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Clive Barker: Man of Counterpoint

POINT AGAINST POINT, note against note: the counterpoint, in music, is not just simple difference and contrast. It creates dialogue and density. It is distinguishable from harmony because it increases the firmness and the complexity of the composition by continuously keeping a distance. Different melodic lines intertwine and collaborate without melting together, each developing its own difference.

Opposing note to note, the counterpoint transforms a simple melody into a vast architecture of sounds, turning the pleasure and art of polyphony into a science. This should suffice to understand that, to our eyes, it can assume the value of a pattern of behaviour and a form of thought that overcomes the confinements of music. For me Clive was the man of counterpoint.

When a person dear to us definitely abandons our regions, the temptation is strong to squeeze in our hands his remaining image – the blend of our multiform memories – and assess it. As if we wanted to tell ourselves and him: now that you are out of the mutable life, we will explain who you were, who you are. But the image slips away, as sand and ash, from our affectionate grip. The more we try to hold it, the more we lose it, feeding our deceptive art of understanding.

Clive didn't let himself be enfolded. Those who had the fortune to befriend him experienced the special nature of his attachment and sentiments. His way of being close to others consisted of a series of impulses and counter-impulses in order to keep a distance. Not that he was a loner. He feared and refused loneliness with all his strength. Therefore he often adopted its forms, almost as though he was fighting it from within.

Every individual is a mystery. Clive made this commonplace alluring and new. He embodied it in an intellectual behaviour and in the way he established his relationships of exchange and friendship. Following the behavioural pattern of counterpoint, he intermingled with the words and actions of the others as if it were the only possible way to understand and be understood.

Was this the reason why he loved improvisation? He was a true intellectual, yet he didn't fit into the cliché of the intellectual. He, who pursued the facility and the lightness of word and action, was often not easily understood. His thick English emerged from a deep gurgle. He enjoyed speaking like the craftsmen or the farmers of the past, distrustful of too many words. He allowed a few laconic sentences to float as simmering sounds bordering expression and the unexpressed, what Frenchmen call *grommeler*.

I remember how Clive conveyed his own emotion: he exposed the funny corners of it. He even did this with anguish and disappointments. He added savour and brilliance to the meetings, private and public, inlaying them with long breaks and unexpected detours that fed reflection. He was a thoughtful man who gave a carefree impression. Against which chains and anxieties did he fight with the weapons of laughter?

It was a behaviour that he refined with time and that belonged to the nature of his wit. I imagine that in this way he fought the cobweb of illusions and disenchantments in which those people who have the double and contradictory gift of enthusiasm and clairvoyance get entangled. It is a gift that is experienced as a yoke by those people who keep alive the dreams of adolescence, yet are condemned to clash with the stony sky of reality, history, and pitiless good sense.

We all know how much Clive loved improvisation. In theatre games he saw one of the

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seeds of that particular way of thinking and behaving that we call 'theatre'. He explained with appropriate examples why it was worth devoting ourselves to refine an ability in which the art of the actor and that of the playwright are interwoven to the point of becoming indistinguishable. But beyond this clarity, I had a feeling that something else lay hidden. What could it be?

Point against point, word against word, attitude against attitude, *rasa* against *rasa*. I wonder: did he keep a distance also from himself, from his public and private story, from his deep experiences, from his multiform empirical knowledge?

We met each other in 1980 in London, at a meeting of the International Theatre Institute, whose British Centre was then under the aegis of *Theatre Quarterly*. This was the first time that Odin Teatret visited Great Britain, invited by Richard Gough and the Cardiff Theatre Laboratory. Clive came to visit us several times during our long stay in Wales, not only to see our performances, but also to observe barters and anonymous working situations in faraway villages. He was the only one who displaced himself in an effort to grasp our theatre better, without limiting his knowledge of it to the impressions of just one performance.

He astonished me by his curiosity and open-mindedness, as if Britain were the island of his exile and not a world where theatre people did not let themselves be distracted by what happens elsewhere. He was substantially different from his colleagues. It is said that islands are not isolated. Clive was a true interpreter of an island's culture: always on the point of departing, attracted by what lies over the sea, what separates and unites.

He was curious about what was going on in the territories of the independent theatres in Europe and Latin America. Not shy of personal effort, he taught among theatre groups in Cuba, just as he did his utmost to ensure Teatro Buendia from Havana a long stay in London. He told me, with pleasure and commitment, about known and anonymous groups whose work he followed in England, sympathetic to their struggle for a theatre freed from literary bonds. At the sessions of ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology in which he participated, he became involved with the protagonists of the Asian classical theatres, especially when he discovered in them a double tension: on the one hand when they revered their own abode – the artistic and spiritual greatness of their own tradition – and on the other, when they embarked on a search, as though their sumptuous abodes were also a jail.

Clive knew all this in first person. He had the good fortune and the torment of a series of small shipwrecks and an imprinting, when, twenty-three years old and with the dream to become a writer, he was captured by the mechanism of producing performances, and landed in Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. He emerged from there as an actor and director, an expert in theatre games, an intellectual and a university teacher, with one foot in the library and the other on the stage. He had devoured his master, didn't always have her before his eyes as a warning and a constraint. He bore her in his guts.

After 1980, we didn't lose each other from sight. We collaborated for a long time: on 'his' magazines – *Theatre Quarterly* and *New Theatre Quarterly* – and 'my' ISTA, but above all with a glass in our hands, walking, travelling by car, speaking on the phone, making brief and intense sorties among possible theatres during his visits to Holstebro and his hospitality in Warwick.

I must make a confession: the techniques of improvisation, when used as a practice in itself, do not mean much to me. I have a particular interest in some of the people who practise them, cleansing them from the stereotypes of so-called spontaneity. I acknowledge their usefulness since they allow actors and playwrights to appropriate some of the elementary principles of theatre composition. The fact that they are also amusing should not constitute their appeal. Theatre can be an island of freedom. We would betray ourselves and our rebellion if we let it resemble a holiday island.

I detest the modern stereotypes and the idealizations that have grown around the legend of improvisation and the *commedia dell'arte*, when the primary motivations of

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those ancient actors are lost. History teaches us that all those different motivations can be contained in just one word: hunger.

I wonder whether the theatres games also conceal a hunger. I always wanted to ask Clive: why insist on improvisation, if the value of theatre as art and as meditation – both for the person who does it and for the one who experiences it – is revealed by the precision of intentionally fixed forms? The life of the work emerges only when the rehearsals are over and the results start to speak with a voice of their own, one which no longer belongs to us and confronts us with questions and mutisms we had not envisaged.

Improvisation – I would have liked to tell Clive – is the preliminary phase of the journey, the fatiguing departure, the moment in which the nets are cast into the sea. Why delay the departure? Why yield to the charm of the brief instant in which the nets are pulled up from the sea? When fortune kisses us, we catch rare, uneatable, and monstrous fish, or ones that are as diaphanous as dead angels rising up to the surface from their dens, alive only for a few seconds, mixed with the trash that populates the depths of our polluted seas.

I believe that Clive tied the image of trash to the idea of creativeness, this word that so often lands on our lips as a deceptive butterfly. Once, in a conversation, he used the following image: we float as if shipwrecked on the desert of the ocean, clinging onto an islet of garbage. Such a place ought not to appeal to us, yet we must not abandon it. We must not surrender to the illusion that it is our earth, nor give in to delusion when we open our eyes to its reality and see only debris and small dead bodies from the past.

Among this waste to which we cling as we persevere in our work, flowers, leaves, and unnatural fruits sometimes grow: something we often call 'art'. Creativity is not harmonious and pleasant. It is, above all, strength of mind and capacity to resist for a long time, hanging on to something that is often far from good taste and originality, from the fragrances of what we desired and imagined. Probably, for Clive, the secret exercise of improvisation was buried in this endless measuring of himself with a strength of mind that doesn't manifest itself through great gestures and dramatic decisions, but in the small, continuous, and intimate game of the renewed search for the new. And in its not-tragic shipwrecks.

Therefore we can reside for a long time in the territory of improvisation, continuing to explore and to transform it, step by step, into a more and more unexplored region. A land that refuses to be reduced to a landscape. It is a mere drop of water, but when analysed under the microscope it reveals all the labyrinths that support theatre work before it grows into another form of life.

Clive said it: the creative work has to do with lightness and weight, with discovery and confusion, with freedom and chains, with the flights of the imagination and the shipwrecks in the mechanical bonds that dominate us. It has nothing to do with harmony and purity. For him, among the many ways of practising and living the counterpoint, only one attitude was forbidden, because inert and with no future: to cleanse his voice of the presence of other voices, to make them parallel thus losing their contrast.

Point against point, illusion against illusion, certainty against certainty.

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