

The Actor Still Present : Joseph Chaikin

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Joe Chaikin, qui a commencé par être acteur au Living Theatre, a fondé et dirigé pendant douze ans The Open Theatre. Avec lui, sa sœur Shami Chaikin, Tina Shepard, Jean-Claude Van Itallie, Megan Terry, Susan Yankowitz. Parmi les spectacles créés : The Serpent, Terminal, America Hurrah, The Mutation Show, Night Walk. Chaikin est l'auteur d'un livre rendant compte de cette expérience : The Presence of the Actor: Notes on the Open Theatre, Disguises, Acting, and Repression (1972). Depuis, il a été Hamm dans Endgame, il a été Voyzek, il a monté une pièce russe des années 20, The Dybbuk. Il est un fabuleux acteur pour qui la confrontation avec le public doit demeurer un acte exceptionnel, un aboutissement rare. En mars 1980, il est venu à Paris présenter le travail fait en collaboration avec Sam Shepard : Tongues, Savage/Love. Quand il est arrivé à Paris, l'acteur qui le remplaçait dans le rôle de Hamm (Endgame) venait de mourir, une semaine après la fin des représentations. Outre les représentations de Tongues et de Savage/Love, Chaikin a présenté son expérience d'homme de théâtre, à la fois comédien et metteur en scène, au cours de deux séances : une conférence de presse et un « atelier ». C'est un compte rendu de ces deux séances que l'on trouvera ici.

Intensity

What interests me very much in the theatre is extreme emotions, I feel dissatisfied with the produced grammar of expressing things and feelings that are intense. We are constantly, every minute, in some intense condition. There is not a minute of relief. We find ways of neutralizing, modifying the intensity just so that we can go on. In the theatre, we can give a kind of expression to this intensification without the social neutralizing. I feel that currents are

so intense all the time, living is so intense all the time that one has to find some moderateness, but the theatre can suspend that monitoring that one has to do.

Mourning

I feel there are certain areas of experience the expression of which is reduced, in the language of the soap opera for instance. One is mourning. The expression of grief is not really permitted, we are, in a way, « sophisticated beyond it », the expression of it carries a certain shame with it. But we have not been able to erase a very deep and live response to grief. When somebody dies, we don't know what to do. In the last six years or so, four or five people who were important to me have died, and nobody knew what to do, we did not want to go to church or to a synagogue, we did not want to have a cold municipal service. What we must find is a way to make ceremonies, ceremonies that have dignity, that have compassion, that permit feeling. We must find ways to acknowledge the major shifts in our lives. Mourning has to do with the expression of irreplaceable love, with a potential for loving and the possibility of going on.

Death

It is true the theme of death comes up in a lot of work that I have done. I suppose that one reason is that I have been so gravely ill about three times and so it haunts me. Another reason is that it is by contrast that one knows the exhilaration of living. Death no longer has for me a morbid association. At least, very rarely. In *Terminal*, the theme was ironic, it was about the cosmeticizing of death, about the way in which we make believe that there is not any death.

Tongues

During my stay in San Francisco, I became extremely ill, it was an illness I had been postponing for some time — to whatever extent one is able to delay those things, which I think is some extent. When I came out of the hospital, I thought I could be a reporter, as one who

had been at the border. Initially, I was like a missionary. I don't feel that sense any more, but *Tongues* came out of this period.

Tenderness

This is the second area which is of interest to me. It is one of the most exploited areas, one of the most useful in terms of publicity. In terms of the soap opera, we are given a way in which to express it, so that a reaction of scepticism towards anything that has to do with tenderness seems an appropriate response.

Rapture

The third area is rapture. One reason for which one is suspicious of it is that it passes. One cannot hold it. The theatre has been an arena in which it was possible to give testimony to very extreme conditions. One possibility is to do Greek plays, or Shakespeare, or Chekhov. But another option is to work on the current idiom. I proceed by this assumption that every single moment is extremely intense.

Beckett has the extraordinary courage to go to the terrifying edge. What makes it possible is wit and humour, the balance between that much desolation and the comic. Beckett is the living playwright I feel most connected with. I also resent him. He is indulgent in the way he accepts being submerged in the dread. Yet he is the most eloquent of all who are alive. I feel it is almost a requirement to work on some of Beckett's work while he is still alive. It is also a privilege.

The end of the Open Theatre

At one point, we felt that instead of pursuing enquiries, we were giving answers. I was more interested in research, which does not totally exclude the relationship with the audience, but which times this encounter. We began with an investigation, a research in areas in which we felt we were not taught enough. We did not learn what we thought we wanted to know. There was a point at which we were becoming very deft at what we were doing, the track

seemed clear. That was after *The Mutation Show*. It seemed that we should not exist unless we would continue to be a kind of process. So I came one morning and suggested to the group that we stop. We already had plans to make a new piece, and also a tour of America and Canada, and one of the people in the Company said : « This is the first year that we can support ourselves... » So we agreed to support ourselves for a year and then stop. We made this new piece which to me was — I don't know how much of it is nostalgia, how much is objectivity — the most evolved piece that we had done, that piece which we called *Night Walk*. We toured it and we did the last performance in California.

Savage/Love

I participated in the birth of the pieces, but when it comes to writing for the theatre (or for anything, for that matter), I feel timid I don't trust myself. In this piece we were both, Sam and I, interested in looking at love and romance. But there is one thing that we did not get to, and that is the irreplaceability and the replaceability of love.

One direction which interests me is chamber theatre, something which is unequivocally intimate. A question which is of interest to me is: how do you know somebody is there, how do you know it is not just a picture, how do you know this voice is not a phonograph?

Doing plays

I don't have the hunger to do plays, it interests me very little. Maybe I am interested in doing *Antigone*, as a director, and as an actor maybe some Beckett. What I am interested in now is extreme emotions and ceremonies. And maybe the third interest I have is to participate in some comic theatre.

When I came out of the hospital, after a period of recovery from this emotional malady, of mourning for this period of approximately twelve years of creative identity given by the Open Theatre, of working with the same people, I made a list of the plays that I most wanted to do. It was a very subjective list: *The Seagull* by Chekhov, *Endgame* by Beckett, *Woyzeck* by Büchner, *Elektra*, and *The Dybbuk* by Anski, and I did them all.

Time and direction

Any training is related to a particular direction. One goes in direction of the stream that moves. We are part of the time and we cannot and should not escape it. The other part of that is the subversion of that current. In the best work, one does both of these things. But one has to speak in the idiom of the time. The most creative people in the theatre have been people who discovered their own metabolic direction. The theatre is a symptom of the way in which we have lost any direction, and what has meaning has to be rediscovered. *One direction is away from the theatre.* Friends of mine who have had a profound involvement with the theatre have now left it, Grotowski says it is a ghost town, a memory. Both The Living Theatre and Grotowski have chosen not to continue in the line of doing more and more plays.

Without a course

I would like to say that I don't have a course, I am not on a course. Since the end of the Open Theatre, I have been doing what I think is important for me to do, but I am not promoting anything whatsoever — including any particular way of doing theatre.