theatre adopting alternative communicative systems it will be hopefully possible to find some solutions, or rather find ways to subvert this distinctive tendency prevalent in Western Contemporary art by finding finding new means to allow different forms to dynamically intermingle.

---

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, "Lesson in Writing", *Image, Music, Text*, (ed.) Stephen Heath (Fontana Paperbacks London 1977).

## Chapter 2.

“In the theatre, a line is a sound, a movement is music and the gesture which emerges from a sound is like a key word in a sentence.”<sup>28</sup>

— Antonin Artaud

We will be exploring in this section communicative systems in theatre forms that contrast with Western theatre. As discussed in the first chapter, the theatre is a medium which has enormous potential for ‘artistic’ communication, because of the possibility of the use of a wide range of different significative layers. According to the folklorist Petr Bogatyrev, formerly a member of the Russian formalist circle who undertook to chart the elementary principles of theatrical semiosis, the stage “radically transforms all objects and bodies defined within it, bestowing upon them an overriding signifying power which they lack - or which at least is less evident - in their normal social functions.”<sup>29</sup> Grotowski in talking of his theatre stripped down of unnecessary ‘plastic’ elements, also discusses the ability of the actor to transform “the floor into a sea, the table into a confessional, a piece of iron into an animate partner.”<sup>30</sup> Bogatyrev goes on to point out the relationship between this ‘transformation’ in the theatre and in religious rituals.<sup>31</sup> This ‘transformability’ of the sign in the theatre, and the intimate relationship between the theatre and a deeper significance that transcends language, are factors that unite all the theatre forms that will be discussed in this chapter, whether it be a chair into a mountain in the Chinese theatre or the transformation of a Balinese dancer into a mythical figure during a liminal moment of the performance. This transformability immediately opens up the significative potential and the spoken word is included in a complex matrix of other communicative forms.

To begin it is time to return to the ancient Greeks in order to set the basis for further discussion. As mentioned, the origin of music for the Greeks was certainly based in speech intonations, and the greatest privilege of music was to enhance drama. According to Harry Partch<sup>32</sup> this is a common factor among all the early people to whom we ascribe civilisation, which includes the Chinese. The Chinese, like the Greeks, felt no hesitation in setting spoken words to music, or in writing on their pictures, or in putting vivid paint on their sculpture. For them the idea of ‘purity’ and ‘independence’ in music and art simply did not

<sup>28</sup> Antonin Artaud, “Theatre and the Gods”, *Artaud on Theatre*:5. The Theatre and its Double.

<sup>29</sup> Kier Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (Routledge 1988): 2. Foundations.

<sup>30</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* *Drama Praxis H106 Course Reader 1990*.

<sup>31</sup> “We also find transformation similar to the basic theatrical element in the carrying out of many practices, customs and folk ceremonies that have a dominant magical or religious function. Furthermore, transformation in such activities is not restricted to the interhuman type, but also transformation into animals or even into material objects.” Petr Bogatyrev, “Semiotics in the Folk Theatre”, *Semiotics of Art* (MIT Press 1976).

<sup>32</sup> Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, (Da Capo Press 1979): Chapter 1.

exist. This is equally true of the Chinese theatre, where the performers sing, act, declaim texts, dance and perform intricate significative gestures. More interesting than that, the language in the Chinese theatre has special factors that set it aside from ordinary speech. The composition of Chinese plays is not in most cases dramatic in the Western sense; it generally lacks the tension reflectable in dramatic dialogue. Chinese drama is a structure made up of verse, prose, and music, and the dramatic text itself is of little significance from a literary point of view; performance is paramount.<sup>33</sup> Analysing the Chinese theatre by its dramatic text could only lead to a misunderstanding, and it is now generally accepted that the text forms only the basis of a complicated structure made up of a wide range of significative systems connected with both acoustic and visual factors. Contemporary Chinese theatre has strong ties with its ancient counterpart, something which sets it aside from the Greeks. It is actually possible for us to analyse the performance text directly, not like with ancient Greek theatre where we are forced to use the very incomplete form of the dramatic text, explaining the many misdirected attempts to rediscover this theatre as an expression of nostalgia.

Japanese drama was originally an offshoot of the Chinese, although it had subsequently a highly individual and independent existence. *Noh* ('accomplishment', the drama of accomplished grace), which stemmed in the fourteenth century, from the Japanese social-religious culture, was an amalgam and refinement of epic recital, the dance, and the popular sports. Obviously, then, music occupied approximately the same place among the Japanese of this period as it had in ancient Greece two thousand years before. It was the expression of a fundamentally similar concept of musical values.<sup>34</sup> Still today a *Noh* or *Kabuki*<sup>35</sup> actor would shake his head with amazement if we asked him to explain the difference between dance and theatre.<sup>36</sup> According to Roland Barthes, the Bunraku puppet theatre form is also notable because of the fact that the voice is "folded into an immense volume of silence in which other traits, other writings, are inscribed"<sup>37</sup>; the use of the voice exists in a complicated structure of communicative forms, where each form seems to work independently rather than the voice/text dictating structures for the different levels of performance: "Bunraku gives the voice a counterbalance, or better a countermatch, that of gesture."

*Bharatanatyam*, an ancient form of Indian classical dance-theatre, also provides us with examples of multilevelled communicative possibilities. Indian scholars

---

<sup>33</sup> Karel Brusak, "Signs in the Chinese Theatre", *Semiotics in Art*: (MIT Press 1976).

<sup>34</sup> Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music* (Da Capo Press 1976): Chapter 1.

<sup>35</sup> Kabuki was an offshoot from Noh around 1600 in a reaction to the increasingly esoteric nature of the Noh performances.

<sup>36</sup> Eugenio Barba, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, (Routledge London 1991): Introduction.

<sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes, "Lesson in Writing", *Image, Music, Text*.

trace *Bharatanatyam* back not only to the ancient text on theatre *Natyasastra* which describes dance poses, but also century old temple sculptings that show these poses. *Bharatanatyam* stands for the basic elements of this old/new dance Bha = Bhara or feelings; Ra = Rasa, or the aesthetic flavour; Ta = Tala, or rhythm; Natyam means dance.<sup>38</sup> The text below, used in *Bharatanatyam* as an incantory prayer to Shiva (the lord of dance), demonstrates an extended notion of performance communication. A series of gestures performed through the hand and the body represent the abstract, unearthly concepts within the prayer, and the text itself is read in old Sanskrit. Like in the declamation of Ancient Greek text, the words were envisaged as melody and thus can be expressed through the meaning of the words, the movements, and the music. Below is a translation:

We bow to the satvika Shiva  
Whose angika is the body  
Whose vachika is the entire language  
Whose aharya is the moon and the stars<sup>39</sup>

This prayer actually engages principles of performance on four levels, the integration of *angika*, *vachika*, *aharya* and *satvika*. We are familiar with the first two levels: *Angika* is the use of the body to experience and communicate, and *vachika* is the use of the voice whether in dialogue or on musical instruments. Here the fundamental concept of speech as melody is clearly demonstrated. However, *aharya* is the use of costumes and make-up and *satvika* is the use of feelings, intelligence and intellect, both suggesting an integration of extended concepts of communication. The performers in another famous Indian dance-theatre form, *Kathakali*, communicate vocally through nonsense sounds, which is accompanied simultaneously by a number of other semiotic codes: Dance, make-up and hand gestures.<sup>40</sup>

The Chinese theatre is characterised by the multi-dimensional significative potential of any object that may be used on stage. An object may appear on set either in reality or in representation; a real object may be substituted on the set by a symbol if this symbol is able to transfer the object's own signs to itself. Some objects used on stage in the Chinese theatre have, however, particularly exceptional traits in relation to the actors and the set. These are 'object signs', able to represent all aspects of the scene alone and unaided. The most important

---

<sup>38</sup> Nicola Savarese, "Nostalgia or the passion for a return", *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (Routledge London 1991).

<sup>39</sup> This poem in Sanskrit, the movements, and the translation were provided by Rakini, a dancer who studied *Bharatanatyam* in India.

<sup>40</sup> Bharata, *Kathakali Performance Reading H200 Murdoch University*: 32 Mudras-The language of the hands.



of these are a table and a chair that are almost never absent from the Chinese stage. If the table and the chair are standing in the usual manner, then the set is an interior. On the other hand, a chair placed side on the ground or on its back signifies an embankment or earth work; overturned it signifies a hill or a mountain; standing on the table, it signifies a city tower.<sup>41</sup> This demonstrates a full exploration of the ‘transformability’ of objects on the stage, possibilities that are particularly alien to Western culture.

Another factor sets these theatre forms aside from what is recognised in the Western world: the dual nature of any sign in the theatre, having both a communicative and an aesthetic function. This is certainly present in the Chinese theatre where the present shape of any routine, gesture or movement has been affected by the attempt to devise a simple and comprehensible sign and to bring out the aesthetic function. The conventional action signs, in fact, never aim at an imitation of reality. They naturally take this as their starting point, but in most cases they are constructed so as to divorce themselves from realism as much as possible. Karel Brusak, in his article on signs in the Chinese theatre, offers us an example:

“The player suggests the action of drinking tea by raising an imaginary cup to his lips, but in order to avoid being realistic, masks the hand executing the gesture with a special movement.”

An action sign thus owes its final form to a “tension between the aesthetic function and other functions, communicative.” This also opens the significative forms into the realm of music: There are many circumstances in the Chinese theatre where music must act as a sign (to express anger, hatred, horror, surprise, anxiety, love, joy, drunkenness, flight and so on) because its realistic representation is forbidden to the Chinese actor on aesthetic grounds.<sup>42</sup> This tendency for the development of such an aesthetic emphasis is common also in other forms, Indian performance in particular: They have even precise words to define the difference. *Lokadharmi* stands for behaviour (dharmi) in daily life (loka); *Natyadharmi* stands for behaviour in dance (natya).<sup>43</sup>

Indian performance theory in relation to these distinctions is actually quite advanced, and a more detailed discussion of some of these elements points out the problematic nature of the Western theatre. In the *Natyasastra* (introduced during our discussion of *Bharatanatyam*) a theory of predicted audience response is presented which then traces the response back through the mechanisms and instruments that serve to arouse and produce it. To this extent

---

<sup>41</sup> Karel Brusak, “Signs in the Chinese Theatre”, *Semiotics in Art*: (MIT Press 1976).

<sup>42</sup> Karel Brusak, “Signs in the Chinese Theatre”, *Semiotics in Art*: (MIT Press 1976).

<sup>43</sup> Eugenio Barba, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (Routledge London 1991): Introduction.

it is similar in theory and methodology to its Western equivalent, Aristotle's Poetics, the significant difference being that in the latter no attempt was made to make any clear distinction between aesthetic responses and those derived from real life. Sanskrit theory, in contradistinction, recognized from the beginning that there is a basic, fundamental difference between emotions experienced and used in real life and those experienced vicariously, aesthetically. Instead, therefore, of attempting in vain to educate its audiences morally, Sanskrit theory concentrated on analysing the peculiar nature of the aesthetic emotions, and did so by radically distinguishing two kinds, calling the everyday emotions 'bhava' and their aesthetic equivalents 'rasa';<sup>44</sup> notions now accepted as standard in Indian performance. In Western culture using the theatre purely as a means to explore everyday human emotions and encounters seems to be a refusal to accept the fact that anything performed in the theatre is something essentially different to everyday experiences, resulting in the creation of 'false' performances that adopt the a small selection of communicative forms.

The use in Indian performance of the 'language of gestures' is perhaps the most extreme expression of this dual function between aesthetic and communicative modes. In Sanskrit, hasta (hand, forearm) and mudra (seal) refer to hand gestures whose use dates back to sacred performances during the time of the Vedas (around 1500 B.C.) when the gestures were used by the priests while they repeated mantras, the religious formulae. There was also a traditionally fixed list of six mudras which represented Buddha's gestures and corresponded to moments in his life.<sup>45</sup> Although it is clear that gesturality is a communication system that transmits a message, and that can consequently be considered a language, it is nevertheless still difficult to clarify certain elements as in vocal languages which are easily fragmented into minimal units.<sup>46</sup> The mudra characteristic which is perhaps the most interesting from the point of view of aesthetic function is that used in relationship to the two principle categories into which all Indian dance-theatre forms are subdivided: *Interpretative dance* ('nritya'), where the mudras have a communicative function, that is, they have literal word meaning;<sup>47</sup> *Pure dance* ('nritya'), which is always included in every dance performance, where the mudras have a purely decorative value and are used as 'pure sound'.<sup>48</sup>

In Western society we can also understand exactly what is meant by this 'pure

---

<sup>44</sup> Bharata, Kathakali Performance Reading H200 Murdoch University: 31. The actor's craft: The guru performing.

<sup>45</sup> Eugenio Barba, A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology (Routledge London 1991): Hands.

<sup>46</sup> Julia Kristeva, Language: The Unknown (Columbia University Press 1989): 22-Semiotics.

<sup>47</sup> "Mudra communication in Kathakali, through the use of gestures simultaneously in right and left hand, results in a vocabulary of 576 words." Bharata, Kathakali, Performance Reading H200 Murdoch University:32. The mudras.

<sup>48</sup> Eugenio Barba, A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology (Routledge London 1991): Hands.

sound' possibility of communication through hand gestures. In the last ten years, theatre for the deaf has begun to be performed. This theatre is fascinating for those spectators who do not understand the sign language alphabet because of the pure dynamics of hands speaking in silence, just as we are fascinated by the Indian mudras without understanding what they mean.<sup>49</sup> In fact, theatre that communicates in this way has been highly influential to many Western theatre theoreticians and performers, even though they had not understood it at a directly interpretable level; they managed to find meaning in its emotional and dramatic projection. Noted examples of this are of course Antonin Artaud whose work changed irrecoverably after seeing Balinese ritual dance performances; he found in this performance a new way to discover communication through gesture, but in a language that had no translatable 'meaning', that found no recourse in the use of words. Grotowski had been more than simply influenced by performances, having studied both in China with the Peking Opera and in the Kalamandalam Kathakali school in India.

These forms that adopt gestural communication in their use of 'pure sound' move surely into the realm of music, communication without a definite translation that nonetheless communicates strongly and deeply. As demonstrated it is no doubt that the property of gestural practice is the privileged realm of religion, sacred dance, and ritual. Here the gesture is a primordial act of signification, where the signification is engendered in a form that can not be transferable to language.<sup>50</sup> One could say that music succeeds in communicating where language fails, communicating things that simply cannot be said in words. Therefore music has not the possibility to communicate some particularity, it simply communicates. Roland Barthes talks of a meaning that "exceeds psychology, anecdote, function, exceeds meaning", where the the given entity is in the process of signification without actually signifying, "signification before it coalesces, nascent, floating." He chooses a word for this phenomenon, 'significance', because it is in the field of the signifier (and not of signification). This meaning can be seen as "the passage from language to significance and the founding act of the filmic itself."<sup>51</sup> This attitude to signification is perhaps the closest connection with forms of musical communication, and can help to explain the possibility of 'significance' through forms in the theatre where the 'language' (often non-vocal) can not be 'understood' (literally translated).

Forms that can communicate with foreign people through the realm of 'significance' have been explored, but it is important now to consider in more detail those forms that communicate even with the local audience in an

---

<sup>49</sup> Eugenio Barba, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (Routledge London 1991): Hands.

<sup>50</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Language: The Unknown* (Columbia University Press 1989): 22-Semiotics.

<sup>51</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning", *Image, Music, Text*.

‘untranslatable language’. Petr Bogatyrev, in his theoretical writings, discusses a folk song performed in an unknown language with an ‘unmotivated ritual function’, usually having a magical function.<sup>52</sup> A direct example is the performance of music on the Tonga islands where the folk songs are often sung in a dialect which is no longer understood by the Tongans: Some feel that it is a form of ancient Tongan, and others that it is a mixture of Polynesian dialects.<sup>53</sup> However, the song still communicates through a combination of the sounds and symbolic hand movements, but in a form that connects not with words, but more with a deeper understanding of sound and significance.

This type of communication is naturally not restricted to the folk song, and extends directly into the theatre. In the Chinese theatre, a sort of ‘aria’ is sung in an archaic almost incomprehensible form of language: thus certain features are signalled by music alone.<sup>54</sup> The performers in Kathakali speak in a strange ‘language of the gods’ called *Alarcha*, a language of yells, shrieks, grunts and eerie noises intended to approximate the language of another universe far removed from human words.<sup>55</sup> *Kebiyar Dudik*, a relatively new dance form in Bali, is often danced as an interpretation of the ‘Kekawin’ - heroic poems sung in a completely archaic language, where the dancer translates the different episodes into movement, but with a strange detachment that is so typical for the way in which the Balinese work with pure rhythm and ‘abstract’ movement.<sup>56</sup>

The concept of rhythm provides another ‘musical’ communicative code certainly without translatable ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense, that must be considered because of its use to structure performances. Vsevolod Meyerhold had a surprising insight into the adoption of rhythm in the theatre: “Music, which determines the tempo of every occurrence on the stage, dictates a rhythm which has nothing in common with everyday existence. [...] The essence of stage rhythm is the antithesis of real, everyday life.” This concept of rhythm is adopted in many Eastern performance forms as a structural element: In Japanese, the expression of ‘jo-ha-kju’ describes the three phases into which every action that is performed by an actor or dancer is divided. In classical Japanese theatre, the ‘jo-ha-kju’ rhythmic phrase has not only to do with the actor’s or dancer’s actions, but is also part of all the various levels of organisation of the performance: It is applied to gesture, to the music, to each version of each play performed, and ultimately determines the rhythm of the entire performance day.<sup>57</sup> In Indonesian and Indian performances there is a strong numerical relationship between the performance texts and the music.

<sup>52</sup> Petr Bogatyrev, “Folk Song from a functional point of view”, *Semiotics in Art*: (MIT Press 1976.)

<sup>53</sup> *Festival Music from Tonga* Reed Pacific Records Ltd. 1976.

<sup>54</sup> Karel Brusak, “Signs in the Chinese Theatre” *Semiotics in Art*: (MIT Press 1976).

<sup>55</sup> Bharata, *Kathakali Performance Reading H200 Murdoch University*: 31. The actor’s craft: 32. The mudras.

<sup>56</sup> Thanks to Purnomo Widagdo, a Javanese dancer of *Kebiyar Dudik*.

<sup>57</sup> Eugenio Barba, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, (Routledge London 1991): Rhythm.

Antonin Artaud talks of the intimate relationship between the “booming, pounding, musical rhythm” and where the sounds “are like natural conclusions of gestures with the same attributes.”<sup>58</sup> This is particularly evident in Indian classical dance where the rhythmic nature of the language dictates both to the musicians and the dancers. A ‘language’ of rhythms has evolved in these forms so that a particular dance can be actually ‘spoken’ as well as danced and played. Below is a rhythmic section from an Indian dance text:

ta-ki-ta  
 ta-ka-di-mi  
 ta-ka  
 ta-ki-ta  
 ta-ka-di-mi  
 ta-ka  
 ta-ka-di-mi  
 ta-ka  
 dhay-khi-ta-thay  
 tha-ki-ta  
 ta-ki-ta-too-na  
 ta-thom-ta  
 dha-dha-tha-dhi-ghe-na-thom!<sup>59</sup>

We will finish this discussion by looking briefly at Balinese ritual theatre, not only for its adoption of a number of contrasting communicative systems simultaneously, but more for its almost complete adoption of ‘abstract’ forms, in other words forms that can not be translated into interpretable language: A signifying process without ultimate signification, a constant process of ‘significance’. Performance in Bali is highly skilled, aesthetic, loaded with tradition. Yet it can’t be viewed under Western definitions of art - as some object that has no real bearing on the individual or community, despite its seemingly ‘abstract’ nature. Every performance in Bali has a deeper meaning and purpose. The objective of a temple festival is to renew contact with the departed village forebears. One of the favourite ways to do this is to put on plays for them. They are ceremonially invited to descend to the shrines prepared for them, to be feasted and entertained. The performances of plays and dramatic dances in Bali are still something of an ancestral rite, in which the hereditary gods are invoked and their deed enacted. Such rituals are annual, social and remedial. So fundamental and so regular are such events that religion itself

<sup>58</sup> Antonin Artaud, “On the Balinese Theatre” *Artaud on Theatre*:5. The Theatre and its Double.

<sup>59</sup> Thanks again to Rakini, the Indiandancer.

requires everyone to be some kind of artist, be it a maker of offerings or as a dancer, actor or musician.<sup>60</sup> This theatre spoke very strongly to Antonin Artaud, who was quite moved by the “feeling of a new bodily language no longer based on words but on signs which emerge through the maze of gestures, postures, airborne cries, through their gyrations and turns, leaving not even the smallest area on stage unused.” He strongly identified with the notion of a new language which had the power to communicate beyond words and their literal translation, and in reaction to this he produced some of his most lucid theoretical work:

“Those actors with their asymmetrical robes look like like moving hieroglyphs. [...] These mental signs have an exact meaning that only strikes one intuitively but violently enough to make translations into logical, discursive language useless. [...] Balinese theatre offers us an outstanding production that suppresses any likelihood of recourse to words to clarify the most abstract subjects; it has invented a language to be spatially developed, but have no meaning outside it. In the Balinese theatre one sense a state prior to language, able to select its own language; music, gestures, moves and words.”<sup>61</sup>

In order to understand the power of these language forms, an insight into Balinese culture is essential; critical study of Balinese dance has revealed that they are not merely beautiful abstractions or captivating ancient narratives whose language has been forgotten. According to Marcia Siegel, who was analysing the Balinese Legong dance, Balinese performances are in fact “dramatisations of liminal events: separation/individuation, illness and recovery, the recognition of spirits, and the traversal between the here-and-now and the place where the spirits reside.” Liminality then is an essential part of Balinese performance, resulting in the recourse to ‘abstract’ communicative systems. The idea of blurred boundaries is intrinsic to liminality, a state where you temporarily lose the distinction between two entities, two individuals, two time frames. In Bali this is characteristic of the music; two musicians create an interlocking rhythm by playing alternating notes. The pattern is so intricate and fast that you cannot distinguish one from the other. The musicians must be individually precise in order to execute the pattern, but they’re only successful when they merge their separate identities into the unity that is the pattern: The music is intricately related to the development of the performance, and speaks in the same ‘abstract’ language as the dancers. For the Balinese, however, the languages adopted are not in fact ‘abstract’. As already discussed, the notion of ‘abstract’ art is alien to Eastern culture; the recourse to such a language without translatable meaning is a necessary part of communicating between different levels of existence. The closest that we have come to such an experience of communication in Western culture occurred perhaps at the turn of the century

---

<sup>60</sup> Dr. David George, “Balinese Ritual Theatre: An Introduction”, *Popular Theatre Course Reader H292*.

<sup>61</sup> Antonin Artaud, “On the Balinese Theatre”, *Artaud on Theatre: 5. The Theatre and its Double*.

when Kandinsky ‘composed’ his revolutionary stage work, a piece that used music, sound, voices, forms and coloured lights; moving, assembling and decomposing: “Forms would appear, develop and vanish, while colours changed through shifting lights. The colour and light would not serve to illustrate the music more than the music served to comment on the drama - all would rest precisely on the action common among all elements.”<sup>62</sup> The piece was not deliberately ‘abstract’, in other words it was not a purely an experiment with the combination of lights and colours, but rather an attempt at communication through an ‘inner’ movement of the spectator. Here was the recourse to an entirely new form of stage language.

Through the realisation of the problematic nature of certain Western notions, such as ‘abstract’ music and ‘art’, it is possible to gain an insight into Eastern theatre. Through the realisation of certain concepts unique to particular Eastern cultures, it possible to paint an entirely new picture of text, music, and its possibilities for communication in the theatre. Through these realisations I believe that it is possible to create a new theatre that can communicate with this new language, a language without ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense, but meaning that is extended through the musical structures, and texts that through the very nature of the sounds help to structure the theatre in a new way. These will be performance texts that can exist simultaneously as music and movement, that have the possibility to communicate not on one level alone, but a number of different levels simultaneously. I will demonstrate in the last two chapters of this paper possibilities for the adoption of such a language by analysing two new music-theatre compositions.

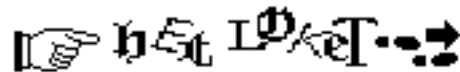
---

<sup>62</sup> Kandinsky and Schoenberg, Letter, Pictures and Documents (Faber and Faber Ltd 1984).

## Chapter 3.

“Traditions in the creative arts are suspect. For they exist on the patrimony of standardisation, which means degeneration... The extent to which an individual can resist being blindly led by tradition is a good measure of his vitality.”<sup>63</sup>

— Harry Partch

**Analysis One:**

an anti opera

Het Locket is a composition project produced for performance in the *New Music Week 1993 Ghent* (Belgium).<sup>64</sup> The production of the work was for a concert of new short chamber operas, and certain of the elements within the work were prefigured, including instrumentation, the presence of a small number of vocal forces, and even the text which was necessary to adopt as the ‘libretto’. These conditions were certainly influential as to why the form of an ‘anti-opera’ was chosen, but this in itself is a complex question that will form an important element of this analysis. Although the work is an ‘anti-opera’ in almost every sense, this definition is extended by attempting to go beyond a simple parody or an attempt at provocative anti-aestheticism; Het Locket attempts to explore other means of communication through music and theatre by adopting different musical and theatrical forms that have few or no common links with the operatic tradition, forms introduced in the second chapter of this paper. This analysis includes a detailed discussion of the forms involved and how their interaction and collision in the composition is designed to demonstrate alternative possibilities for communication in the theatre, possibilities that stand against the closure of the opera.

It is important first to discuss the creative process that went into this work before an analysis of the forms involved can be undertaken. For the production of the chamber opera the composers were required to use texts from a selection of short plays by a French absurdist playwright - Jean Tardieu, and adopt it as a libretto for a short ‘absurd’ chamber opera. Le Préposé (‘the teller’) was chosen for the composition in question because of the broader potential of some of the themes involved. Otherwise the text was considered extremely unsatisfactory for presentation in the theatre, involved with metaphorical language and narrative that would certainly seem outdated because of the strong existential nature of the thematic material. A client approaches a teller behind which a

<sup>63</sup> Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, (Da Capo Press 1979): Author’s Preface.

<sup>64</sup> “Week van de Hedendaagse Muziek” has occurred yearly since 1986.



railway attendant sits, and asks for information concerning the next train. Through a series of wordy encounters where the client has extreme difficulty in asking questions just as the attendant seems completely unable or unwilling to answer, we discover that the client is actually seeking answers to very impossible questions about the nature of his life and existence. The two indulge in probing word games that explore the superficiality of spoken language and further frustrate the client leading him to question his own identity and finally to his destruction. The emphasis is on the difficulty in communication, and the difficulty that we have in expressing ourselves and the ‘indefinable concepts’ that construct our psyche through words: He finally leaves, questions unanswered and a terrible car-crash is heard. Evidently he didn’t make it to the train.

Immediate comparisons were found between some of the central themes of Le Préposé and another ‘narrative’ of a considerably contrasting nature. This was a cassette recording made in a park in China<sup>65</sup>, where an older Chinese man teaches a younger Chinese girl one of the songs from the Chinese theatre. A particularly striking element of this ‘narrative’ was the fact that it involved no verbal language as we understand it, but still could clearly communicate the exact nature of what happened in the story: The teaching method itself was quite complex, but one could tell that the man was teaching the girl a simple song through the use of an extremely rhythmically and melodically elaborate melody. It was difficult not to compare this form of communication with that in the Tardieu play, both discourses involving aural encounters between two parties where one tries to attain or receive something from the other by adopting the tools of the discourse (words/music); the power relationships between the parties were also comparable - client/attendant, student/teacher. On the Chinese recording there were other uses of language and musical communication that were to affect the way the music was composed and structured within this composition, but simply the fact that the tape recording provided an entirely different method of communication through musical discourse, and that certain similarities existed between this ‘narrative’ and the thematic material of the Tardieu play in question was enough inspiration. Being left by force with a play that was considered essentially outdated and an equally outdated musical/theatrical form (opera), the adoption of the Chinese recording seemed the only recourse.

Other elements on the recording were also influential, particularly the attempt of a Westerner to imitate the sound of the Chinese language, which introduced some ideas about performing in a ‘nonsense’ language: Imitation of the songs, echoing the vocal characteristics of the Chinese language, but obviously with no

---

<sup>65</sup> This recording was made by Moniek Darge during the tour of her performance duo through China.

significant potential other than realisation of a sound quality, was an interesting contrast with the Chinese girl trying to learn the song, both involving forms of communication that are not simply word-based. Another interesting element was some of the Chinese language spoken by the older Chinese man before he begins teaching the song, language with deliberate musical qualities characteristic of the Chinese theatre. The exact nature of the influences and how they were adopted into the composition will be discussed further on. In any case, the contradiction presented by the possibility of combining elements of Western opera, an elite form for the selected few in Western society, with the 'Chinese Opera', which is an ancient system adopting simultaneously various different communicative systems so that there is something for everyone in the audience to appreciate (comparatively non-elite), was too exciting to ignore. This resulted in the creation of *Het Loket* (a Dutch translation of 'Le Préposé'), a music-theatre piece where two actors simultaneously perform *the client* and *the attendant* from the Tardieu play and *the teacher* and *the student* from the Chinese recording.

The question is, of course, how could the opera element be interpolated into an already complicated narrative structure. This was where the idea for an anti-opera became clearly manifest. On top of the two realities that already existed within the composition, the third discourse would be that of the opera singers and the musicians. The problems inherent in the operatic form could be demonstrated by having the opera singers play a role in attempting to define the already existing narratives through language forms: One of the singers adopting gestural signs, and the other vocal sounds, but gestures and vocal sounds with no semantic basis. The story of the student and the teacher is acted out central stage through musical interaction, and the opera singers interrupt the performance in order to 'explain' it to the audience, but because of the 'untranslatable' nature of their discourse they are unable to provide any basis for communication. This sets up an interesting ambiguity where the music speaks for itself despite all the efforts of the opera singers to confuse matters terribly. In any case, it can be seen that the third discourse of the opera singers is important in bringing out some of the the important themes from *Le Préposé* where the near impossibility of vocal communication is presented. This is also the intention of combining the discourses, whose collision provides ambiguities and points of confusion designed to make us question language as a central communicative form as it exists in Western theatre. The deliberate inclusion of a comic element into this composition is designed also to create a contrasting discourse that communicates through all the realities (especially the opera singers who appear the most absurd), allowing other elements to communicate subliminally.

Interactions between these different discourses in the composition and the

significance of their collision in pointing out essential problems inherent in the Western musical frame will be elaborated, but it is important to see them in relation to the complete structure of the composition. *Het Loket* is divided into four sections, (i) Overture, (ii) Introduction, (iii) Exposition, and (iv) Conclusion. These titles allude both to structuring divisions ('movements') in music and also the four act structure of theatre, although the four sections flow together forming an uninterrupted performance.

**Overture:** The lighting rises from darkness and the five players positioned in a semi-circle around a central performing area are seen as almost caricatures of musicians: Instruments in position ready to play, faces with serious expressions but exquisitely motionless. Central stage is a large barrier (the teller) that sits in between two chairs. Next to each of the chairs is an absurd object: Tea pots with multi-coloured tubes emerging.<sup>66</sup> After a certain time of waiting, the first musical sound bursts forward: The audience hears the sound of a violin and sees the violinist play with exaggerated performance gestures. After another time bracket accompanied by deathly motionlessness, the double bass is heard and the double bass gestures as if performing. The percussion player then moves to play the gong with a large and strong gesture, but approximately when contact is made with the centre of the instrument, a loud and brash Asian instrument is heard (Peking opera gong). Then the double bass player moves to play and the sound of a clarinet emerges. The performance is rendered entirely ridiculous when the percussion player moves again to play the gong, but the plunking sound of a glockenspiel is heard. The instrumental sounds are being played on tape, and the live performers act merely to gesture as if they are performing. The imitations of the tape become more ridiculous, until finally the sound of a single gong on tape cues the performers to 'play' furiously, but without making a sound. While this is happening, the percussion player lifts his hand in slow motion as if to play the gong, and then suddenly and shockingly plays the first live sound, which brings about sudden motionlessness from the other performers. After a short time of absolute stillness, a real chaotic improvisation begins, with all the instruments playing together as loudly as possible. At this point the sound of a real opera overture which is on tape gradually emerges underneath the improvisation. When it becomes clear that another sound source has become manifest, the players begin to genuinely look around to find out where the sound is coming from, in between playing musical fragments. Soon however, these fragments stop, and we are left with the musicians performing simply movements of the head in a choreographed format without expression or intention. After the overture has died away, the opera singers emerge from backstage. The entrance of the opera singers is designed to present a negative image of the opulence of the opera, represented immediately by the costumes.

---

<sup>66</sup> Designed especially for the production, these will later be revealed as musical instruments in the Chinese teacher/student pantomime discourse.

The use of a real operatic overture which summons forth the singers is designed to posit the singers in their roles: Representatives of narrative who will structure the performance through text and bring about resolution. This is quickly rendered absurd.

**Introduction:** When the overture has faded out, the instrumentalists suddenly turn to the singers, clapping wildly. The violin player actually gets up and delivers an imaginary rose to the female opera singer who smells it and tosses it over her shoulder, smiling. The singers then go through a process of ‘introducing’ the instruments to the audience. The male singer stays at the front of the stage, and sings a short recitative in distinctly operatic style, but with a text consisting of only vowels. The female singer who had already walked over to the double bass player and ‘introduced’ him gesturally, now makes imitative sounds of the instrument accompanied by gestures as if she is playing. This brings the double-bass player to life, resulting in a short improvised imitation of the singer. It continues in the same form with the French horn and then the clarinet, presenting caricatures of the instruments: Their performance style, followed by their actual sound. However, when it comes to the violin, the flow that has already been set up between the opera singers and the instruments is changed. The singer moves to the violin, and does the introductory gesture, but instead of imitating the sound, she picks an imaginary rose from the pocket of the violin player, and smells it. The violin, who is gesturing, ready to play, all of a sudden moves out of playing position and takes it back, appearing a little upset or angry. Apparently confused by the action of the violin, the female singer appears to have forgotten the last performer, and looks around to find out who that is. After another operatic recitative, the male opera singer gestures towards the percussion player, and realizing suddenly who she has forgotten, she rushes over towards him. This time there is an interaction between the percussion player and the singer, who tries to demonstrate the different percussion instruments. The Introduction is ended by the percussion player who plays loud notes on the Peking opera gong causing the opera singers to move to positions at the side of the stage.

**Exposition:** The actors walk on stage. The actor representing the ‘older man’ comes on stage first: He enters stage left, and sits in a predetermined position centre stage on one side of the teller. The other actor representing the ‘younger girl’ enters timidly some seconds later. A short performance takes place through the teller, where the desperation of the client is represented. No vocal sounds are made, but the client attempts to communicate with the attendant who apparently is unable to acknowledge the other and mimes a number of clerical duties. The performers outside this reality stay totally silent and motionless until the percussion player plays a loud note on the Peking opera gong, cueing the actors to freeze and the opera singers to come back to life; the male singer

performing a ridiculous imitation of peking opera singing (with high falsetto and long sliding notes) using a nonsense vowel text, and the female performing distinct symbolic actions. Then the sound of a large gong from the percussion player cues the actors to start performing as if they are the Chinese teacher and student. The singers have stepped back to watch this performance. The actors pick up the strange objects sitting on the stage, which are revealed to be instruments. The actual music is played by the instrumentalists who are surrounding the central ensemble; their role is obviously essential to the development in this section. The music itself is influenced by the Chinese recording, and is characteristic of heterophonic music common in many forms of ancient music, where a simple melody is elaborated into a totally new form.<sup>67</sup> It begins with a complete recitation of the complex heterophonic melody, gestured by the 'teacher' (by blowing in the spout of the teapot), but played by the violin, and is answered by the 'student', but played by the clarinet. The student evidently can not play the melody and appears confused, so the teacher plays a short example, and when the student still can't make the connection, the teacher plays his melody a little simpler, and then a little simpler again. The student gradually is able to perform the melody slowly. Another raucous Chinese gong causes a sudden reversal of realities: The actors go back to performing the action of the *Le Préposé*, but this time a little slower and more stylised, while the nonsense Chinese text and gestures comes back into play with the opera singers. After a short recitation of the 'text', it returns again to the Chinese pantomime, and gradually the student learns the entire melody. Also other instruments start joining the performance, first a double bass drone and then long notes from the French horn. The whole scenario is gradually reaching a 'musical' point of resolution. The performance swings between the discourse of the Chinese performance and the opera singers/*Préposé* discourse a number of times still, but the fourth division begins with a very short Chinese-like nonsense text that leads again into the full ensemble, but this time with the falsetto male voice actually singing a simple melody with the nonsense texts. The gestures of the female have also become stylised into a strict but melodious pattern that repeats with the same rhythm as the other singer, and the actors are performing a series of stylised movements taken from the *Préposé* discourse. All performers are now playing together, forming a harmonious whole reminiscent of the gamelan music of Indonesia and adopting Peking opera melodies. This apparent harmoniousness is soon interrupted by traffic sounds and car noises on tape (taken from the Tardieu play) which emerges from beneath and then overtakes the sound of the ensemble. In a reaction to the cacophony now presented by the car noises, the musicians one by one leave the performance space. First the violin player leaves, then the percussionist, then the clarinet player, and finally the double bass player. The singers however

---

<sup>67</sup> The melody in its simplest form was transcribed by the composer from the chinese recording.

appear totally oblivious to the traffic sounds and go on performing the same melody and motions. Finally at the loudest point in the traffic noises, the 'client/student' runs suddenly offstage, and the sound of a horrific traffic accident is heard.

**Conclusion:** The opera singers are still remaining to do what always seems to happen to the heroes and heroines at the end of an opera performance: Die. All the other performers have left, except for the *attendant* who is sitting behind his desk shifting through papers. The singers appear shocked by the car crash, and attempt to narrate the story of the death: The female singer sings in typical bel canto style, highly dramatic songs of pain that result in her own death, and then the male singer, performing gestures of death in an effort to describe her 'song', also dies. The *attendant* finishes classifying his papers, totally oblivious to all that has gone on, and walks off stage. This is the end of the performance.

The realisation of Het Loket is involved with certain characteristics of theatre forms discussed in the second chapter of this paper, and it is necessary now to talk in more detail about these elements. The 'transformability' of signs in the theatre is a particularly important factor introduced by folklorist Petr Bogatyrev. A characteristic of folk theatre that sets it aside from Western theatre is that "neither the spectator nor the actor should have the sensation of a complete transformation." According to Bogatyrev, in the folk theatre actors "deliberately disguise themselves as various animals in such a way that the spectators will easily recognise that they see before them not a real horse, goat or bear, but only an actor dressed as such."<sup>68</sup> This is also a characteristic of certain forms of Eastern theatre where a distance exists between the characters and the actors portraying them. In these theatre forms, the actors are people who remain actors no matter which character they play, as for example in Japanese Noh, where the conventions don't expect you to believe that the actor actually 'transforms' into a character from a medieval Japanese story. The actor is in fact deliberately distanced from his role by a mask in which the face of the actor is visible, reminding you always of his presence. As such, the mediums of communication can be abstract and non-linear, and one actor can play many different characters in the same play, presenting entirely different channels to Western theatre where you are actually expected to believe that an actor, for the time of the performance, will 'become' another person for a brief space of time. In Het Loket the actors are not restricted to a single role, being required to perform alternately in two narratives (that from *Le Préposé* and the Chinese teacher/student narrative), requiring two contrasting forms of presentation: In the Chinese teacher/student narrative, the actors are required to perform as if it is a pantomime; communicating through exaggerated actions without vocal

---

<sup>68</sup> Petr Bogatyrev, "Forms and Functions of Folk Theatre", *Semiotics of Art* (MIT Press 1976).

sounds; although one of the characters is a ‘young girl’ and the other is an ‘older man’ these roles are not required to be played by actors fitting this description, they must merely act as such in a very exaggerated pantomime style. The *Préposé* discourse requires also a voiceless pantomime, but one that through the use of silence expresses the unutterable difficulty of communication.

Bogatyrev’s ‘transformability’ extends from objects and actors adopted in the performance to the performance space itself. This is demonstrated clearly in certain non-institutionalised performance forms where fixed-feature space was either nonexistent, as in the medieval mystery cycles, or secondary to semi-fixed and informal space, as in the medieval theatre-in-the-round, where actors descended into the plateau to form an acting area. Medieval drama took place in the street, in the market place or in the hall of a lord’s house, not in a theatre intended for such performance. Thus at the very beginning one finds dramatists having to deal with the problem of ‘defining’ the play as a play; of separating it from the current of ordinary living by what amounts to a proclamation: “A ceremonially composed pronouncement introducing this special sort of event and calling for silent, or at least sympathetic attention for its interruption of the flow of the audience’s own lives.”<sup>69</sup> Fifteenth century morality plays started with an introduction, often provided by an intermediary who established the characters as fictions that the actors would interpret. Petr Bogatyrev describes similar spatial transformations at work in the Russian peasant theatre, where again the acting area is defined by the performers themselves:

“The participants in the performance approach the house in which, for example, a feast is taking place. They open the door and first the horse enters the *izba* [acting area] and lashes those present; everybody present gets up onto the benches and so the *izba* is clear for dramatic action.”<sup>70</sup>

This device of presentation or ‘induction’ has persisted in the theatre, so as to renew deeper significance connecting the ambiguous relationship between the play-word and the world outside the theatre. A specific example of this is a music theatre composition by Sir Harrison Birtwistle called Down by the Greenwood Side, a piece exploring, among other things, the induction conventions of medieval theatre.<sup>71</sup>

This theatrical ‘induction’ technique has certainly been significant in contemporary theatre, being undoubtedly an influence to Brecht in his use of the ‘gestus of showing’ - as when the actor stands aside in order to comment upon

---

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality*, (Harper and Row 1973): 5. Rhetorical Conventions.

<sup>70</sup> Kier Elam, *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, (Routledge 1988): 5. Theatrical communication.

<sup>71</sup> Down by the Greenwood Side (1969), A Dramatic Pastoral, Score UE 15327. Libretto by Michael Nyman.

what is happening, or a rendering of the representational means opaque through a range of devices such as freezes, slow-motion effects and unexpected changes in lighting, where the specified elements were brought to the foreground or 'framed'. Much of the experimental theatre of the 1960s and 1970s was devoted to the development of techniques for framing and estranging the signifying process.<sup>72</sup> Many such 'inductional' techniques have been adopted in Het Loket, processes whose intentions are to bring into the foreground certain elements of the performance in order to question the musical frame. For example, the 'Overture' that begins the composition begins with the instrumentalists seeming to perform short musical passages, but in fact are only performing gestures as the music is on tape. The very nature of the musical frame is brought into the question when the sounds on tape do not correspond to instruments performing the gestures. This is doubly demonstrated when the sound of a real orchestral opera overture gradually overtakes the live instrumental performance and the performers move from desperately searching for the sound to performing expressionless head movements. This is to highlight the restriction of the musical frame, where the performance dialogue is considerably restricted to only certain gestures connected with the performance of music, as well as to provide a contrast with the opera singers who will soon enter the performance space. The opera singers themselves adopt a number of 'induction' techniques, the purpose being firstly to parody problems inherent in the musical/operatic frame and secondly to present a wordless pantomime in which the instrumentalists are one by one introduced to the audience.

Other characteristics of folk theatre are adopted in Het Loket, particularly relating to the use of the performance space. Firstly, the simplicity of the scenic element, which is practically nonexistent, is both a move against the extravagance of opera and an attempt to recapture something from the simplicity of folk-theatre where its inherent 'transformability' provides new communicative possibilities. This is based on the simple premise that a performance space is always a performance space, and there is little point in going to a lot of trouble and expense to try and convince the audience otherwise, whether it is a drawing room in an English mansion or a small patch of African jungle or the bottom of the sea. A combination of music, movement and text along with simple objects (a chair representing a mountain, as in the Chinese theatre) allows the audience to form their own image of the space: "The Naturalistic Theatre denies that the spectator has the ability to finish a painting in his imagination, or to dream as he does when listening to music. and yet the

---

<sup>72</sup> "A particularly successful exponent has been the American director-playwright Richard Foreman, whose use of visual and aural 'framing devices' constitutes a recognizable stylistic feature of his productions - that is, his inclusion of 'anything that punctuates, frames, emphasizes, or brings into the foreground a particular word, object, action or position.'" Kier Elam, Semiotics of Theatre and Drama (Routledge 1988): 2. Foundations.



spectator possesses such an ability.”<sup>73</sup> This is the central premise of Grotowski’s ‘Poor’ theatre.

Connections with folk theatre forms are further demonstrated by the integration of the musical element, both physically by their direct use in the performance space, dynamically interacting with the performance; and symbolically, where the music is not merely commenting on or accompanying the action. The physical element is demonstrated by the formation of the instrumentalists into a ring surrounding the performance area and thus ‘defining’ it, recalling induction techniques of folk theatre and directly representative of Balinese ritual theatre performances where the gamelan surrounds the dancers. Symbolically the musicians become vehicles for the narrative when the musical discourse plays a structuring role. This symbolic element is extended by the intimate relationship between the music structures and the performance text, recalling Balinese, Indian and Japanese performances where there is a strong numerical relationship between the performance texts and the music. The use of stylised gestures, recalling the Sanskrit performance theory, is also pointing out that ‘reality’ in the theatre is something essentially different to the reality of everyday existence.

All these possibilities involve, in one way or another, the questioning or highlighting of the theatrical/musical frame. The theatrical frame is in effect the product of a set of transactional conventions governing the participants’ expectations and their understanding of the kinds of realities involved in the performance, highlighting a relationship between the audience and the performers. The degree to which the theatrical frame can be accepted is defined in theatrical terminology as ‘theatrical competence’, and this notion will play a role in analysing the composition. The theatrical competence of any particular audience depends naturally on the society that produced it, usually the same society that produced the theatre performance itself. It is on the basis of certain understandings that the performers in the Western theatre are able to interact on stage apparently oblivious to the audience, just as the spectators themselves find no difficulty in identifying which elements belong to the representation and which to the excluded theatrical context, and so do not expect to impinge directly on the interaction. This of course explains the difficulties that often arise when people from one culture experience theatre from another, where the theatrical competence is considerably different, often reflected directly in the relationship between the audience and the performers. The function of Het Loket is directly involved with this questioning of the theatrical competence of a Western audience: The entirely different and contrasting narrative forms set up a situation where the audience must become ‘competent’ by forming their own

---

<sup>73</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold, “The Theatre Theatrical”, *H106 Drama Praxis Course Reader 1990*.

understanding of how the piece is communicating, forming a new basis for the transmission of meaning in the theatre. The performance of Het Loket is therefore a learning process, directly represented in the student/teacher discourse where a clearly non-standard narrative form is presented.

The concept of ‘theatrical competence’ relates to another important theoretical distinction in the theatre that classifies different ‘dramatic worlds’ or discourses that exist in any performance; these ‘worlds’ are different realities that exist in the theatre between the audience and the performers. Western theatre generally recognises the existence of two such ‘worlds’, that of the performers, “a spatio-temporal elsewhere represented as though actually present for the audience”<sup>74</sup>, and that of the audience whose function is to appreciate the performance in silence. Although the audience is capable of seeing into the world of the performers, the performers are certainly not permitted to consider the world of the audience as a hypothetical alternative to their own. Although various playwrights have attempted to bend these conventions, Samuel Beckett, Peter Handke, Pirandello and Tom Stoppard to name a few, these distinctions are taboo and performances that attempt to step beyond these boundaries are considered merely amusing jokes. In forms of folk theatre, these distinctions do not always exist, and the audience is not nearly so sensitive if the frames are broken because they are deliberately set up to appear false. Bogatyrev in his analysis of folk theatre said that “the actors draw the spectators into the play, often directly provoking them, laughing at them and their environment.”<sup>75</sup>

A theatre performance from Uzbekistan has particular relevance to this discussion.<sup>76</sup> An interview with the director Abdoerachman Abdoenaza revealed the importance of influences from “lost theatre traditions. [...] A story-telling theatre, where a sort of comic opera was played, using masked performers.” His theatre group was searching for traditional theatre forms from the Turkish-Asiatic culture, where the performer is also a musician, theatre actor and dancer.<sup>77</sup> This was The Unknown Theatre of Khamza, so named because of the rediscovery of the lost theatre traditions. They presented a performance characterised by the simultaneous adoption of various theatrical ‘worlds’. Three can be immediately recognised:

---

<sup>74</sup> Kier Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, (Routledge 1988): 4. Dramatic Logic.

<sup>75</sup> Petr Bogatyrev, “Forms and Functions of folk theatre”, *Semiotics of Art*: (MIT Press 1976).

<sup>76</sup> The unknown theatre of Khamza was witnessed in ‘De Singel’, a performance venue in Antwerpen (Belgium) during a festival of theatre from Central Asia, March 1993.

<sup>77</sup> Taken from the programme notes provided by the festival. Translated from Dutch into English by Z. Laskewicz.

(i) The discourse of the ‘performer’; the world that is made up of the interaction between the personalities of the actors before they have taken on alternate roles. The musicians are particularly important members that remain constant during the entire performance and can interact between all the different worlds.

(ii) The discourse of the ‘performing’; the world in which the central dramatic action takes place.

(iii) The world of the audience.

The performance itself is structured by interactions between these discourses. It is important first to give a summary of events within the performance:

The Unknown Theatre of Khamza

*“On one night I went to my beloved”*

- a comedy

Onto an empty stage, set up with plain tree branches, comes a jolly troop of actors. Dancing, singing, joking. They are accompanied by the musicians and heavily veiled dancers. While they direct their singing and dancing towards the audience, the actors hang the decor up: Four coloured curtains making a makeshift stage. After it is hanged up the curtain opens, and we are witness to a simple story about masters and servants: The man of the house wants to slip away and asks his servant to take his place in bed for the night so his wife will not suspect. But that same night the wife of the house has just the same idea, and asks her servant if she will take her place. In the place of the masters, the servants amuse themselves. Like often in Eastern theatre, the women’s roles are played by men, which certainly gives a comic effect. The musicians sit next to the scene and continually interrupt the action in order to illustrate the events through music. But after an hour the party is over. The theatre is again packed away and the performers move off stage.<sup>78</sup>

The interaction between the different ‘worlds’ was particularly interesting. The performance communicated first through the ‘performer’ discourse, where members of the cast were presented busying themselves preparing for a theatre event, which included setting up the ‘stage’ itself, and then becoming the ‘actors’ within this ‘play within a play’ (a form adopted so convincingly by Brecht in The Caucasian Chalk Circle). In a short time, a simple construction was built before the audience, now hiding the actors as they changed costumes and positioned set pieces. Before the curtain was opened, the musicians glanced in to see what the actors were doing, and the audience was offered a glimpse of a liminal moment: An actor revealed changing into the costume of a woman. Caught in this state of half preparation, he was still able to recognise the world of the actors and even the audience, and rushed in a desperate state to close the curtain again. When the curtain was finally opened and the musicians had taken

---

<sup>78</sup> Translated from the programme by Z. Laskewicz.

their place, the 'performing' discourse was revealed. Interaction mostly took place between the musicians and the 'performing' discourse, where the musicians observed and commented on the action, and the characters in the 'performing' discourse reacted. However, it was sometimes difficult to determine from which world the actor was communicating with the musicians: For example if the actor reacted to a criticism from the musicians as to his acting ability, it is most likely that he was communicating from the 'performer' discourse, but if the actor asked the musician to play dance music to celebrate the letter she (he) has received from her (his) lover, then she (he) was communicating from the 'performing' discourse. The musicians and the actors in the 'performing' discourse also related directly to the world of the audience, sometimes asking advice, sometimes simply directing narrative deliberately in their direction, acknowledging their existence. This interaction is fascinating, and one must not be deceived by the simplicity of the dramatic text: The performance text reveals this theatre to be an intricate communicative vehicle where the theatrical nature of the performance is highlighted by the exploration of the theatrical frame. The end of the performance was also interesting. The slapstick theatre became resolved, and the curtain was closed, followed by a closing song from the musicians. The actors emerged from backstage and bowed, and then the actor (dressed as a woman) went up to the audience and begun speaking, communicating from the 'performing' discourse, provocatively stroking the head of a man in the front row. Then the actor took off the wig and entered the 'performer' discourse again.

Het Loket is also based on extended interaction between the dramatic worlds. Here exists the discourse of the musicians and the singers, the world of the *Préposé* discourse, the world of the Chinese teacher/student discourse, and of course the world of the audience. The performance begins in the discourse of the musicians, a very limited world in which the musicians exist purely to perform; they are dead silent and expressionless until music is played and are mostly unable to interact independently with any other world in the performance unless it is through the production of music. This is the musical frame. When the singers enter, the musicians are allowed to recognise their existence, and applaud vehemently. The world of the musicians is only allowed to react to the world of the singers if the singers so desire it<sup>79</sup>, as demonstrated when the female singer 'brings the instruments to life' by first imitating their sound and then introducing them to the world of the audience. The singers are always the intermediary between the other worlds, like the musicians in the performance from Uzbekistan, although the function is considerably different. The world of the actors, represented through two contrasting discourses, does not recognise the existence of any other reality, and the singers again act as intermediaries

---

<sup>79</sup> There are moments however when the musicians are able to assert their independence, for example the violin player taking back the flower.

between this world and the world of the audience, although as already pointed out communication is impossible because the tools of the discourse are deliberately unusable for the expected communicative form. The climax of the composition involves a sort of an interaction between all the different realities: The sound of traffic noises coming from an ‘omnipotent’ world overwhelms the performance, and gradually the musicians, who seemed to be otherwise trapped in their roles as musical performers, are brought out of this state by the noise and walk one by one off stage in. When the noise is at its loudest and all the instruments have left, the female performer from the *Préposé* discourse is brought out of an almost trance-like performance of stylised gestures by the traffic noises and rushes off stage. Then there is the sound of the traffic accident, and the singers, who were otherwise totally oblivious to the noises, are suddenly brought to the realization of the death of the client/student, and themselves die in an attempt to explain the story. This attempt to combine the different dramatic worlds is deliberately provocative, attempting to present through their collision both the problematic nature of music and opera performances, and possibilities for a new type of performance. Harrison Birtwistle’s music-theatre composition Down by the Greenwood Side involves a similar use of the simultaneous combination of dramatic worlds: The reality of ‘Mrs Green’, a character from a lyric song tradition who killed her children, and a world taken from a medieval ‘Mummers’ play. The realities do not interact until the end of the composition where Mrs Green enters the world of the medieval play by literally ‘stepping in’ to the previously induced performance area. Here she is promptly judged and carried off stage.<sup>80</sup>

Many elements adopted in this composition are without ‘translatable’ meaning, signifying the adoption of musical communication modes. In HetLoket, compositional impetus grew from a notion of an ‘enhanced language’ unique to the theatre, common in Eastern performance forms. According to Karel Brusak of the Prague structuralist school, this was especially true of the Chinese theatre:

“Theatre speech was formed by an artificial mixing of various dialects. [...] The declaiming of individual words is founded on a strictly adhered to system of four tones which prevents possible errors in comprehension and also serves to heighten the musicality of the speech.”<sup>81</sup>

The nonsense language of the male singer alludes to Chinese text declamation in its use of sliding tones and a falsetto voice, but because this language is without ‘meaning’ it is not possible for the ‘sounds’ of the speech to enhance an

---

<sup>80</sup> Down by the Greenwood Side (1969), A Dramatic Pastoral, Score UE 15327. Libretto by Michael Nyman.

<sup>81</sup> Karel Brusak, “Signs in the Chinese Theatre”, Semiotics of Art (MIT Press 1976): 3. Acoustic Signs.

interpretation.<sup>82</sup> Signification occurs in a considerably different way, working in a larger system of gestures, acts and sounds. By not providing the opera singers with the communicative forms or narratives that are necessary for resolution, in fact forcing them to perform in alien forms (movement, gesture and alternative singing styles), the musical operatic frame is explicitly framed and the strict elitist conventions of opera are questioned. The gestures of the female singer have significance in this regard: By relating to events that have already happened and will happen in the performance (e.g. the smelling of a flower recalls the Introduction, the beating of a gong foresees the end of the short declamation, and the suicide gestures foresee the end of the performance) the gestures are particularly ambiguous, exaggerating the fact that they are using 'untranslatable' languages. This method of signification is used in order to not restrict the interpretable possibilities, extending in this case from the questioning of the musical frame to the questioning of language as a valid form of communication. The use of nonsense language to radically alienate the signifier from its meaning-function and to demonstrate the opacity of spoken language looks back to the work of Alfred Jarry and Ilya Zdanevich.<sup>83</sup>

This form of signification where a number of different levels work together with the explicit purpose of communicating 'meaning' is present also in the discourse of the teacher and the student, but this time the nature of the message is not at all ambiguous (despite being without vocal sound): The music works directly with the action to create the dialogue. This recalls the function of the music in the folk theatre form Uzbekistan, where the musicians provide musical passages, sound effects and vocal interactions in order to assist the theatre in communicating.

The final point of significance is the score itself which uses a combination of theatrical and musical notation in order to create a new type of performance text, a notion discussed in the first two chapters of this text. The exact intricacies in the notating of music-theatre compositions is certainly beyond the realm of this discussion, but it is enough to say that in order to create such a 'text' new notation methods were necessary; methods that literally deconstructed the traditional forms of a music 'score' and a dramatic 'play'. Examples from the score are included at the end of this document.

In Het Loket the deliberate collision and interaction of different realities are presented in order to extend the communicative possibilities. The central element in the composition is of course 'the teller' itself ('het loket', 'le

---

<sup>82</sup> The 'nonsense' language adopted by the male singer is actually made up of vowel sounds taken from Tardieu's play. This element of the composition was completed by Moniek Darge.

<sup>83</sup> The work of Zdanevich, a Russian futurist who was later to become a dadaist, will be introduced in the next chapter.

préposé'), symbolic of the distance that exists between people in the process of communicating, and the teller more specifically represents that barrier that cannot be overcome in order to discover true understanding: Language. This devastating truth is revealed when the apparent harmony between all the discourses is ruptured by the traffic noises, bringing the composition to its conclusion. The teller remains the central, pervasive image, and becomes representative for all the restricting Western traditions that this composition is standing against, beginning superficially with the opera and ending with the more devastating restrictions of an almost purely language based culture: "Modern society believes itself to be ushering in a civilisation of the image, but what it actually establishes overall, is a civilisation of speech."<sup>84</sup>

It is clear that Het Loket is more than simply a composition that points out the negative aspects of opera, and is extended through the use of alternative communicative systems. It is also quite clear that by combining the contrasting narratives and performance discourses, the Western theatre and opera forms are deliberately distanced in order to exaggerate these contrasts and find new forms of representation.

---

<sup>84</sup> Roland Barthes, "A Lesson in Writing", Image Music Text (ed.) Stephen Heath (Fontana Press 1977).

## Chapter 4.

“It is not *new* objects which should be used in art, but a new and fantastic light should be thrown upon the old ones.

— Alexei Kruchenykh

**Analysis two:**

ZAUM > ZACHAR LHWKEVIC ZAUM  
The Russian Futurist Connection

Zaum is the name for a music-theatre composition involving an entirely new attitude to language introduced during a little understood period of history close by the turn of the century: Russian Futurism. This composition takes the futurist theory and extends it through various contrasting theoretical concepts, some already encountered in this paper. The intention is to create a theatrical composition based on a new attitude to language, but this time to entirely escape from the the bonds of Western conventions by creating a communicative form that is unique to the theatre. This is the first attempt to completely explore the possibilities of discovering text through music and of music communicating through text, the ultimate aim being to present various levels of ambiguity that can providing many possible ways for ‘meaning’ to be rendered in the theatre.

Russian futurism had a totally contrasting set of influences to other movements in art primarily because of the isolated position of Russia. These influences reflect a dichotomy: A vision for the future, and an interest in ancient history. This expressed itself through their highly innovative ways of rethinking language. The Russian futurists possibly went further than any movement in art in exploring the possibilities of extension of the word into other media, although their work to this day is largely unrecognised and ignored. The dominant figure remains the Italian futurists whose obsession with war, speed and the city makes them easier to classify under their chosen title. There is no doubt that the Italian futurists reflected their dislike for the rigid conventions of its society in the break-up of grammar, words, and the pictorial image, which irrecoverably changed the face of aesthetic values, and this deconstruction is one of the factors common with Russian futurism. However, the Russian futurist vision took these notions further, using the deconstruction of different mediums to create something new, vital and exciting for the changing world. The Russians certainly recognized this contrast, in fact they rejected the Italians and felt that they had surpassed them even before they became labelled with the name ‘futurists’. These artists also adopted Eastern philosophies and called for a total



rejection of Western Europe. Benedict Livshits, an important Russian futurist poet and theoretician, described the West and the East as completely different systems of aesthetic vision and said that they should “recognise themselves as Asians and rid themselves of their European yoke.”

A group of artists recognised for the extremity of their experimental work, became known as the ‘cubo-futurists’. The name of this composition is taken from one the primary theoretical innovations introduced by members of this group: *Zaumni Yazyk* (abbreviated *zaum*), meaning ‘trans-sense language.’ This is basically a form of poetic communication that redefined language itself, but not in terms of ‘meaning’ in the translatable sense: According to the futurists, poetry using language restricted by strict referential meaning and grammatical structures was no longer a valid form of artistic communication. Poetry was extended to include non-referential sounds that could nevertheless be enjoyed ‘by themselves,’ an attitude that had previously been confined to music. These linguistic innovations certainly extended beyond merely the meaningless stringing together of Russian sounds and into areas of communication that had rarely been seriously considered. This included the theatre: Alexei Kruchenykh (1886-1969), one of the primary theoreticians of *zaum* language, said that he saw *zaum* as the only possibility for use in the new theatre and cinema. Russian futurist theatre was taken to its extreme by Ilya Zdanevich (1894-1975), who was later to become part of the Dada movement. He wrote a series of five plays entirely in nonsense language, and simultaneously extended the sound possibilities of the medium and broke the language barrier by writing them entirely in phonetics (even the title and the stage directions). According to Jindrich Honzl, a member of the Prague structuralist school “with the advent of the cubo-futurist theatre new materials appeared on the stage, and formerly undreamed of things acquired various representative functions.”<sup>85</sup>

This ‘multi-media’ sensibility which is characteristic of the Russian futurist movement has immediate relevance to my own work in redefining traditionally accepted mediums in order to create new possibilities in performance. The intention of the composition is to rediscover the theory of *zaum* language, and through this to dynamically present through performance an array of gradually transforming musical, theatrical and visual elements; a collage of sound, movement and action that can be interpreted on a number of different levels. In this ‘rediscovery’ of the work of the Russian futurists, the poetry of three of the leading Russian futurist poets who were the primary supporters of *zaum* have been integrated: Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922), Alexei Kruchenykh and Vasily Kamensky (1884-1961). Each had their own individual attitude to the use of *zaum*, presenting contrasting but equally valid concepts which resulted in

---

<sup>85</sup> Jindrich Honzl, “Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre”, *Semiotics of Art* (MIT Press 1976).

the production of different poetic styles.

Velimir Khlebnikov was a dreamer and had a truly unusual vision; his poetry deals with language as an infinitely redefinable medium, and historical fact on a constantly occurring time continuum. In his poetry, he yearned for the past and antiquity, and was almost religiously devoted to the East. For Khlebnikov, poetry was not an end in itself or a 'realistic' description of reality, but a means of exploration and discovery of language and new forms: "He showed us aspects of language whose existence we did not even suspect."<sup>86</sup> Knowing the power of the word as manifested in charms and incantations, Khlebnikov dreamed of taming this power and of turning transrational language into a rational one, but with a difference. Unlike the languages we use, this one would be a universal language of pure concepts clearly expressed by speech sounds. Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov were the first poets to adopt zaum as a creative medium, and they shared a close working relationship and friendship.

Alexei Kruchenykh was to become the primary supporter and theoretician of zaum, which he saw as a leading mode of expression because he believed that "trans-sense language was demanded by the confused character of contemporary life and served as an antidote to the paralysis of common language."<sup>87</sup> This was a reaction against the obsession with meaning, reason, psychology and philosophy presented by the conservative literary traditions. The absurdity of Kruchenykh's most experimental works was a very specific behaviour; it was different from the seemingly absurd with a hidden message, different even from the surreal type of subconscious associations. This absurdity was a pointless, mindless, stubbornly senseless, irresolvable condition meant only to reveal new and previously invisible realms of the psyche.<sup>88</sup> Although Kruchenykh's zaum seems to be taking an extremist stance on language deconstruction, on closer examination an interesting duality is presented: Kornei Chukovsky, a literary critic, commented on the primeval nature of this poetry. He said that trans-sense language was not a 'language', but a "pre-language, pre-cultural, pre-historical, when there was no discourse, conversation, only cries and screams." The strange irony of the situation was that in their passion for the future, the futurists had "selected for their poetry the most ancient of the very ancient languages."<sup>89</sup>

Vasily Kamensky presented an alternative emphasis through his use of zaum: After postulating the 'musical' orientation of the word, Kamensky asserted the poet's right to his own unique understanding and vision of poetic beauty so as to discover new poetic paths. A Russian futurist critic wrote that "perhaps none

---

<sup>86</sup> Osip Brik, "On Khlebnikov", *The Ardis anthology of Russian Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980)

<sup>87</sup> Vahan D. Barooshian, *Russian Cubo-futurism* (mouton Paris 1976): Chapter 4.

<sup>88</sup> Charlotte Douglas, "Views from the New World," *Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980).

<sup>89</sup> Kornej Chokovsky, *Futuristy* (Peterburg 1922).

has felt the sound as an aim in itself, as a unique joy as Vasily Kamensky.”<sup>90</sup>

The theatrical work of Ilya Zdanevich will also play a role in this theoretical analysis because of his creation of a particularly unique theatre. His major contribution to Russian futurism took the form of a series of five plays called ‘Aslaablichya.’<sup>91</sup> Zdanevich named the genre *vertep* thus emphasising its primitivistic nature. *Vertep* was a form of puppet folk theatre of Ukrainian origin, which mixed episodes from the Bible with comic scenes of everyday life. In the tradition of folk theatre the figure of the Master begins each play with a short talk to the audience, providing hints as to the possible meaning; simultaneously ‘inducing’ and defining the performance space. The text itself is not Russian, but zaum, and it is perhaps the most consistent and large scale use of zaum in Russian futurist literature. The spoken element is further enhanced by the fact that every word, including stage directions and the title, is given in phonetic transcription,<sup>92</sup> significant in relation to the possibilities of the creation of a new performance text. Also significant is Zdanevich’s exploration of folk-theatre forms that communicate through expressive means considerably beyond simply the use of language.<sup>93</sup>

The Russian futurists in their adoption of zaum language certainly caught more than a glimpse of what was to become the obsession of Antonin Artaud: The creation of a new language unique to the theatre, where the word is broken from its strict meaning and discovered in a completely new form. From his famous volume of theoretical essays The Theatre and its Double a clear image of this language can be found:

“The language of theatre is, in effect, the language of the stage, which is dynamic and objective. It is the sum of everything which can be put on

---

<sup>90</sup> Vahan D. Barooshian, Russian Cubo-Futurism (Mouton Paris 1976): Chapter 5.

<sup>91</sup> Relating to the image of a donkey.

<sup>92</sup> Vladimir Markov, Russian Futurism (MacGibbon and Kee Ltd. 1968): Chapter 7.

<sup>93</sup> Demonstrative of these communication possibilities, in the performance of The Unknown Theatre of Khamza, it was certainly still possible to understand the performance without the available simultaneous translation.

a stage in terms of objects, shapes, attitudes, and meanings. But only to the extent where all these elements arrange themselves in the process and are cut off from their immediate meaning, and endeavour, indeed, to create a true language based on the sign, rather than based on the word. That is where the notion of symbolism based on the changing of meanings comes in. Things will be stripped of their immediate meaning and will be given a new one.”<sup>94</sup>

The final zaum composition will be a full scale three-movement work for five performers and tape. The tape part will be for electronic sounds as well as recordings of the performers themselves, reflecting a connecting series of parallel structures that unite the three movements. The zaum texts form the structural basis for the composition, uniting both the gestural, the vocal and the musical communicative forms. The emphasis is on creating a performance form that will produce no ‘logical’ expectations as to narrative through the adoption of musical structures, but will still allow various forms of theatrical and musical communication to be presented in forms that can flow between one another. The intention is to create interesting and exciting contrasts through projecting these systems together, giving the performance freedom to work on a number of different levels simultaneously, presenting many possible interpretations as to the actual ‘narrative’ or ‘narratives’ at play. As the texts adopted are firstly in Russian, and secondly have no interpretable meaning anyway, the freedom attained is through assigning new meanings to these vocal sounds: The intention of course is to use this ambiguity between text, language and meaning as the vehicle to create other communicative forms. During the course of the composition various ensemble pieces will form and unform on stage, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes solo, in order to present different aspects of zaum communication. Choreographed movement and interaction between the tape and the live performance will play an important role.

---

<sup>94</sup> Antonin Artaud , “Theatre and Poetry”, *Artaud and Theatre* (ed.) Claude Schumacher (Methuen Drama London 1989): 5. The Theatre and its Double.

The composition has no 'set'; place and absence of place are simultaneously created and destroyed by the performers who move within a central performance area. Lighting and sounds (other than from the performers themselves) also play a role in creating the space in which the performers move. Costume design is relatively simple: The performers are called on to wear a standard dress suit that is a little too large, preferably each player with a different coloured suit. The performers should also be wearing the same type of hat, united both by colour and form. The costumes are not changed completely during the work, but at different times the composition calls for certain elements of the costume to be removed or reworked in some way - particularly the hat and the jacket. The purpose of this costume is first to standardise the performers into a form that will allow them to be used during the composition as an 'instrument' for the development, but at the same time will not be alien to the audience and provide some ambiguity when these 'standard' costumes are used by performers making very 'non-standard' gestures and sounds, as well as actually 'using' these costumes for contrasting functions within the work. The multi-functionary nature of these costumes deliberately stretches the economy of means in the theatre, adopting the 'transformational' possibilities available for objects and entities on the stage. This is a reaction against the tradition of realistic dramatic representation which severely limits this mobility of the sign-relationship: In the Western theatre we generally expect the object being signified to be represented by a vehicle that has the direct characteristics of that object. This is not the case, however, in the Oriental theatre where far more semantic scope is permitted to each stage item: The multi-levelled adoption of costumes in Zaum recalls the role of objects in the Chinese theatre. It is also reminiscent of Grotowski's 'poor' theatre where a rich semantic structure is produced by a small stock of vehicles.<sup>95</sup>

In the composition, the initial broader structural emphasis is on a gradual transferal from 'meaningful' to 'meaningless' texts. I am using these terms carefully and in the sense that Western thought recognises 'meaningless': An entity, be it an object or a concept, that can not be translated into a recognisable language form. In truth there is actually nothing in this composition without 'meaning' or 'purpose', but the emphasis is on the movement from texts that adopt forms that appear to be in some form communicating through narrative means - telling stories and performing pantomimes in the form of a ritual; through the questioning of language itself expressed through the creation of a new 'meta-language' defined completely through movement; to a section based on the exploration of the semiotic possibilities of movement in musical performance. This divides the composition into three major divisions relating to the work of a specific cubo-futurist poet, and each of these movements will be

---

<sup>95</sup>Kier Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama (Routledge 1988): 2. Foundations.

described in detail in relation to the communication forms adopted.

**ZAUM—1:**

Khlebnikov

The first movement presents an exploration of Khlebnikov's attitude to zaum poetry. Khlebnikov had an extended attitude to language as a communicative form, believing strongly in the almost 'magical' power of vocal sounds both to signify and even affect the world in a way beyond signification. This certainly connects with an ancient attitude to language, and one adopted in many Eastern theatre forms. According to Julia Kristeva the work of Khlebnikov "threaded through metaphor and metonymy a network of phonemes or phonic groups charged with instinctual drives and meaning, constituting what for the author was a numerical code, a ciphering, underlying the verbal sign."<sup>96</sup> Characteristic of Khlebnikov's work is an attempt to construct a language of hieroglyphs from abstract concepts, sometimes called the 'stellar' or 'universal' language. Here the Khlebnikovian zaum attains its highest point of rarefaction, and only conventionally can one speak of its possible decipherment.<sup>97</sup> Antonin Artaud's concept of stage language is certainly significant here, an attitude where signification freely germinates from a variety of different sources:

Gestures will be equivalent to signs, signs to words. The spoken word, when psychological circumstances permit, will be performed in an incantory way.[...] Movements, poses, bodies of characters will form or dissolve like hieroglyphs. This language will spread from one organ to another, establishing analogies, unforeseen associations between series of objects, series of sound, series of intonations.<sup>98</sup>

This movement will adopt a flowing structure that will present different ways of interpreting these attitudes to language, particularly by extending the vocal sound into movement. Through a combination of the performance of ritual like movements and sounds, and narrative based 'story-telling' forms where short scenes are enacted through lingual, visual and musical means without the use of a 'translatable' language, some sense of 'meaning' that goes beyond the words themselves will hopefully be discovered: These linguistic structures are adopted as part of the musical and gestural form, adopting a connection between gesture and sound, sound and colour. The structures within the work are 'musical' and not related to a literal translation of the texts used, but are connected more with the relationship between music and ritual, as discussed in chapter two in relation to certain forms of Eastern theatre, existing in a liminal world somewhere between here and beyond, the distance between a sound and its signification;

---

<sup>96</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (CUP New York 1980): 1. The Ethics of Linguistics.

<sup>97</sup> *Sonora:Poesia Sonora*, Cramps Records (Memoria Spa, 20123 Milano): Zaum, transmental language.

<sup>98</sup> Antonin Artaud, "To André Gide", *Artaud and Theatre* (ed.) Claude Schumacher (Methuen Drama London 1989): 5. The NRF Project.

dwelling in the realm of 'significance'. The movement begins with a strong internal rhythm uniting the movements, gestures, vocal sounds and music, and also the relationship between the performers on the stage and the objects which they use. This internal rhythm gradually falls away as the communication forms adopted by the performers become more complicated and the action of the players seems to become independent of this internal rhythm.



**ZAUM—2:**  
Kruchenykh

Kruchenykh played a particularly significant role with regard to the theory and use of zaum language. He thought that the conservative literary traditions placed serious limitations on poetic imagination, invention, verbal play and spontaneous intuition. Kruchenykh suggested that the ‘emptier’ the poetic imagination, the more creative and fruitful the poetic result: The penetration of the mysteries beyond the rational world.<sup>99</sup> These anarchic attitudes to language form the basis for the second movement, and the emphasis however is on the rejection of the idea of any ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ in the Western sense in order for some kind of signification to occur.

This is presented by a constant transformation between ‘theatrical’ and ‘musical’ form, or more correctly, contrasting performance situations that allude to theatrical ‘meaning’ (by adopting gesture-signs that have some meaning other than as part of the performance) and totally ‘meaningless’ gestures/sounds: The composition begins with performers adopting potentially ‘meaningful’ gestures which forms into an amusing musical form, just as the composition ends after a musical vocal composition develops into a performance that alludes to Russian ‘slapstick’ theatre. The purpose is to explore points of ambiguity between ‘musical’ and ‘theatrical’ communication. The central section uses fragmented gestures adopted from the first movement, and the movements themselves become directly representative of vocal sound from tape: A new ‘performance’ language is in fact created before the eyes of the audience.

Lighting emerges on the central ensemble, who stand side-by-side centre stage close by the audience, staring blankly as if entirely disinterested in the performance event. It begins first with the performers using certain gestures seemingly at random: Coughing, checking watch, clearing throat, sighing etc. The intention is for it to appear that the performers are in fact waiting for something to happen. This soon forms into simple musical structures, where the same series of gestures are no longer performed randomly but form part of a simple rhythmic structure rendering the movements quite absurd. This is a deliberate use of traditionally ‘out of frame’ activity to highlight the performance mode. Given the conventional basis of the frame, great importance attaches to the audience’s willingness to ‘disattend’ certain events that are not actually part of the performance, such as audience activity. In this performance the audience are directly confronted with this ‘out of frame’ activity, material that is both non-musical and non-theatrical, but which is obviously impossible to ‘disattend’ because the performers have already been recognised as such and are

---

<sup>99</sup> Vahan D. Barooshian, *Russian Cubo-Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980): pg. 83.

standing in the centre of the stage.<sup>100</sup> This is comparable to an Italian futurist performance called *Luce!* ('lights!') where the audience is confronted with a dark performance hall where nothing appears to happen, and then are induced by cast members planted in the audience to call for the lights to be brought up. When the lights finally return, the performance is over. Non-standard material was also readily adopted in Russian futurist performance.

The tape part emerges from beneath the sound of the live performance ensemble with whispered conversational vocal sounds that appear to come from nowhere, and a sudden loud sibilant sound (Shh!) stills the ensemble who were previously performing the absurd rhythmic gestures. Five voices can be heard on tape speaking in a language that sounds a little like Russian. These five voices on are designed to be recordings of the same five performers performing on the podium, so that the performers must actually listen for their own voice. The text that is used on the recording is taken from a Kruchenykh zaum poem that alludes to Russian, but has actually no translation into any language; the poem was fragmented and a conversational vocabulary formed from this source material. The first reaction from the performance ensemble is to be seemingly shocked, causing them to look in all directions to see exactly from where the sound emerged. A number of whispered sounds on the tape lead to a shouted command which brings the ensemble to attention. Then another vocal command is uttered, this sound becomes a name for one of the performers and causes him to move to a certain position and face in a certain direction. This happens a number of times until all the performers are named and positioned in specified places around the performance space. Then simple syllabic vocal sounds<sup>101</sup> becomes represented on the stage by simple movements from the performers (the raising of an arm, turning of the head etc.); the voices appear to be commanding the performers to move. The same vocal sound comes to represent the same movement for a certain performer, and a number of the vocal sounds are shared by all the performers. In other words, a 'semiotic code' is created on the stage, where the audience is deliberately directed into recognising an entirely new, be it limited, 'stage language.' Ambiguity is presented by the contrast between the indexical nature of the voices on tape who appear to be 'commanding' the performers to move, and the symbolic nature of the language itself. This is theoretically provocative, questioning theatre forms which use always the same form of preset language conventions to communicate in the theatre. As well as questioning this particular theatrical frame, it also brings up the 'theatre competence' introduced in chapter three, where the very nature of the performance forces the audience to become again competent through the use

---

<sup>100</sup> It is interesting to note however that the audience during the first performance interacted with the performance by performing similar gestures and sounds, brought about being confronted by the same behaviour on stage.

<sup>101</sup> These vocal sounds are taken from freely from another Kruchenykh poem and the Russian language itself.

of a completely new language/performance form.

Back to a description of the composition: The vocal/movement sounds on tape become more frequent until finally all the performers are moving in reaction to the cassette. A point of development is reached where ‘movement words’ are formed by the syllabic Russian fragments, and each performer has a specific ‘word’ which he must perform. After the voices have stopped and the ensemble on the stage is still, the names of the performers are called and one by one they move into specified positions surrounding the performance space. The lighting fades out, and the sound of voices in whispered conversation can be heard from the cassette. This develops gradually into a musical structure, and finally the vocal composition reaches its climax resulting in the lights being brought up suddenly, spotlighting two performers centre stage performing an absurd action; presenting an almost slow motion fragment of Russian ‘slapstick’ theatre. A number of different fragments are presented by the same two performers, separated by changing the colour of the lighting to differentiate the small sections, and the players still surrounding the performance space read sections from a complete zaum poem by Kruchenykh. This slapstick ending is deliberately reminiscent of the nonsense folk-like zaum theatre of Zdanevich. A final text also from Kruchenykh is adopted by the performers on stage in multiple languages when the short pantomime is over, beginning with one player, and then spreading to the others: “Lets put an end to this ridiculous vaudeville.” When all the players are saying the phrase as if trying to convince one another of the urgency, a loud sound from the tape (‘nyet’) results in the performers stopping and then performing a simultaneous gesture (a finger to the lips to indicate quietness), after which the performance space is quickly brought into darkness.

**ZAUM—3**

Kamensky

Vasily Kamensky (1884-1961) was a major part of the early futurist activity, and soon after a brief retirement, he rejoined the group at a time when it definitely had switched from the impressionism of the old days to new, avant-garde techniques. Kamensky not only welcomed the change, but wanted to proceed even further in this direction. Following the premises of Russian cubo-futurism, he attempted to break down language and reconstruct it in a totally new form. He became interested in the phonic instrumentation, and in particular with the possibilities offered by onomatopoeic procedures: Here a melodic line came increasingly to prevail. The structure of the third movement, in adopting some of the attitudes to language characteristic of Kamensky, uses the structures and rhythms behind text to structure the musical development within the composition, reminiscent of Indian dance ‘spoken’ through the rhythmic nature of the words: Musical structures continually result in the formation of the text just as the reciting of the text results in the creation of musical structures. However, the emphasis in this section is to explore more completely the role that ‘movement’ plays in the creation of music; the natural physicality of movement expressed through playing an instrument or conducting. These ‘instrument-based’ movements will be discovered in a highly stylised form, reminiscent again of the aesthetic/communicative function so common in Eastern performances, but more particularly relating to a relatively new form of Balinese dance that has used the ‘physicality’ of instrument-playing to structure the dance:

“The originator of *Kebiyar Dudik* had great musical knowledge, and one of his specialities was playing the ‘trompong’ while he danced, he moved with great dexterity along the scales of the upside down brown bowls.”<sup>102</sup>

According to Purnomo Widagdo, a dancer trained in this form in Bali, the dance itself evolved almost purely from the playing of this instrument, where the length of the instrument itself necessitated the player to move from one end to the other. It did not take long for it to be discovered in a stylised dance form.

Godfried-Willem Raes, a Belgian composer, bases his musical performance theory also as an expression of movement, represented particularly in his work for ‘invisible instruments’ *A Book of Moves*: “We are not searching for methods to support movement, but rather for methods that movement uses as a direct instrument for the expressive handling of sound. [...] The movement becomes

---

<sup>102</sup> Taken from a document provided by Purnomo Widagdo, describing the history of the dance.

instrumental for the sound.”<sup>103</sup> In this composition the movements of the performer are picked up by specialised electronic sensors and translated into information that can be used by a computer; in effect the performer by moving produces sounds. ‘Invisible instruments’ are positioned at specified position in space. The possibilities for the expression of music through movement are explored in a wide variety of different forms in this composition divided into sixteen different parts. This includes a representation of the conducting process, and a parody of solo percussion literature from the serial and post-serial period, the player jumping from one instrument to the other.<sup>104</sup> These two movements are certainly effective in exploring the physical aspect of instrument playing and conducting, demonstrating the essential physicality of music playing and from that an exploration of the semiotic possibilities.

These theories and attitudes will be adopted primarily by using the performers on stage as tools both to express the relationship between sound and movement, and in particular the possibilities for interfacing text with these notions of music. The movement begins with a ‘phantom’ ensemble that forms on stage where the existence of strange musical instruments is suggested by the stylised movements of the performers. The sounds themselves are heard from a recording, and are actually unusual vocal sounds of the same five performers. After this complete ensemble piece, a number of events occur on stage involving interaction between text, sound and movement, where rhythmic texts are recited forming the musical structures (reflected both through music on tape and movements by the performers), and more particularly the expression of a number of different ‘rhythmic/movement’ levels occurring in the same time-span, as represented in Indonesian music. Here the combination of different rhythmic levels are represented through the movements of the performers, contrasting with Western music where a master rhythm controls the gestures of all performers.

As can be demonstrated in the work of the Russian futurists, the ultra-modern tends to link up with the archaic; an eternal contradiction of the avant-garde, where contemporary attitudes feed back to an ancient primeval tongue. Kruchenykh himself wrote poetry consisting entirely of vowels, which can compare to the Egyptian priests who chose a name composed of vowels for the gods in the most solemn of religious ceremonies.<sup>105</sup> The classical tradition obliterated this type of ‘Asian’ invention and it has fallen to the avant-garde to rediscover and appropriate it: “We have charged the word with forces and energies which made it possible us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the

---

<sup>103</sup> Taken from Godfried’s still unpublished theoretical and technical work about his composition A Book of Moves.

<sup>104</sup> The movements are ‘Lead’ and ‘Beat’ respectively.

<sup>105</sup> Sonora:Poesia Sonora, Cramps Records (Memoria Spa, 20123 Milano):What is sound poetry?

‘word’ as a magical complex of images”<sup>106</sup> wrote the dadaist Hugo Ball; “we must withdraw into the deepest alchemy of words, reserving to poetry its most sacred ground.” This programme would have appealed to Velimir Khlebnikov who wanted to create a mythical ‘pan-slavonic’ language “whose shoots must grow through the thicknesses of modern Russian.”<sup>107</sup> Perhaps the greatest tribute left by the Russian futurists was zaum. Zaum looked like the outer limit of poetry, where sounds can create meaning but are not subordinated to it. The two major proponents of zaum, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, certainly shared a vision for new ways of dealing with language, even if their methods were decidedly different. In both cases, the ‘absurdity’ of zaum had a purpose and was never completely anarchic: For Khlebnikov that purpose was connected with new ways of harnessing language as a means of communication, whereas Kruchenykh totally abandoned rational interpretation wanting to connect on a level that went beyond rational processes and deep into the psyche. Even Kamensky was to develop the concept of zaum through his interest in the musical nature of nonsense verse. For the Russian futurists this was “an appeal to a higher sense, one that is implicit only in the form of the work itself. The spatial temporal universe, one that is stable and pervasive.”<sup>108</sup> This interpretation of Russian futurism as a transcendent movement is comparable to Zen Buddhism, which treats alogical language as the key to enlightenment and a complete understanding of the world. This also connects back to the ‘ritual’ significance forms adopted by Eastern performances, where untranslatable vocal and gestural languages are adopted to communicate concepts essentially alien to language. My intention in the zaum composition is to explore this connection between the ancient and the contemporary by adopting certain attitudes to performance and linguistic theory in the ‘musical’ structure.

---

<sup>106</sup> Annabelle Melzer, *Latest Rage the Big Drum*, (UMI Resesarch Press 1980).

<sup>107</sup> *Sonora:Poesia Sonora*, Cramps Records (Memoria Spa, 20123 Milano):Forerunners and Dadaists in Germany.

<sup>108</sup> Charlotte Douglas, “View from the New World”, *Ardis Anthology of Russian Futurism* (Ardis Lakeland Press 1980).

Now that we are at the end of our discussion it is time to refer back to the questions that begun this analytical survey. The most important personal discovery for me relates most to the recognition of music as a distinctly significant form, despite Western traditions that want us to understand that it is 'abstract'. I have also come to the understanding that if music is to be discovered in the theatre in a form that is more cogent than simply an expressive accompaniment to meaning-based language, it must have independent significant potential and play some role in the significant process. Through this understanding I believe that it is possible to create an entirely new theatre. Below is a list of elements that must be adopted in order to create such a theatre:

- (i) Creation of a new language adopting elements of other communicative forms, especially non-vocal.
- (ii) Adoption and exploitation of an ambiguity between musical development and the aural/semantic structure of language.
- (iii) Exploration of the power of gestural communication; representing a duality between aesthetic and communicative functions.
- (iv) Extension of the performance text through an exploration of new forms of notation.
- (v) Exploration of the possibilities of expressing a 'text' through purely musical means.
- (vi) Exploring the 'significance' of music that can communicate beyond language.