The influences upon steven berkoff

Upon studying Steven Berkoff as a practitioner I have always profoundly noted that his theories are very hard to define due to their ever changing and versatile nature. The lack of official documentation on Berkoff's theories makes it especially hard to fully comprehend what exactly the Berkovian performance style involves and dictates. Fortunately he has written a few journals which chronicle the rehearsal and creative process he has gone through for his various productions. Among these publications is Mediations on Metamorphosis (1995), a journal of Berkoff's time spent in Japan directing the tenth major production of Metamorphosis, and Coriolanus in Deutschland (1992) which chronicles the rehearsal process for his 1988 production of Coriolanus in Munich, Germany. However, these journals are primarily autobiographical and lack much theoretical context. In 1969, Steven Berkoff presented the debut of his adaptation of Frank Kafka's Metamorphosis at the Round House Theatre in London. This production was significant because Berkoff – serving for the first time as writer/adapter, director, and actor in a full-length project – presented an aesthetic which would become identified as his artistic trademark. Metamorphosiscombined elements of Brechtian Epic Theatre by using actors to purposefully represent characters rather than become them; Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty by breaking from traditional theatre texts and asking the actors to bare their inner thoughts as if they were human-sacrifices to create ritualistic theatre; Jean-Louis Barrault's " total-theatre" by using all possible means to uncover the meaning – conscious or otherwise – of the play; and Jacques Le Coq's theories of mime, movement, masks, and ensemble, by using the performers to create the environment. Berkoff has also been seen to incorporate some of the visual techniques used in Kabuki, a highly stylized, highly rhythmic

classicalJapanese form of theatre. ‘ Kabuki music rises about the body of the actor. It does not impose itself upon the actor, but instead gives musical and rhythmic expression to his movement, and in doing so increases the flow of theatrical expressiveness toward the audience.’ (1974, p. 113) Another aspect of Japanese Kabuki is evident in Berkoff’s dealings with masks and face paint.

Even though Berkoff appropriated production styles from others and adapted the spoken words from a novel, the end result was uniquely Berkovian. In Mediation of Metamorphosis (1995) Berkoff seems to somewhat challenge someone to define his style when he writes, “ More than ever I feel my work develop into a kind of school, not by rigid formula but by learning certain techniques which expand your ideology and communication skills.” (1995, p. 137) There are themes that have undeniably remained relatively constant throughout Berkoff’s work, themes that can be seen as somewhat of a base to the Berkovian theoretical framework. These themes I speak of are routed mainly in the belief that the actors instincts should be trusted over all else and the job of theory is to help evoke these instincts. Berkoff’s common themes of extensive physical expression, transformation, and over-exaggerated experimental emphasis upon the spoken word should therefore be used as a means to evoke and exaggerate the actor instincts when dealing with the character.

“ The atmosphere is in the sound which should come from the throats of the actors. Therefore their sound can control and amplify their situation, since people make sounds as well as moving and speaking. This is total and human, and in this way you return to the actor his mimetic gifts and his oral

expressiveness. At the same time one is seeing the situation in human terms, as a story told to us by players.” (Gambit, 1978, p. 17)

Berkoff believes actors should create their own sounds and so breaks traditional mime conventions. Like many of Le Coq’s students, Berkoff freely changes the pure form of mime to create his own individual style. Surprisingly Le Coq encourages this practice as it essential to his belief in allowing the actor to work as an individual, believing “ it is important to be open and not to copy the style of someone else because you will never be as good as he is. Each is better in his own style” (Lust, p. 106). In drawing from this extract it is clear that I believe Berkoff is often sometimes regarded too highly for ‘ originating’ his performance style when thinking in particular about his instruction of individual development. Most of his performance style is derived from Le Coq who has been proven to have firm roots in the practice of Commedia delle Arte. It seems that most of the Berkovian individuality stems from his Berkoff’s own mannerisms. InModern and Post-Modern Mime, Thomas Leabhart summarizes the influences upon Le Coq:

“ Lecoq’sschool is one of those theatres that, rather than being a rsum of what has happened, has helped young performers find new directions and so revitalize the theatre. Lecoq’s whole vision of the theatre is like Copeau’s, remain on the fringes of the commercial theatre, not wanting to give themselves to it as it exists. They, like their teacher, work apart, preserve their artistic vision, nurture their strength, and steadily increase their power to influence the course of theatre history.” (1989, p. 101-102)

Like Lust's definition of postmodern mime, Leabhart's summary of Le Coq's influence is applicable to Berkoff.

Previously in 1973, Berkoff and The London Group declared their own mission statement:

" To express drama in the most vital way imaginable; to perform at the height of one's powers with all the available means. That is, through the spoken word, gesture, mime and music. Sometimes the emphasis on one, sometimes on the other.(Theatre Quarterly, 1978, p. 39)

This philosophical statement is an ideal example of the constants that have remained throughout Berkoff's subsequent career; stylised movement, mime, exaggerated vocal work, direct address, asides, and improvisation are components of nearly every Berkovian performance. Berkoff expects actors to willingly sacrifice themselves physically and emotionally, ready to perform whatever tasks are necessary to illuminate the text.

When dealing with texts, as a director, Berkoff does not seek to produce a literal reproduction of texts on stage. It rare to see Berkoff relying on the intent of the author, instead he uses the texts to relay his own ideas on stage. He hasn't denied this. He said himself said that his version of Hamlet (1979) was " a dissection of the play" (I am Hamlet, 1989), and his staging of Agamemnon was attempted as an " analysis of the play rather than a realistic rendering." (2007, p. 123)

Berkoff predominantly always sees the set as his own responsibility as he believes that it is vital in accordance with his desired aesthetic and

theoretical projection. Most of the time he is seen to use minimalist sets usually consisting of one stationary prop, a sofa or a table for example. He believes that any mental environment desired can be created using mime and so it is unnecessary for excessive use of props. Many of his works have been performed in tight close quarter environments with extensive use of glaring light and shadow which seek to emphasize the physical presence on stage.

Forever on a quest for vitality Berkoff is very prone to break theatrical conventions, resulting in a style of heavily a contradictory nature. These contradictions are a spouse of his determination " to see how I could bring mime together with the spoken word as its opposite partner, creating the form and structure of the piece" (1995, p. 53). Characteristics such as this can be easily traced to his training with Jacques Le Coq, whom Thomas Leabhart, author of And Post-Modern Mime (1989), as modern teaching " mime to talk." (1989, p. 101) To fuse these opposites, Berkoff relies on mime, a traditionally silent form, yet he cherishes the spoken word; his productions are very over-the-top energy wise yet depend on great subtlety; the actor should never show himself to be self-conscious yet his presented self is very much so; Berkoff carefully choreographs movement yet he encourages improvisation.

Other sources of Berkovian theory is rooted in interviews and short articles (some of which Berkoff has written) which have been printed in various journals. One the most significant of these articles titled " Three Theatre Manifestos." (1978) In an interview present in the Three Theatre Manisfestos

(1978) Berkoff outlines his philosophy which, according to him, has changed little through the years; he summarizes his theories by stating:

“ In the end there is only the actor, his body, mind and voice…The actor exists without the play…he can improvise, be silent, mime, make sounds and be a witness.” (1978, p. 11)

Another extract from Three Theatre Manifestos depicts Berkoff sounding remarkably similar to Antoni Artaud and his Threatre of Cruelty: “ Acting for me is the closest metaphor to human sacrifice on the stage”; (1978, p. 7) other echo the thoughts of Brecht “ By describing the accident, the witness becomes the accident; he is there reliving it.” (1978, p. 11) The visual elements of a Berkovian production are strikingly stark. Classical Greek theatre, Japanese Kabuki, and Vsevelod Meyerhold’s constructivism, are particularly influential on Berkoff’s visual aesthetic. By mixing minimal sets with very theatrical costumes, masks, and lighting, the visual focus is on the actor. Though the costumes draw attention to themselves, they serve to emphasize the performer and help to create the environment and the characterization.

To draw a conclusion on Berkoff’s authenticity in theatre one must take at look at his work in a broader sense. Berkoff’s contribution and influence upon theatre is clear, but his place as a name in history in questionable. Berkoff’s performance aesthetic will undoubtedly always exist – in various different forms – but whether he will be credited with association is a question for future historians. However because his work is thoroughly grounded in the

works of many famous theatre names his style will undoubtedly be incorporated into many future artists works – knowingly or not.

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