

Living Theatre 1

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We have one more hour to spend together, and I'd like to start by saying what I hope to do during this hour. First, I'd like to insist on the importance of the Living Theatre, and this is what I'll do first. I'll be a little more specific about the things they did. And then, I would like to say a few words about the Open Theatre, which, as I indicated, is a development, one of the possible developments of the Living Theatre, under the influence of Joseph Chaikin. And then, we'll turn to something which is not radically different, but initiatives which were also important, very original, but addressed to a different audience and with a different aim. And it's two kinds of theatre, which are more popular theatre, and more political, maybe, except that you cannot say the living theatre was not political, because it was political. They were anarchists at heart, as I have said before, I think. So, the two forms of maybe more collective theatre, but still collective is not right because the living theatre was also a community. Anyway, these two initiatives are the Bread and Puppet Theatre, and the Teatro Campesino, two very interesting types of theatre, which developed in the 60s.

Then, we will turn to another kind of political theatre, which is more directly related to our syllabus, and that is Black Theatre. I won't spend as much time as I would like to on this very important category of American theatre, but I'd like to give a few indications. And with whatever time we have left, that time I'd like to devote to the last work on our syllabus, which is a play by Sam Shepard. So, I'd like to present Shepard and indicate what he has brought to the theatre in recent years.

So, we turn back to the Living Theatre, and Julian Beck has said himself some very interesting things, thinking back on their experiment. He had said very interesting things, not only on what they did, but on a possible relationship to the theatre. He thinks that at the beginning, they were maybe, they had a formalist attitude towards art, not the theatre so

much as art in general. And this is what he called the influence of the, and I think it's an amusing formula, the influence of the Museum of Modern Art. And they changed, they became more political or more committed, more involved in the world as it is. Perhaps, he says, our aesthetic itself has not so much changed as the attitude. Now, we know that art is a means of communicating, not an end. He's criticising, in a way, the art for art's sake attitude.

At that earlier time, and that's going back to the 50s, we were dominated chiefly by form, line, colour. One of their first experiments, I don't think I have mentioned it, is a play by Gertrude Stein, which is called *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. And I have personal interest in this play, because many years later, I translated it myself for Richard Foreman, under the French title of *Faust ou la fête électrique*. And it is a very fascinating piece of work. They did it, the Living Theatre did it, because of the interest of Gertrude Stein in language. And this is what they found attractive to them. The work of Stein, I'm quoting Julian Beck, the work of Stein was attractive to us because it never ceased being part of the revolution of the word. And he says, in the form of questions then, how can you have a lively civilisation if the language is outmoded and no longer says what anyone can possibly want to mean? This is a problem, this is me speaking now, this is a problem which is of special interest in theatre, because in the theatre you speak, well that's an obvious comment, you don't only write, and you speak to an audience who is a contemporary audience, and who has collective reactions, and you are always in the present. So, you do not write for eternity.

And the charm of being archaic is something that a reader can take, but an audience in a theatre never. So here is Julian Beck again. How can you enlarge the limits of consciousness if language atrophies? How can you approach real conscious being if the language is just hanging around? The difference between mere conscious being and true existence is the nearness to God.

Buber, he's quoting here, Martin Buber. Relentlessly, Stein worked with form in an attempt to surface sunken knowledge, not simply information, but the light-shedding qualities of metaphysical and psychological associations, and what is perhaps more exactness. To find out what is really there, to examine everything, common objects, and to define them, not partially, but totally and exactly, so that when we see and think, we see what is really there, and when we think, we think thoroughly.

So, you see, there is a very demanding attitude, you know, that Gertrude Stein has often been blamed for obscurity, but Julian Beck saw through that that there was a demand at exactness, as he puts it, or accuracy. There is a one piece by Gertrude Stein called *Things As They Are*, and *Things As They Are*, this is something which certainly the theatre has to deal with. If you want to be true, you can invent things, but you have to be true at another level. This was, he says about her, her experiment. It did not stop with prose description, but carried on into varied forms of literature, not the least of which in this woman's prolific output was in theatre, and there would be a whole series of, well, classes or courses or research or whatever. I mean, we could discuss at length the experiments in the theatre that were Gertrude Stein's, but here we are sticking to the Living Theatre.

You remember that they did *The Brig*, which was about this Marine Corps and the punishments that were inflicted on the soldiers, and this apparently was a totally different kind of theatre, because it was against the military discipline in the brainwashing it involves and the tearing apart of human dignity, let's call it that. But very interestingly, Julian Beck makes a parallel between the two types of theatre, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, which is a remake of the Faustian legend, as the title indicates, but in the times of electric lights, and there's a ballet of electric lights, and it is at times nonsensical and very lively, while *The Brig* is always very austere and exacting, but Julian Beck considers them, the two players, as mirrors locked face to face. But he says one mirror is taller than the other. I'm sure of that. One of them is wider, but I'm not sure of that. Both do minimize the narrative, and this is a very interesting element, also a problem in the theatre.

What do you do with narrative? And by narrative, does he mean perhaps action here, the plot, or does he mean narrative in the sense of one character talking? You know that there is a return in the theatre, and we'll see this with Shepard, to narrative, on the contrary, more developed. That is to say, turning away from what is purely dramatic conflict, in order to allow reminiscences, or a stream of consciousness.

And we are now used in recent theatre, in France also, I'll take the example of Claude Régy, with the German theatre, such as Peter Handke's theatre, or Botho Strauss, he's doing *Le Parc* currently, or Maeterlinck recently, reminiscences very, very long monologues, and audiences, who would have been impatient with this years ago, are now used to entering a sort of dream world through the human voice, or the voice of the actor, and you enter a magic

world, just in the same way as you can enter it through stage images, for instance. So, this is a new trend, which I want you to keep in mind, because it's very important.

So, when he says, when Julian Beck says about these two plays, they minimize the narrative, it's not true that there is no text, because there is some text, but I think he means perhaps the use of dialogue is minimal. I go on with my quotation. Both are concerned with examining minutely a moral sensibility, and both are concerned with identity. And here I stop for a minute on this term of identity, because what the theatre deals with very, very often is identity, whether it is private identity, individual identity, as is the case, for instance, in, I would say, Beckett's theatre, or Pinter's theatre, or if it is a more collective identity, and this is very much the case with the Teatro Campesino, which I mentioned, and which I'll deal with a little more, or with the Black Theatre in America. Both are deeply formed by the rhythms they create. Both are involved with electric light. And of course, it's a totally different approach, because the electric light is cheerful and playful in Gertrude Stein, while electric light is like the torture that you inflict on people by blaring lights in their eyes. And rhythms are also playful in one direction. In the other play, *The Brig*, rhythms are the staccato rhythms of military life. All right, I'll stop here for the parallel between these two plays.

Julian Beck, in the 60s, was asked to summarize, in a few words, I think he was given 20 words to summarize, and in a way it's a joke, how can you summarize in 20 words, the purpose of the Living Theatre. So, he said, hold on, call me back, I'll have the answer in a few minutes. And he came out with a very short sentence, which to him summarized then the purpose of his theatre, I quote, "to increase conscious awareness, to stress the sacredness of life, to break down the walls". Conscious awareness, he could have saved a word here, because awareness or consciousness are about the same words. But to stress the sacredness of life, there is a return to the religious function of the theatre. And this we will find in almost every innovative form of theatre, this return, outside any given or established religion, mostly. But in the same spirit as Artaud, for instance, a return to this religious function of the theatre, in the theatre of the absurd, in Europe, we find the same phenomenon. I think that when the theatre goes back to its roots and tries to find what is essential about its function, it finds some kind of sacredness. And as I mentioned before, this sacredness can be found in, I quote, universal copulation, for instance. It is not necessarily going to church and praying, but the sacredness of life, life in all its forms.

A little later on, he developed this theme by saying, I quote, that the audience in a theatre, the audience is part of this religious phenomenon. It is a congregation led by priests, a call ecstasy of reading and response, dance, seeking transcendence, a way out and up, the vertical thrust, seeking a state of awareness that surpasses mere conscious being and brings you closer to God. It's almost a state of trance which leads to meditation, and it has to be seen that various techniques can induce the same kind of state of mind. And in some of the later experiments, the Living Theatre used the yoga techniques, for instance. That's only one of the examples. At the same time as they were religious, we must not forget that Julian Beck and Judith Malina were considered as scandalous. And to give just one example of the many, many times when they were arrested for scandalous conduct, being, you know, taking everybody into the streets, half naked or naked, for instance, they were arrested for putting on *The Brig* and they were brought to trial for the simple reason that they had shouted, supposedly, they said they hadn't, stormed the barricades into the streets, and that was considered as a case of guilt. I just mentioned Artaud, and I think that Julian Beck and Judith Malina would agree with this, would have agreed with this, that it was a very important influence of them. *The Brig*, Julian Beck says, is the theatre of cruelty, in that it is the distillation of the direction of the Living Theatre's history. You cannot shut off from it as from a dream. It is there, real, in the pit of your stomach. I was saying religious, now I'm saying something physical. It is not just something you watch, but, and you cannot shut off from it as from a dream, that is to say, the world of the unreal. It is the real world. It is in the pit, I repeat, of your stomach.

And he quotes Artaud in the book, there's a book called *We, the Living Theatre*, which is a very interesting documentary book with plenty of pictures and descriptions of what they did. There is a quotation directly from Artaud, which I'll quote to you. Why lie? Why try to place on a literary level a thing which is the very cry of life? Why give an appearance of fiction to what is made up of the ineradicable substance of the soul, to what is the whale of reality? All right, this is the end of the quote.

I'd like to come back a little on what they did in the play called *Mysteries and Small Pieces*, just to give you a sort of idea of what it was about. They did things which were, which could be considered as exercises, but exercises, knowing very well that there was an audience watching. But it was a sequence of events which were relatively unrelated to one another.

One was called the "Break Dollar". I won't mention this one, but I'll mention "Street Songs". "Street Songs" in which Julian seated cross-legged in the center of the stage after having announced street songs, started to intone current revolutionary slogans, which at the time were abolish money, abolish police, change the world, fuck for peace, free all men, etc. So, these were, some of them were very provocative slogans, but the audience would recognize them from what was currently shouted in the streets at that time. The actors from the rear of the theatre, from among the spectators, because this was what they did a lot of time, it's become one of their "image de marque" or tricks or whatever, the actors would mix with the spectators. So, from among the spectators, they would soon begin to repeat the slogans and members of the audience usually joined in too.

Another thing was the lions, and that was a yoga breathing exercise with six to eight actors performing on the edge of the stage. It's a kind, they said, a physiological message hinting the need of deep total purification of the body as well as of the mind. Then they had tableau vivant, a series of flashes performed by six groups of four actors each who improvised compositions within the framework of four wooden boxes set one next to the other vertically, the open side facing the public, so that they were inside boxes. It was a sort of what we would call constructivist set in which each actor was improvising and of course could not see, since he was in his own particular box, what the others were doing at the same time. The lights were turned on and off rhythmically every few seconds. You imagine the stress, the stressing effect of this kind of aggressive lighting. During the brief instance of darkness, the actors change compositions and expressions. So, you imagine the effect, you see them in one position, then a brief black, and then the light is turned on again, and you see something which is totally different. Then you had an exercise called the plague, and this was after Artaud, *Le Théâtre et la peste*, and it was inspired by Artaud's description of a plague epidemic.

This final piece was, they said, the very embodiment of Artaud's theatrical philosophy. It is an exorcism of death as well as a warning, an attempt to make us aware the state of emergency we have reached. This will be echoed in a slightly different way in *Terminal*, the play which Joe Chaikin and Susan Jankovic put on for the Open Theatre, which was about death also. And we come to one of the, there is in the book here, a long quotation from the *Theatre and its Double, Le Théâtre et son Double*, by Artaud. I'll send you back to that book. I think it's a very good thing.

If you want to understand something about contemporary theatre, you have to read Artaud's book, *The Theatre and its Double*. Read it in French, *Le Théâtre et son Double*, which ends up, this is the end of the quotation, the body fluids furrowed like the earth, struck by lightning, like lava kneaded by subterranean forces, search for an outlet. And the image which has remained famous because there has been many photographic reproductions of it, and the people who had seen it have often mentioned it. The final image in this scene by the Living Theatre was, and here I read a description, now there are bodies all over, scattered on stage, in the aisles, collapsed among the spectators. Finally, they are all dead. Silence. Slowly, some of the dead rise and begin to recompose the other contorted bodies. One by one, the rigid bodies are carried on stage. They are piled up until the pyramid of corpses is completed. The dead have buried the dead. All disappears in darkness. You see that this could be a very effective scene with biblical overtones, and the effect of dead bodies, not only on stage, but among the spectators with this rigidity, and all the exercises they had done to make their bodies more expressive and more physical than what actors usually do on stage, I think must have been very effective.

As a parallel to this, I would like to mention something which was done by the Open Theatre. I'm leaving the Beck's with regret, and I would have many more things to say about them, but we must keep in proportion, and we must speak about the other companies as well. In the Open Theatre, they took up these physical exercises with a sense, a very deep sense, and I think this was Joe Chaikin's influence. If I have a key word I'd like to use there, even in other players than terminal, it would be the term of maybe not death, but mortality. I think the sense of mortality is something which pervades all their experiments in the theatre, and I think this is common to many other people who have worked for the theatre. Why? I'm not sure I can tell, but this is something which is very true. Here is what Chaikin says about this. I believe that the ultimate value in the theatre is the confrontation of all the live bodies in the room with the mortality which they share. The visceral confrontation with the reality that one is living now, and at some other time no longer living.

If you take the example of Tennessee Williams, for instance, the fact that he says that we are prisoners inside our own skins, and that we are sentenced to death, that is, or convicted, that's about the term he uses. This sense of growing old, fading, is also a sense which he expresses totally differently through images in his text, whereas here it's expressed

more physically by the bodies of the actors, but it is a sense they share. They did a show, the open theatre, as I think I mentioned, they mostly remained experimental. That is to say, they did very few performances which were really meant for an audience. Usually when they were through with working, they started on something else. They were ready to work on something else. The final product was not what was of interest to them. Still, they did a few things, and they opened *Viet Rock*, for instance. *Viet Rock*, this was during the Vietnam War, and treating it as a movie, as a rock, they called it a folk war movie. So, they used some of the techniques of movies, not so much projections on the screen, but slow motion and that kind of thing. And you understand that it is a very shocking use, well, putting together words to say a folk war movie called *Viet Rock*. So, this is, I'll describe briefly the final scene of *Viet Rock*. The G.I.s are leaving Saigon. They are carousing in a bar with Vietnamese girls. There is an explosion. Everybody dies. From the motionless heap of actors' bodies on the floor, and here you see where it comes from. It comes directly from the living theatre. From this motionless heap of actors' bodies on the floor comes the chorus of phrases from which there is a passage, who needs war? The entire company, this was Megan Terry's idea. Megan Terry is a woman, and she was the, she wrote the script for the play.

And her instructions were as follows. The entire company says the following together, and the heap should pulse like a giant beating heart. Who, who, who. Who, who, who. As the last lines die away, as the last line, sorry, dies away, there is silence for a count of twenty. Then, one by one, the actors rise. They must do so in extremely slow motion, as if coming back from a long distance. They are fragile. They are angels. They are beautiful. One by one, they stand. One by one, they enter the audience. Each chooses an audience member and touches his hand, head, face, hair. Look and touch. Look and touch. A celebration of presence. They go among the audience until every actor has left the stage. Then, as the song begins, they leave the auditorium. In no way should the actors communicate superiority. They must communicate the wonder and gift of being actually alive together with the audience at that moment. I'll just end up by quoting this song. They were, the chorus of the dead was saying, who needs me? Who needs this? Who needs war? Who needs this shit? I'm in the shit. Who needs me? Who? Who needs? Who needs? Who?