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REFERENCE ONLY

MNEMODRAMA: ALESSANDRO FERSEN'S PARASHAMANIC TRAINING TECHNIQUE FOR THE OCCIDENTAL PERFORMER

by

JOHN C. GREEN

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth

in partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Faculty of Arts & Design

School of Humanities & Performance

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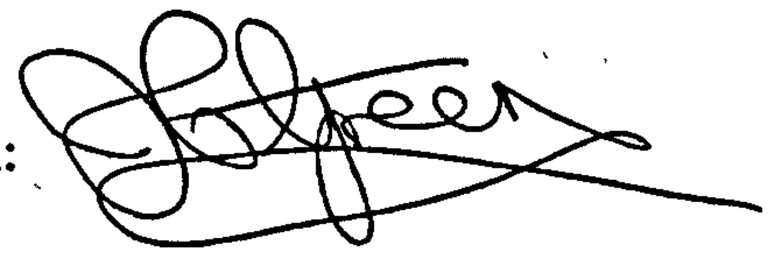
signed: 

John C. Green

MNEMODRAMA: ALESSANDRO FERSEN'S PARASHAMANIC TRAINING TECHNIQUE FOR THE OCCIDENTAL PERFORMER

by

John Green

This thesis is the first full-length study of the experiments in performer training undertaken by Alessandro Fersen in his studio laboratory in Rome between 1957 and 1983 and practiced since then in the codified technique which he calls *Mnemodrama* (literally,"a drama of memory").

The purpose of my research is twofold: firstly, to focus on the development of the core technique of mnemodrama which is a theatrical simulation of ritual object manipulation employed by shamans in traditional cultures in order to induce an altered state of consciousness. In Fersen's terms such transic techniques provide the contemporary performer with a psychic training which enables him to explore different aspects of his persona rediscovered from both the autobiographical and archetypal levels of his unconscious. Secondly, the thesis presents a case for viewing Alessandro Fersen as a pioneer of post-war experimental theatre practice, particularly from the standpoint of the interdisciplinary nature of his experiments (theatre combined with anthropology, ethnology and psychology) and his focus on training rather than performance within the confines of a laboratory. The philosophy behind his research, its goals and methodology are therefore compared with those of his more celebrated peers, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba.

This thesis combines academic research with two periods of observation of the mnemodrama in performance at Fersen's studio in Rome in 1990 and 1992. Subsequently, I was able to introduce Fersen and his work to British academic theatre professionals for the first time at the international conference on Performance, Ritual and Shamanism organised by the Centre for Performance Research and held in Cardiff in January 1993. Finally, the appendices contain Fersen's essential justification for his research, from which the arguments of this thesis have been developed. The appendices also represent the first substantial translation of Fersen's writings on theatre to appear in the English language.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other university award.

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INTRODUCTION

The shaman is a nostalgic philosopher who, through a ritual identification of that which he remembers, hopes to provoke a vision of fundamental essences. His primary function is to heal mankind's fragmentary experience of existence in the cosmos through ritual performances which restore, however fleetingly, the original generative moment of mythic consciousness - the *illud tempus* - the time of origins, the period of Creation, when gods walked the earth, mortals visited the sky and the great archetypal events of myth took place. The shaman is a connector who bridges the mythic past, the primordial past and historical time. At the same time he masters psychological transitions, passing from normality to alternative states of consciousness and back, bringing the dark world of the unconscious to the light of consciousness. As a performer he must therefore be uniquely adept at psychological control for his profession requires continual, intense and voluntary attainment of abnormal psychological states, particularly the entering of trances and the obtaining of vision.

The principle of shamanism is that the shaman undertakes a journey to another sphere of existence in order to heal an individual or tribal malady. This ritual journey - *magical flight* - is undertaken in a state of trance during which the shaman encounters (consults or battles with) the spirits which form the mythic foundation of the tribal structure. The shaman travels to the edge of the social order each time he undertakes these journeys. According to anthropologist Barbara

Meyerhoff,[1] he enters the realm of "non-form" which she defines as 'the underlying chaos of the unconceptualized domain which has not yet been made part of the cosmos by the cultural activity of naming and defining.' With each crossing over the shaman gains power, a therapeutic status which Meyerhoff believes is the reward for all persons who travel to the edges of order. Embracing the concepts of Victor Turner, Meyerhoff views shamans as liminal individuals, forever "betwixt and between" at the thresholds of form.

The shaman, in Meyerhoff's interpretation, therefore stands at the juncture of opposing forces - the *coincidentia oppositorium* - and his dialectical task is continually to move between these opposites without resolving them. It is not a balance achieved by synthesis, nor a static condition achieved by resolving oppositions. It is not a compromise. Rather it is a state of acute tension, the kind of tension which, Meyerhoff indicates, exists when two unqualified forces encounter each other, meeting headlong and are not reconciled but 'held teetering on the verge of chaos, not in reason but in experience.' It is a position, she suggests, with which the Occidental viewpoint, schooled in the Aristotelian tradition, is extremely uncomfortable. This is an assertion borne out in the experience of Alessandro Fersen who, for the past thirty-five years, has been exploring his own theatricalised version of the shamanic realm of *non-form* with succeeding generations of actors in his theatre laboratory in Rome.

Created in 1957, Fersen's theatre laboratory was, historically, one of the first in post-war Europe and in philosophy and structure anticipated the experiments in ritual theatre undertaken in the 1960s by, amongst others, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba in

Europe and Richard Schechner and Joseph Chaikin in North America, with Julian Beck and The Living Theatre traversing both continents. The laboratories created by these individuals may be seen as the Occidental theatre's response to what the Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann[2] has discerned as the 'breakdown of consciousness' in modern art, a breakdown which carries the artist 'backwards to an all-embracing participation with the world' but at the same time, he has stressed that such a return to archaic qualities of *participation mystique* contains 'the constructive, creative elements of a new world vision.' Neumann bases his concept on the early writings of the French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl under whom Fersen had studied in the late 1930s in Paris. It is from the interdisciplinary perspective of theatre combined with anthropology, and later psychology, that Fersen pursued his research, anticipating a mode of enquiry later adopted by Peter Brook in his work with the anthropologist Colin Turnbull and Richard Schechner in his with Victor Turner. Also typical of later laboratory structures was Fersen's insistence on working with a small, select group of actors and a process which emphasised training over rehearsal and performance.

The initial catalyst for the creation of the laboratory was Fersen's desire to find an answer to the question 'Does an exclusive, inalienable theatre language exist that cannot be advantageously translated into other forms of entertainment ?' [3] Beginning with a rigorous practical testing of the theories of Stanislavski, Fersen embarked on a search for a genetic code for the Occidental actor which took him back into archaic forms of performance existing on the threshold of ritual and

theatre resulting in the development of a series of techniques which he describes under the generic title of *mnemodrama*:

> Theoretically it is a "drama of memory," the actualization in dramatic-oneiric form of an event or trauma that emerges from the unconscious of the performers and which is expressed scenically. The mnemodrama is the result of a kind of exercise that represents an advanced step in the "techniques of abandon": the play-relation to a neutral prop. Mnemodrama can be spoken or silent, the work of one person or a group. It is spontaneous and does not proceed from any text or direction. It is not a play, only a personal experience for the actor. [4]

The "techniques of abandon" evolved from Fersen's study of possessorial trance states manifested by initiates of the *Candomble* cult which he had witnessed in Bahia in 1958; the essence of which he transposed to his laboratory during the 1960s. In the laboratory setting alternative states of consciousness were induced and explored through the manipulation of abstract scenic props such as sticks of wood and lengths of cloth.

It is the concern of this thesis that the tightness of focus and the sheer longevity of Fersen's experiments (from 1958 to the mid '80s) raise a number of important issues for Occidental theatre practice, particularly in the light of the growth of interest in the hybrid discipline of "theatre-anthropology" in recent years. By and large the fusion of experiments in ritual performance with the discipline of anthropology has resulted in the binding of the concept of ritual (and, by extension, the image of the shaman) hand and foot to the imagery of Aristotelian order. Fersen's emphasis on transic techniques of abandonment, framed within the anti-structure of *paidiac play* as the

manifestation of archaic modes of experiential knowledge, challenges this explanation of ritual and the role of the shaman within it.

In personifying mnemodrama as a 'shamanic experience of death and rebirth',[5] his experiments may be viewed as a contemporary exploration of shamanic initiation in which the focus of attention is on the *decentered* character of the performer as a strategic zone of vacuity, a palette of imageric possibility. It is this tension between the chaos of abandonment and the implied presence of order; between anthropological interpretations of such concepts as trance, the dialectics of performance and ritual and the manifestation of those terms within the experiential reality of laboratory conditions, which provides the through-line of his work and constitutes the essence of its shamanistic balance.

Trance States

The term *trance* is widely used but imprecisely defined in anthropology. It seems to have been used broadly to cover all waking altered states of consciousness and more narrowly to indicate such a state marked by focused attention. According to H.S. Sullivan,[6] trance is a prototaxic experience - one characterised by loss of ego - a term he coined as descriptive of one of three modes representing cognitive relationships to experience. Within the prototaxic mode are to be found the procedures of trance, dissociation, possession, mediumship, hypnosis, psychedelic drug experiences, organ possession including glossolalia and automatic writing. These varied states have in common the excurses of an ordinary state of consciousness, with loss of

memory of the incident and an altered state of consciousness involving trance or dissociation.

One of the major problems concerning interpretations of transic phenomena has been the desire on the part of many anthropologists working in the field of ritual ceremony to make a clear distinction between shamanistic and possessorial trance states. The "old guard " is represented by Mircea Eliade:

> the shaman's trance is conceived as a journey undertaken in the company of the spirits he embodies. Nowhere do we find any evidence of (possessorial) trance being viewed as a journey made by man into the spirit world. In every case it is interpreted as involving the arrival of the spirit or god in the world of men. [7]

Eliade is supported by Luc de Heusch,[8] Gilbert Rouget[9] and Raymond Firth[10] . Firth distinguishes between the states of spirit possession, spirit mediumship and shamanism. Vincent Crapanzano and Vivian Garrison suggest that Firth imposes too rigid a structure that effectively 'distorts the essential fluidity of interpretation and consequent (verbal and behavioural) articulation of the phenomena.' [11] They observe that it is often the case that the ritual initiate moves - if not in one seance, then throughout the course of his relationship with his possessing deity - in and out of all three states. I.M. Lewis supports this position, declaring that there is no compelling evidence to suggest that these trance states necessarily indicate cultures with different infrastructures or at different levels of evolutionary complexity:

> ..... we see yet again that "trance" and "possession" regularly occur in the same cultural contexts, blending together to form a single, composite phenomenon. [12]

Erika Bourguignon[13] takes a middle position, recognising the distinction between the trance states but blurring it with so many nuances that it almost disappears.

Bourguignon's model clearly distinguishes between what she terms *negative* (uncontrolled) and *positive* (controlled) trance states in which the latter is typically associated with cult groups and characteristically involves the impersonation of another persona or entity. A *positive* transic experience therefore involves the individual becoming another through a performance which is carried out in front of, and for the sake of an audience. She notes that such performances are typically carried out by women (e.g. Candomble rites) and that the transic state is induced through a combination of drumming, singing , dancing and crowd contagion and is followed by the experience of amnesia on the part of the performer. The possessed initiate gains power as the vehicle of another with whom she strongly identifies and through the fact that the whole process is controlled because she has learned the appropriate techniques. She might not know at the time that she has been dancing, or that her deity has possessed her, but before and after dancing she knows what trance is in her culture; what the proper gestures are, what behaviour is acceptable in trance and even how far out of control to get in performance.

The other side of the transic coin, *negative* possession, is Bourguignon's model of shamanistic trance within which, she suggests, the notion of individual rather than group benefit is paramount. In contrast to the performative function of the *positive* trance, the *negative* involves the private interaction of the individual with an identified other, within which frame both identities remain

clearly separate and the experience is remembered by the individual. According to Bourguignon the transic experience may be induced by forms of hypoglycemia - fasting, sensory deprivation, mortification, drugs - leading to uncontrolled but relatively passive behaviour patterns. She identifies the *negative* state primarily with the male who sends his soul on a journey to speak or struggle with the spirits of the *illud tempus* and who achieves subsequent mastery by having power, knowledge or special gifts bestowed by the spirits.

Whilst I will argue that the techniques of *mnemodrama* suggest that the transic state is experienced by Fersen's performers as a fusion of the two aspects of Bourguignon's model, it is important at this point to emphasise the prominence she gives to role play. In their study of the Batuque cult in Belem Brazil (a derivative of the Yoruba Candomble), Seth and Ruth Leacock discovered that the essence of possession consisted in acting a role whilst in a psychological condition very similar to the hypnotic state. They observed that in both cases individuals in altered states of consciousness enact specifically defined roles. The hypnotic plays the role of a hypnotised person, just as the Batuque initiate plays the role of an individual possessed by a supernatural deity. In both cases, they suggest, the performer attempts to conform to certain conceptions he has of what the role entails. It is the ability of the performers to control their performance which finally validates the cosmology of the cult:

> For the individual, possession is the ultimate proof that the *Encantados* (cult deities) really do exist. In addition, individual capabilities are central, since it is clear that some people learn and perform the roles much more readily than others. [14]

The role playing model advanced by Theodore R. Sarbin[15] presents an interesting means of viewing trance phenomena as the degree of organismic intensity and involvement experienced by the individual in performance. Sarbin distinguishes seven different levels of role- playing in the highest of which self and role remain undifferentiated, whilst in the lowest self and role are totally differentiated. This merging of action and awareness within the performer is the transic state examined by Csikszentmihalyi in his "Flow Theory:"

> when the actor's attention is highly focussed in a limited stimulus field which provides non-contradictory demands for action appropriate to the actor's resources, with clear and immediate feedback in the form of control feelings, a state may be reached in which the ego has nothing to do and awareness of it fades. [16]

"Flow" provides a model of the semi-oneiric state which arises out of the fusion of abandonment and control, where the performer is aware of his actions but does not reflect on the act of awareness itself. The experience of flow is fleeting and interrupted once the field of stimulus loses its power and awareness of the duality of self once again rises to the surface. The importance of Csikszentmihalyi's model, from a performance perspective, is his emphasis on the individual's centering of attention and his subsequent loss of self awareness. It is this centering of attention which is pivotal in encouraging the flow of experience. In ritual performances such as Candomble, the initiate is encouraged to centre attention through physical isolation where she learns the songs, dances and foods of her possessing deity. In the period of her initiation she learns to practise concentrating, to enter trance by consciously blocking out outside sensory stimulation.

Centering of attention is the basis of Stanislavski's *circles of attention*, part of his elaborate theory of techniques designed to train the actor to reach a state of rationally induced trance.[17]

From the anthropological perspective, therefore, transic states provide the initiate with an idiom for *articulating* a certain range of experience. By articulating is meant the act of constructing an event (performance) to make it meaningful. The act of articulation is more than a passive representation of the event; it is, in essence, the creation of the event. Once the experience is articulated, once it is rendered as a performance, it is cast within the world of meaning and may then provide a basis for action. *Projection* (shamanic trance) and *articulation* (possessorial trance) are both essentially metaphorical processes. In projection the other is the vehicle for the qualities, feelings and desires that are within the self. The movement is essentially centrifugal, from inner to outer. In articulation through possessing deities, the deity too is the vehicle for such qualities, feelings and desires, or at least their motivation but here the catalyst is located outside the individual from the start. In spirit possession itself, the movement is the very opposite of projection. It is centripetal, from outer to inner, literally but not psychoanalytically speaking, introjective.

The appropriation of these anthropological definitions of trance by experimental theatre practitioners results for example, in Richard Schechner's [18] division of Occidental performance practice into techniques of *subtraction* and *addition*: a model inspired by his observations of Grotowski's work during his *Poor Theatre* phase [19] and various forms of Asian theatre practice, which he contrasts with the techniques of Stanislavski. According to his model, a performer is

either subtracted, achieving transparency and eliminating from the creative process what Grotowski describes as 'the resistances and obstacles caused by one's own organism;' or he is added to becoming more than he is when he is not performing: he is *doubled*, to use Artaud's word. Schechner suggests that the first technique is the theatrical equivalent of the shaman in ecstasy, whilst the second is that of the cult celebrant in a state of possession (e.g. the Balinese Barong dancer). In Occidental terms he identifies the performer in ecstasy as Grotowski's actor Cieslak in 'The Constant Prince' - the *holy* actor - and the possessed performer as Stanislavski as Vershinin or Olivier as Hamlet - the *character* actor. According to this model, therefore, Stanislavski's technique, whilst humanistic and psychological, is still a version of the archaic technique of performing by becoming or being possessed by another.

Schechner suggests that no theatrical performance is "pure" ecstasy or possession but a fusion of the two states. From a Stanislavskian perspective, this suggests that his concept of the *magic if* is the theatrical equivalent of the shaman's *magical flight* in that it acts as a psychic lever to lift the performer out of his ordinary state of consciousness into an alternative (oneiric) state. In his preparation to take on the identity of another persona, the performer enters the realm of the shaman during the rehearsal process, traditionally the initial stage in his journey towards identification with his role. Once the role has manifested itself psychically, it must then be transformed into a physical entity before the spectator, it must become bodily present. In order to do this the performer must change functions, transforming himself from psychic traveller to possessed vehicle in a moment of

reversal which David Cole,[20] clarifying Schechner, defines as *rounding*. According to Cole the rounding of the performer-as-shaman into the persona of performer -as-possessed vehicle occurs at the moment of ecstatic abandonment; the moment when the shamanic quest can go no further and the individual becomes fully enspirited. The performer is caught up in the world of energy he has sought and is over-mastered by it. He has completed his mission by rounding as the possessed vehicle in and by whom the profane *illud tempus* of the text is presented to the spectator.

Whilst Cole's theory is illuminating and has some relevance to the early stages of Fersen's research, it is ultimately an inversion of the concept of shamanic balance because it reinforces the traditional anthropological urge for order by containing the transic states (and by implication the image of the shaman) within an Aristotelian framework. This is in contrast to the performer's experience of Fersen's *mnemodrama* which in performance comes close to realising in experiential terms Walter Benjamin's assertion that, 'the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again.' [21]

What Benjamin came to advocate was a sort of surrealist technique using what he called *dialectical images* - what his friend Adorno referred to as 'picture puzzles which shock by way of their enigmatic form and thereby set thinking in motion.' [22] Picture puzzles is of course how Freud referred to the manifest content of dream imagery and if it was to the manifest and not to the latent level that Benjamin was drawn; that was because of the way such images defamiliarised the familiar, redeeming the past in the present in a

series of anarchical images. The intent was to facilitate the construction of an *illud tempus* from the glimpses provided of alternative futures when otherwise concealed or forgotten connections with the past were revealed by a juxtaposition of images, as in the technique of *montage* - a technique of great importance to Benjamin. He came to regard montage (the ability to capture the infinite, sudden or subterranean connections of dissimilars), as the major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology. Stanley Mitchell has suggested that Benjamin discovers montage 'wherever a critical intelligence intervenes to comment upon the representation,' in other words:

> where the representation is never complete in itself, but is openly and continually compared with the life represented; where the actors can at any moment stand outside themselves and show themselves to be actors. [23]

Applied to the transic condition of mnemodrama, montage takes on the qualities which Bertolt Brecht wanted for his alienation effects in his epic theatre. Only in Fersen's experiments, the *A* effect, with the performer standing outside his now defamiliarised experience and analysing that experience, is inconstant and rapidly alternates with absorption in the images revealed through the trance. It is arguable that the mnemodrama symbolises Brecht's model in its primal form, with the performer standing within and without his performance in quick oscillation. Such a reading of the transic condition also conjures up images of Artaud's vision of primal theatre as ' an infinite perspective of conflicts.' [24]

For Artaud, all manifestations of energy were destructive and consequently regenerative, a cycle of Death and Eros. If each act, by his

definition, disrupts order and unity to create new ones, then the universe cannot be viewed as unity and order, but in the paradoxical terms of shamanic balance as order and disorder, control and chaos. He proceeds with an assertion that somewhere in the universe there exists 'a kind of essential drama' which contains in a manner at once manifold and unique, 'the essential principles of all drama.' [25]

Artaud's "essential drama" may in fact be located in the real life trauma of the Siberian Tungus, among whom the psychotic state of *olonism* was first identified and diagnosed by the Russian anthropologist Shirokogoroff and later studied by one of Fersen's collaborators, Ernesto De Martino. According to their research, in the state of olonism an individual loses all distinction between his self image and action observed independently of the self in the outside world. In the words of Ernesto De Martino:

> instead of hearing or seeing the rustling of leaves in the wind, he becomes the tree that has rustling leaves; instead of hearing a word, he becomes the word itself ..... [26]

The individual is literally possessed by his surroundings and experiences a state of fructuous chaos akin to the spontaneous sacred madness *(hieromania)* of a cult initiate but without any controlling presence. At the height of the crisis De Martino has observed that, in certain cases, the olonised individual makes a visible effort to resist his chaotic state and re-establish his social identity. He does not accept his susceptibility and refuses to give himself up to oblivion; in other words, he reacts. He becomes anguished and this anguish expresses his will to retain his soul when confronted with the threat of losing it. De Martino views this moment of anguish as the original catalyst for the

existential drama, the origin of ritual performance, the main action of which is the struggle to redeem, in his words, 'a balance of the dual identities of the *horizontal* (social) and *vertical* (archetypal) self images within the individual. [27]

The threat of oblivion in the olonised individual results in an eruption of emotion which in many ways is the psychological manifestation of Artaud's concept of *cruelty:*

> It is cruelty that cements matter together, cruelty that molds the features of the created world ..... effort is a cruelty, existence through effort is a cruelty ..... everything that acts is a cruelty. [28]

Cruelty is the residue of becoming, the moment when the individual struggles from the brink of oblivion towards a re-birth of his persona or, in terms of the Artaudian metaphor, the moment when the victim burnt at the stake begins signalling through the flames that he still exists. It is this struggle for the authenticity of the performing self experienced by the individual as a montage in which he oscillates in and out of involvement and alienation, absorbing technique only to negate it, which, I believe, is the distinguishing feature of the mnemodramatic trance.

The Double Being

From an anthropological perspective, the individual in primal societies is believed to possess two souls: a personal soul - *purpa* - and a less personal *vital principle.* The *purpa* is considered to be an invisible replica of the body - its mimetic double. In the state of possession experienced by the initiate in Candomble ritual, for example, it is the purpa which is replaced by the deity whilst the vital principle remains

in the body, ensuring that a loophole is left for consciousness and control. Transic possession for the Candomble initiate is therefore an oneiric state of dual consciousness, a condition perceived by the Balinese as the duality of *inget* (awareness of the social self) and *engsap* (loss of awareness). [29] The degree of control exercised by the vital principle during possession affects the degree of abandonment of the purpa, which in turn determines the depth of trance experienced by the ritual initiate.

In the Occidental theatre, the controlling consciousness of the performer also relies upon a version of the primal "two-soul" concept. The duality of existence on stage is the performer living the life of his character in relationship with the other characters in the play, but aware of himself in the actual process of creation. The performance reality is therefore the mimetic double of daily reality, with the former being controlled by the latter. The Italian actor Tommaso Salvini drew attention to this paradox in 1893:

> while I am acting I am living a dual life, crying or laughing on the one hand and simultaneously so dissecting my tears and laughter that they appeal most forcibly to those whose hearts I wish to reach. [30]

Salvini is simultaneously performer and spectator of himself, dual identities created by the presence of the double mechanisms of creative abandonment and objective control. In performance the Occidental performer moves from the experience of daily reality to an altered state of consciousness we might define as "performance reality" and back again, in a symbolic realisation of the shamanistic *magical flight*. By way of contrast, the ritual initiate moves from a daily reality through a period of psychic abandonment - *soul loss* - and returns to an

alternative reality, having been effectively changed by the performance. In Richard Schechner's terms [31] the Occidental performer is *transported* through performance whereas the ritual initiate is *transformed*. The Occidental performer attempts to re-create his role for each performance whereas the ritual performer re-lives the moment of his symbolic death and initiatory rebirth in each ceremony. Schechner suggests that, once initiated, the ritual performer may enter the transported state of the Occidental performer temporarily, thereby symbolising the fact that such performances are always conducted within the realm of psychic uncertainty. There appears to be no guarantee, for example, that a Candomble initiate will be possessed by her deity during initiation, nor that it will always manifest itself on a regular basis once she has been initiated. The initiate's enspiriting is not a given fact, but a task to be carried out repeatedly in a re-actualisation of that initial moment of transformation. Unlike the occidental performer, whose duality of presence is reflected in his ability to engage and disengage with the illusion of his assumed character at will, the ritual performer at the deepest level of trance is her metaphysical other. Mimesis in this context is not the imitation of an action but the action itself, not the impersonation of a character but a revelation of the unconscious self. Fersen's experiments inhabit the domain between these two concepts of mimesis:

> In the theatre actors talk about living a role and not living a role. But the condition of the actor is an oneiric condition - one of non-ego. [32]

Ritual

Fersen locates the terrain of mnemodrama on the threshold between ritual enactment and theatre, in which the concept of ritual as *play* is extremely important - a point of view which is again a fertile field for interdisciplinary enquiry.

Ritual enactment is not an ordinary everyday action, nor is it the imitation of an action in the Aristotelian sense. Rather it is a kind of action which is on the threshold between these, in a distinct category of its own which Ronald Grimes has defined as an action full of 'sensory meaning.' [33] Rituals are reenactments, not original occurrences and they are repetitive and highly stylised. These features control and delimit as well as inspire and arouse strong subjective states. Freud and Malinowski have stressed ritual performances as coming into play during crisis and times of distress to provide distance and control. Rappaport,[34] on the other hand, has stressed the irrelevance of "authentic" experience in rituals. Lying, he points out, is common and often permissible. As a participant in a performative genre, the individual performs a statement of belief through a gesture. That is all that is socially required and all that is of interest to the community. For Rappaport the ritual performer's personal feelings are irrelevant and genuflection before communal beliefs is all. Indeed, he suggests, all ritual is a kind of lie, the lie of *as if* which Goffman[35] and Bateson [36] refer to as "the frame" and which Susan Langer [37] calls "virtual magic," which in theatrical terms is simply the willing suspension of disbelief encapsulated by the phrase "Let's pretend." Meyerhoff suggests that it is the *play* element which unites these various perspectives on ritual and, by extension, that embraces all

performances whether imitative, representational, or transformational. She points out that the play frame is neither true nor false, nor does it suggest a specific emotional state:

> ritual performances are testaments to our capacity to endlessly bring new possibilities into being without entirely relinquishing the old, prior understandings that have given rise to them; we make magic, believe in it and do not, at once; we make ourselves anew, yet remain familiar to ourselves, are capable of being carried away, changed, yet know fully and freely exactly what we are doing and why. [38]

Victor Turner, like Meyerhoff, views ritual as essentially anti-structural, creative, often carnivalesque and, above all, as playful. In the last years of his life, he became interested in the work of the neuroanatomist Paul Maclean whose research revealed that there is an old *reptilian* brain controlling movement, a newer *limbic* brain concerned basically with emotions and a relatively very recent *cerebral neocortex* brain of cognitive thought. This last is itself divided into left and right lobes, each with distinct functions. Maclean notes that these three brains are interdependent:

> The highest and newest portion of the cerebral cortex has by no means detached itself from an ancient "primitive" region, but functions as it does precisely by virtue of its relationship to the old emotional circuitry. [39]

Reviewing Maclean's findings, Turner suggests that movement and feeling (the first two of Maclean's triunity) are mostly genetically based, while cognitive functions are less so. He concludes that ritual is the interface between these - the cultural arena where the reptilian and limbic brains meet the neocortex. Play in this context is viewed as 'the joker in the neuroanthropological act'[40] - it is a transient concept:

> Play is, for me, a liminal or liminoid mode, essentially interstitial, betwixt and between all standard taxonomic

> modes ..... As such play cannot be pinned down by formulations of left-hemisphere thinking ..... Play is neither ritual action nor meditation, nor is it merely vegetative, nor is it just "having fun;" it also has a good deal of ergotropic and agonistic aggressivity in its odd-jobbing, bricolage style. [41]

As such play is an activity that has not yet been defined, or, in Turner's terms play is categorically uncategorisable, the "anti" by means of which all categories are destabilised. It is a dynamic model of the brain itself: free to move, to find its own ways, to actively contribute to the evolutionary process. Turner's model is not structural at all but processual and as such provides a framework within which the efficacy of the dominant play forms in Fersen's ritual experiments may be analysed and understood.

Throughout this thesis I have used the metaphor of the journey to describe and analyse the process of Fersen's experiments in ritual performance. In many ways this journey resembles the performance of a *gestual* or *visionary* mnemodrama: sometimes it appears to be impossible to interpret, at other times it halts abruptly, seemingly paralysed by doubts as to its purpose and ultimate direction. Despite the fact that these impediments are ever present, the journey always continues, driven by Fersen's indomitable spirit. It is impossible at this stage to divorce the work from the man and we must therefore begin with a brief overview of Fersen's own personal journey.

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41. Turner (1988) p. 17. Turner takes his concept of "Liminal" from the theories of the French Ethnologist and Folklorist Arnold van Gennep, who first coined the term to mean "threshold." He uses *limen* to denote the central of three phases in his model of a primal *rite of passage*. According to this model, the ritual of a rite of passage takes place in three distinct phases: separation, alienation and reintegration.

Chapter One

ALESSANDRO FERSEN'S MYTHOPOEIC JOURNEY

The shamans of pre-industrial cultures traditionally suffered personal illness and psychic breakdown as part of their preparation for an eventual breakthrough to transpersonal levels of visionary wisdom and healing activity. The neo-shamanist Nevill Drury has pointed out the amount of fruitless fantasy involved in trying to transpose the world of the traditional shaman to contemporary society in any literal, anthropological or sociological way. For Drury, the creative importance of reflecting upon the application of shamanism to today's world is twofold: shamanism reminds us of core feelings of the 'sheer "aliveness" of the universe' and it opens up the possibility 'for each of us to discover our own inner mythology, to explore our own transpersonal archetypes, to find our own Dreamtime.'[1] It is this dimension of *mythopoeisis* that Michael Tucker[2] believes is the essential relation between the call of the shaman in traditional cultures and a general interdisciplinary movement in 20th Century art and in Occidental art practice. The metaphor of a journey - to one's own self, to the depths of one's longing and experience in the world - is crucial here. It is a journey which may initially seem both strange and disturbing but which can ultimately come to be seen as partaking of

healing, archetypal qualities. Joseph Beuys [3] and Antonin Artaud are two examples of artists this century connected with performance, who have suffered on the threshold of death and been reborn through the self-shamanising of their art.

In the case of Artaud, Martin Esslin suggests that, in another epoch, he might have been 'a shaman, a prophet, an alchemist, an oracle, a saint or a gnostic teacher.'[4] In January 1936 Artaud sailed to Mexico; in August of that year, after a 750 - mile train journey, he travelled on horseback across the Sierra Madre to the territory of the Tarahumara Indians in order to explore those "other worlds" of participation mystique which led him to conclude that the humanism of the Rènaissance had resulted in 'a dimunition of man.'[5] By one of those interesting quirks of history, at the very moment Artaud was departing for Mexico Alessandro Fersen was arriving in Paris in search of his own sense of communitas. Fersen would eventually make contact with Charles Dullin, Artaud's former teacher and theatre director, but would not come across the writings of Artaud until they were translated into Italian in 1966, by which time Fersen had undertaken his own journey into "other worlds " of participation mystique. Whilst the psychological circumstances of the two men cannot be compared, Fersen, like Artaud, had suffered a crisis of identity which precipitated his journeys and resulted in a "cure" which manifested itself through the vehicle of theatrical performance. In this sense Fersen, like Artaud before him and Grotowski and Eugenio Barba after him, is a personification of the Brechtian *sage*, a man who has suffered and travelled much and who changes his role to suit his circumstances.

Alessandro Fersen was born Alexander Fajrajzen in the city of Lodz, Poland, in 1911 to a family of wealthy Jewish bankers. Three months after his birth, he was uprooted and taken to live in the family's newly adopted home in Genoa. Fersen declares that growing up in Genoa, under his mother's influence, he felt a strong spiritual almost mythical tie to his native Poland but when he visited the country for the first time at the age of seventeen, he experienced a profound culture shock. This shock of alienation from his homeland led to a persistent view of himself as a liminal figure within Italian society, 'I am without roots and this feeling has determined the path of my work.'[6] Poland became the first of his cultural "lost domains" and his subsequent journeys were conducted through others which existed on the periphery of culture and history, in search of models which might heal the fractured forms of Occidental existence and thereby himself.

Family tradition determined that the young Fersen would either become a banker or follow a career in the law. He duly enrolled as a law student at the University of Genoa but almost immediately became interested in literature and philosophy. The genesis of his mythopoeic spirit can be found in the pages of his Doctoral thesis l'universo come Giuoco written in 1933. In it he put forward the argument that the original *paidiac* free play of the universe, the primal world of wild spontaneous energies, had gradually been transformed into one of socially conditioned order within which man's ability to directly experience the chaos of primordial life had been suppressed in the unconscious layers of the individual psyche. Fersen desired mankind's return to the condition of what he called 'creative

abandonment,' a concept modelled on the descriptions he had read of archaic feasts, in which the distinctions between celebrant and witness were dissolved in the ecstasy of mutual participation. The thesis was heavily influenced by his absorption in the philosophy of Nietzsche which had just been translated into Italian by the philosopher Giorgio Colli, who was later to become a personal friend of Fersen's and an early champion of his experiments in *mnemodrama*. What attracted the rootless Fersen to Nietzsche's philosophy was the latter's definition, in The Birth of Tragedy, of the "mythless man" of the industrial West who was fired by the energies of material progress but at the same time troubled by an immense nostalgia for the lost domain of the *illud tempus*:

> The tremendous historical need of our unsatisfied modern culture, the assembling around one of countless other cultures, the consuming demand for knowledge - what does all this point to, if not the loss of the mythical home, the mythical maternal womb... [7]

Fersen supported his reading of Nietzsche with the writings of Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Luigi Pirandello, the former's appearance in his thesis incurring the wrath of the university authorities for whom Anthropology could not be considered a legitimate science for study. Although as yet disinterested in the theatre other than as a casual spectator, Fersen was attracted to the plays of Pirandello because of their emphasis on the dualism of man living a life and witnessing himself living that life. For Pirandello this is the definitive condition of man as a role playing entity in society, but for Fersen it represented an image of mankind's coercion from the paidiac play of primal participation to psycho-physical control through the advent of science. The mythopoeic dimensions of Fersen's argument caused a scandal and he

was accused by the university authorities of "anarchic intentions" against the state. He now states that it was only with the greatest difficulty that he finally obtained his degree.

In retrospect the ludic emphasis of l'universo come Giuoco , whilst it remained unknown outside the world of Italian academia, does suggest that Fersen was in tune with the mythopoeic spirit in the arts and sciences in the pre-war era in Europe. His thesis anticipates the publication of Huizinga's seminal Homo Ludens over a decade later and Martin Buber's concept of the *I -THOU* participative relationship between self and world, the moment when the details of existence are experienced freshly as if for the first time. These in turn would provide the model for Victor Turner's concept of "spontaneous communitas" in the 1960s which, in terms of general philosophy at least, shows him to be a fellow traveller with Fersen.

The second stage of Fersen's mythopoeic journey was his self-imposed exile in Paris between 1936 and 1939, a move he made much against the wishes of his family in order to avoid taking up Italian citizenship which at that time would almost certainly have meant joining the Fascist Party and certain conscription into the army. His Parisian sojourn as a nationless citizen of the world may be seen as both the actualisation of his thesis and the further development of his interest in anthropology. On arrival in 1936 he immediately enrolled in classes taught by Levy-Bruhl at the College de France and was slowly drawn into an artistic climate heady with a waning surrealism and growing existentialism, where he met Andre Gide, Arthur Adamov and Charles Dullin and discovered the poetry of Baudelaire. At the same time he turned his hand to a whole range of menial tasks in

order to keep body and soul together, although by his own admission he was often on the verge of starving.

In the light of his later theatre experiments, Fersen's meeting with Charles Dullin was of great importance. Dullin had founded his laboratory theatre, the *Atelier*, in 1921 as a centre for actor training organised on the principle of a commune. His aim was to create a complete actor through a training technique whose goal was a synthesis of the actor's perception of himself - 'voix de soi-meme' - with his perception of the exterior world - 'voix du monde.' [8] On the walls of the Atelier studio were hung brightly painted masks, many in black leather or imitation wood. Exercises with these masks were an important part of Dullin's training technique in that they provided his actors with a counter-point to the improvisations connected with their individual research into autobiographical memory based on the techniques of Stanislavski. The adoption of mask exercises suggests a decisive shift in emphasis away from the psychological towards the ritual, with the masked actors taking on the aspect of Edward Gordon Craig's *ubermarionette* - 'actor plus fire, minus ego' [9] - awaiting animation. Fersen's meeting with Dullin and his observation of his work thus provided him with his first contact with the alien power of ritual and provided him with a model for the later construction of his own laboratory.

With the outbreak of war in 1939 Fersen returned to Italy, where he resumed a liminal existence by joining the Marxist Party of Genoa for whom he wrote anti-Fascist propaganda and was responsible for aiding Polish refugees. Following the German invasion he fled to the mountains to join the resistance movement and was eventually forced

to flee to Switzerland where he worked in a refugee camp. In the camp he met the painter Emanuele Luzzati and through him became involved creatively in the theatre for the first time:

> I see the images of our first show (...) Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the first stage design of my life, all made of rags (...) Going to see Fersen, also a refugee in a tiny village in the Valais, and asking him for a text for this show (...) Fersen was then for me more of a poet, a writer than a director. [10]

Following the liberation of Italy, Fersen returned to Genoa where he was appointed Secretary of Cultural Re-organisation for The Committee for National Liberation for the Liguria region.

The year 1945 marks the beginning of Fersen's theatrical journey, his initial entrance into the world of Italian theatre as writer and director in residence at the Nuovo Theatre in Genoa. Teamed once again with Luzzati as his designer, Fersen chose to inaugurate his new career with his own adaptation of a traditional Hasidic legend the Lea Lebovitz, the story of a young girl who sacrifices her own life in order to save that of a young student of the Talmud with whom she is in love. The production enabled Fersen practically to engage with his fascination for Occidental mysticism and once again celebrate the culture of a "lost domain:"

> (Lea Lebovitz) was a moral testimony towards a civilization almost entirely destroyed by Nazism together with all its wealth of traditions, poetry and wisdom. [11]

The resulting production appears, from Fersen's own description of it, to have been heavily influenced by his exposure to Dullin's work and method of staging:

> it was the first spontaneous attempt at what was then with an ugly formula, called *Total Theatre* with the word

> flowing into song, the mime intertwined with dance, with an anti-literal gestuality dictated by the use of huge masks created by Luzzati. [12]

In his reminiscence of this production, Fersen suggests that he discovered the means of animating his own de-centred self:

> as soon as I set foot on the stage, something strange happened to me: I knew everything, or it seemed to me that I knew everything about the secrets, the tricks, the "magic" of theatre. [13]

The enthusiastic critical and public reception which greeted the appearance of the Lea Lebovitz was not, however, repeated in succeeding productions in which Fersen attempted to refine his "total theatre" style. Facing a professional crisis in which the demands of the commercial theatre conflicted with a desire to create theatre which would in some sense bind a community together, Fersen wrote three manifestos in which he outlined his vision of a theatre which would accomplish the latter. Written during 1950, the manifestos rejected the purely aesthetic function of occidental theatre with its literary focus and industrial packaging of productions and called for a return to the origins of theatre, for the excavation of the original, primal impulse for performance within the community. The publication of these manifestos with their provocative titles - The Out-of-date Theatre, Theatre Saved by Cinema and The Destiny of Theatre is in its Origins - caused a sensation in Italy which split the theatre community into pro- and anti- Fersen factions.

It is difficult from this historical distance to effectively gauge the impact of Fersen's writings, if any, on the international theatre community beyond the borders of Italy, but it is possible to suggest that, as in the case of his Doctoral thesis, Fersen was again reflecting the

spirit of the time. The spirit of revolt against theatrical aestheticism was in the air and it is interesting to compare, for example, Fersen's titles with those of several articles written by the young Jerzy Grotowski at the end of the decade: "Theatre and the Cosmic Man," "On the Theatre of the Future," "The Death and Reincarnation of the Theatre" and "What is Theatre?" Like Fersen, Grotowski warned that the theatre in its present form was doomed to extinction because it was no match for the power and mass appeal of the electronic media. His articles split the Polish theatre establishment into pro and anti factions and his own response was to initiate his experimental theatre company in Opole in 1959, a course of action similar to the one taken by Fersen following the publication of his manifestos in 1951.

An attempt to put the spirit of the manifestos into practice resulted in Fersen and Luzzati staging the first "Surrealist Cabaret" ever seen in Rome in the winter of 1951. At this time Fersen was supplementing his meagre earnings from writing and theatre direction by working as an assistant producer for a film company and thereby managed to scrape enough money together to open a small cafe theatre. For his initial production Fersen gathered round him an international group of performers which included Catherine Sauvage, Etienne Decroux's assistant Eliane Gyuon, dancers from Martha Graham's company and a New Orleans Jazz Band. The resulting show was entitled Nottambuli ("Sleepwalkers") and consisted of a highly stylised montage of modern dance, mime and songs and readings from the writings of Bertolt Brecht and Eugene Ionesco, both of whom were still relatively unknown in Italy at that time. The programme note for the show was written by Fersen and again took the form of a manifesto:

> It is our belief that in modern times the need for a return to the original unity of theatrical life is becoming progressively outlined and accentuated. In every era, at every latitude, within every civilization - in the Greek Tragedy as well as in the medieval sacred representation, in the Italian Commedia, in the Javanese and Chinese theatres - those which we consider autonomous theatrical arts, the prose, the singing, the dance, live together harmoniously fused in the complex and rich equilibrium of a single work of art; they constitute the undivided elements of a single language which is that of the authentic theatre. [14]

The appearance of Nottambuli once again caused a confrontation between Fersen and the authorities and he was forced to close down the cafe theatre in the face of police surveillance of his "anarchist" activities.

The staging of this "existential cabaret" had been a genuine attempt on Fersen's part to re-create the conditions of Dullin's *atelier* for the theatre - going public of Rome. The fact that all the performers involved with the show lived together as a commune, receiving food in payment for their performances, not only acknowledged Dullin's model, but anticipated the arrival of The Living Theatre whose director Julian Beck became a regular visitor to Fersen's studio during the 1960s. Later Fersen would return to the montage style of Nottambuli with his original piece entitled The Crazy Show, which he devised with the cooperation of Guido Stagnaro and the young composer Luciano Berio. Fersen described this piece as "a funambolic surrealist cocktail" and it proved to be Rome's first experience of what would come to be designated "Theatre of the Absurd."

In 1952 Fersen was again offered the opportunity to work in mainstream theatre when he was invited to direct a production of Beaumarchais' Il Barbiere di Siviglia at the newly opened Teatro Stabile

in Genoa. Beaumarchais was quickly followed by productions of works by Moliere, Pirandello, Ben Jonson and Lope de Vega, as Fersen devoted himself to the growth of the Stabile's reputation between 1952 and 1954. These were years which provided Fersen with his first proper training in his craft:

> (...) due to the extremely poor means of the Stabile, I had the possibility of being involved in all the problems of the stage from the lighting to the smallest problems of technical equipment; and from this craftsman-like relationship with the stage mechanics, I learned a lot. [15]

The practical man of the theatre was still beset, however, by the doubts and questions originally raised in the manifestos:

> I had to give an answer, my answer to a series of tormenting questions in which my choice of life was also involved and which can be summed up in a single one: why the modern theatre ? With what aims and by which means does the theatre exist within the framework of our society ? [16]

In seeking a practical response to these questions he turned for inspiration to the model of his Nottambuli project, only this time he substituted the concept of a theatre *laboratory* - with all its implications of serious scientific research - for the idealistic commune. His plan, however, proved to be alien to the Italian authorities who refused to grant either funding or planning permission for the scheme. Finally Fersen compromised by reluctantly agreeing to include his research laboratory as a discrete unit within the general curriculum of a theatre training school. The Fersen Studio of Scenic Arts subsequently opened in Rome in 1957 as the first alternative programme of theatre training to the prestigious National Academy of Dramatic Art, which had been created by Silvio d'Amico in 1935.

Initially the work of the Studio was structured along a traditional two - year theatre training programme, offering classes in voice and movement and all aspects of theatre design. The influence of Charles Dullin permeated additional classes devoted to mime and mask work, skills which were not offered in the traditional programme of the National Academy at this time. Fersen's research laboratory worked in isolation away from the main training programme and consisted of a group of ten performers who comprised a mixture of professionals and senior students from the Studio. As the research developed over the years, selected students were specifically invited by Fersen to join his laboratory group on completion of their two years of training at the Studio. The fact that all members of the group had received a basic training in theatre arts, principally based on a combination of the ideas of Stanislavski and Brecht, is important from the perspective of the future emphasis on de-training which would emerge as the structure of *mnemodrama* began to take shape. In addition, Fersen demanded that all the members of his research group were psychologically as well as physically strong for the task in hand - training not therapy was the stated goal of the research, a paradox which was to haunt Fersen for his entire career.

During the first phase of the laboratory's existence (1957 - 1961), Fersen combined his research activities in Rome with his directing duties at the Teatro Stabile in Genoa. In 1958 he was forced to interrupt the former in order to undertake a tour of Italian communities in Brazil with the Stabile company. Exposure to native Brazilian culture appears to have re-awakened his interest in anthropology as he became fascinated with what he perceived to be the ritual structure of Carnival

and the hypnotic power of the Samba. It was through an introduction to a composer of sambas that he was invited to witness an initiation rite of one of the Candomble cults in Bahia, an experience which would prove to be the seminal influence on the future direction of his research. When the Stabile company returned to Italy Fersen remained behind in Bahia where, for a period of four months, he observed and participated in the ritual practices of Candomble.

In anthropological terms the world of Candomble is a peripheral one, especially in comparison to the dominant European and American orientated sectors of Brazilian culture. It is a separate reality where the "lost domain" of African behaviour norms (specifically Yoruban) brought to Brazil by slaves, are emphasised. Exclusively female (men are only allowed to participate if they assume female attire), Candomble is a possession cult whose ritual structure is characterised by belief in and worship of a pantheon of divinities - *Orixas* - of which the god Olorun is the supreme although non-worshipped head.

Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of the cult, it is worth pointing out that Fersen's interdisciplinary interest in Candomble reflects a shift in perspective by a number of anthropologists at the time concerning the therapeutic value of cult membership for women. It was not until the 1940s that anthropologists such as Ashton (1943) and Kuper (1947) [17] began to discuss the idea that ritualised possession states were about the only way in which women in many cultures could escape from impossible home situations or achieve social prestige. In the very year that Fersen was making his own study of the possession cult, anthropologists Leiris, Mischel and Mischel and

Messing [18] all independently wrote papers emphasising what they identified as the positive features, such as the *cathartic* effects of acting out otherwise forbidden behaviour, and the supportive value of membership in the cult group.

An anthropological perspective on Candomble suggests that the cult initially provides Fersen with a model of cultural syncretism, a primal *mnemodrama*. Roger Bastide [19], for example, states that one of the first problems confronting the student of Candomble, is to find out how and why so many characteristic features of African culture managed to survive the rigours of the slave regime in Brazil. In attempting to provide an answer, Bastide applies the Bergsonian distinction between memory-as-recollection and memory-as-habit. He suggests that, through a combination of the two, it was possible for the African slave to preserve memories of his past. Slavery in Brazil automatically separated a child from his parents and left him to be brought up by the old women who were no longer fit to toil in the fields. It was precisely this group which, by reason of old age, would be most likely to dwell on the past. Thus, according to Bastide, such memories could well have been transmitted from one generation to another, especially since the slave ships continued to arrive with fresh consignments of human "cattle." On the other hand, the new modes of production enforced by the regime accustomed people's bodies to different motor habits and at the same time the relationship between white masters and black servants introduced a whole new range of social conduct. Thus, while the slave's psychological perspective might remain African, his physical actions were gradually being Americanised.

In the long run, and especially after the abolition of the slave-trade, such memories were bound to lose their original clarity. They were out of place in this new environment; slowly but inevitably they became blurred and at last faded into total oblivion. If these memories were to survive, they had to attach themselves to some existing custom, establish a foothold in contemporary society, find some sort of niche or hiding place. Since the African could no longer find, in Brazil, anything like the old Yoruban context of traditional beliefs, he had to discover - or invent - a brand-new social framework which could contain them. The cult of Candomble therefore evolved as a syncretism of traditional Yoruban belief with aspects of Roman Catholicism wherein, for example, the *orixas* manifested themselves in the images of Catholic saints: a syncretism of what Fersen would later define in his own mnemodrama techniques as the horizontal (social) memory with the vertical (ancestral) memory, the discovery of which resulted in the psycho-physical *centring* of the individual.

Candomble is essentially a monotheistic cult at the individual level. The initiate - *Adoxu* - is consecrated to one and only one orixa. Cult members consider everyone to have an orixa or *Dom Da Cabeca* ("master of the head"), who becomes permanently associated with each child at birth and whose identity is divined by the cult head or *Mae-De-Santo* ("Mother of the Spirits"). Initiation - *Feito* - ("being made") lies at the very heart of the social organisation of Candomble. Psychologically it is the confirmation of the unity of the adoxu with her orixa and an opening of the road to control of supernatural power. Viewed sociologically, it is the major rite of aggregation, binding the individual to the cult through the re-actualisation of her moment of

possession by her orixa, invoked through the performance of elaborate trance dances which characterise initiation.

Gisele Binon-Cossard, who studied the cult from the inside as an adept, states that initiation lasts in theory for a period of three months, but that the most important stage consists of a three-week period of confinement or seclusion. This period is spent by the adoxu in an isolated room - *Pegi* - measuring six by twelve feet, where she is required to sleep on the floor at all times. Whilst in this secluded state she manifests a variety of supernatural beings and her *purpa* (soul) is considered to be absent. Cossard's experience reveals two quite distinct aspects to the adoxu's altered state of consciousness, defined by the cult as *santo* and *ere*.

The performance leading to the adoxu's manifestation of the state of *santo* commences with the Mae-De-Santo calling the orixas from Africa to come and take their adoxu's. An orixa only takes its adoxu on the day dedicated to it and then only when it is deemed to be ready. The manner in which the orixa takes its newly selected adoxu is described as *caida* - making her "fall dead." This usually happens at a public ceremony after the adoxu has danced all the dances characteristic of her adoxu, which may well take over an hour to perform. Cossard recalls her experience of the *santo* state as being particularly gruelling:

> it is extremely tiring physically and, in addition, since swallowing scarcely occurs in the course of it, it is impossible for the novice to take nourishment; consequently it cannot be continued for long with impunity. It is therefore necessary to put the novice into a different state (...)[20]

When the orixa arrives it throws the body of the adoxu to the ground and takes her soul. It is believed that a person in such a state is "like an

open door anyone may enter" and accordingly precautions are taken to ensure that the proper spirit enters her and manifests itself. A large white sheet is spread over the adoxu's body, covering the feet and head to protect it from evil spirits, following which the body is carried out of the public space back to the pegi where it awaits the arrival of the first *ere* to manifest itself.

Cossard observes that even though the alterations of consciousness are much less marked than during the santo state, the *ere* state is still accompanied by psychological disturbances: extremely reduced faculties of taste and smell, a diminished sense of touch, almost no need for sleep and dissociation from affectively relating to normal life. According to Cossard in the state of ere the adoxu experiences a "splitting of the self":

> (the *ere*) is aware of all the novice's preoccupations when in a normal state but envisages them with total detachment, as though he were dealing with a complete stranger. He refers to her in speech as "my daughter." The novice exists in a state of double consciousness. But this state is also a trance since it gives rise in certain cases to phenomena that fall into the province of parapsychology: projection into space, projection into past and future time (...) [21]

Rouget declares that the *ere* is a "trance of dispossession" [22] in which the adoxu loses the sense of her social persona prior to acquiring a new one. In traditional theatre terms, the manifestation of the *ere* state may be likened to a rehearsal during which various approaches to the character are attempted and discarded by the performer in pursuit of a final fusing of performer with character in performance.

The first *ere* which manifests in the adoxu is usually an infant symbolised by the dressing of the adoxu in children's clothing,

encouraging her to play with toys and in which she does not speak but simply babbles and cries like a baby when hungry. The infantile ere normally remains for seventeen days. In preparation for the eventual arrival of her orixa, the adoxu's head is shaved and a sacrificial offering of birds and animals is made to the orixa. This sacrifice is called *Babori* and is intended to "feed the head" of the adoxu where the orixa will arrive to possess her. As the orixa comes to eat he momentarily replaces the infantile ere but does not dance. At the instant of possession, the adoxu shakes violently as she receives strength from the feeding orixa, who is replaced by a second ere once the sacrifices are completed. This second ere, the *Ere De Grau*, manifests itself in the adoxu as a male persona, prone to violence and harsh cries but, like the infantile ere which it replaces, unable to speak. The *Ere De Grau* remains for one night only and with its departure, a third and final ere is manifested prior to the orixa finally possessing the adoxu. This final manifestation takes the form of a young girl dressed once again in the costume of the infantile ere but dancing in an upright posture with lightness and grace, despite the fact that her eyes remain closed throughout - blocking out any visual stimulus which might impair her concentration on her psychic interior. Like the two previous eres, this one does not speak or make any noise whatsoever during her performance. The ultimate goal of the ere training is to enable the adoxu to transcend these infantile stages and re-discover a pure state of being in communion with the orixa who possesses her. Physically this will be realised when she dances upright with eyes open in what Samuel Beckett, in another context, has described as the "nesting stare" of the infant whose gaze is possessed by images of the *illud tempus*.

Once the adoxu has been possessed by her orixa, she is presented to the members of the cult house in a joyous celebration known as the *Orunko*. During this celebration the new "daughter of the gods" reveals her new name. Afterwards she remains in seclusion for another week, still in a state of trance. The following Sunday there takes place the ceremony called *panan*, during which the adoxu relearns the behaviour appropriate to secular life which she had forgotten in the course of her metamorphosis. She can then return home but she still remains under the control of the *Mae-De-Santo* who has initiated her.

Rouget [23] points out that in Candomble initiation has two ultimate objectives which are complementary but nevertheless distinct. The first is to train the adoxu, which means transforming her not only in terms of her internal persona (by conferring a certain knowledge and a certain power upon her) but aslo in terms of her social relations (by making her a member of a sisterhood which, in this case, can be likened to a secret society, since initiation is closely linked with secrecy). The second objective is to create receptacles for the orixa - individuals capable of becoming possessed. Once initiation is accomplished, the adoxu will never be the same person that she used to be and she will never again bear the same name, at least in the cult. This does not mean, however, that she will permanently become the orixa to be embodied. She will only be possessed by her orixa from time to time. Even though the goal of initiation is possession, training an adoxu is, nevertheless, an operation in its own right and the adoxu in her normal state is very different from the person she becomes when possessed. Initiatory trance affects initiates, not those who are

possessed. Rouget points out that the fact that it is easier to trigger possession trance in a subject already in a state of initiatory trance (which in his terms is a state of "dispossession") than in a subject in a normal state, does not in any way suggest that initiatory trance is an intermediary state between the normal and the possession state. He declares it to be 'another form of trance, which should be considered in and of itself and quite independently from possession.'

The emphasis on movement in Candomble initiation has led I.M. Lewis to interpret it as an example of a "danced psychodrama" in which he declares, 'some measure of psychic compensation for the injuries and vicissitudes of daily life is obtained.' Possession in this context is a release, an escape from harsh reality into a world of symbolism:

> The possessed person who in the seance is the centre of attention says in effect, "Look at me, I am dancing." Thus those forced by society into subservience play exactly the opposite role with the active encouragement of the seance audience. [24]

It is important to emphasise what Lewis's statement merely hints at, namely, that there is no distinction between performer and audience in a Candomble ritual; all present are participants. The cult members bear witness to the adoxu's performance whilst she is possessed by her orixa and thereby provide the authenticating voice of her possession. What is lost in terms of her personal experience whilst she is in a state of trance, is gained by and validates the cultural experience of the cult members. The adoxu's loss of consciousness during her trance guarantees the validity of the cult's mythopoeic consciousness:

> while the orixas are dancing, they approach the spectators and embrace each of them individually. It is difficult to

> describe the looks of expectation and reverence on the faces of spectators as the orixas move up to them and embrace them (...) but at that climactic moment, their expressions clearly demonstrate all of the potential good associated with Candomble reaching its fulfillment. [25]

The atmosphere during all stages of Candomble initiation is controlled and yet essentially permissive and comforting. Factors which made a great impression on Fersen and dominate the only detailed description of his Candomble experience which he has ever committed to print:

> by following one night the dangerous evolutions of a young girl in trance, possessed by Ogun the god of war, I have reached some interesting conclusions. The young black (...) was taking enormous leaps into the air and was facing imaginary battles whilst waving about a heavy silver sword (symbol of Ogun) without ever touching with her downward strokes, the large number of faithfuls gathered around the barracao walls. By observing the beautiful face transfigured by the orgiastic trance, the closed or semi-closed eyes, a slash of foaming like a wound at the side of the mouth, I thought I saw in her abandonment to the turbulent god a subtle presence, an imperceptible fringe of control presiding over the whole of that exhausting possession. [26]

Surprisingly what is lacking from this description, given Fersen's desire to rediscover a holistic theatrical form, is any mention of the explicitly therapeutic value of the ritual. No reference is made by Fersen to the fact that the goal of each adoxu is to achieve a state of ecstasy and collapse in a trance from which she will eventually emerge purged and refreshed. He appears to be observing the rite from the standpoint of theatrical technique alone. He does, however, make a very important connection between what he observes in Candomble and what he has read regarding the origins of Occidental theatre:

> The sacred possession produced during the nocturnal rites has all the characteristics of the Dionysian orgy and brings about convulsive motions like those handed down by Greek ceramics in the depiction of the dancing Maenads. [27]

Fersen's absorption in classical mythology and his readings of Nietzsche suggest that, on the surface at least, he discovered parallels between Candomble and the rites of Dionysos in the fact that both cults were exclusively female, that the use of symbolic props in Candomble echoed classical descriptions of the wielding of the *thyrsus* by the Maenads and that both cults manifested the possession state through continuous, whirling movements. This recognition of the "lost domain" of the archaic cult of Dionysos beneath the structure of Candomble ritual would eventually encourage Fersen to probe in his research beyond the boundaries of the history of written theatre back to the very origins of theatrical performance itself.

The Candomble experience did not initially influence the direction of Fersen's research. For on his return to his laboratory he set about conducting a detailed practical analysis of the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski:

> For someone curious about knowing the interior dynamic of the scenic life it was right to start from him. He had been the first theatre man who had analysed the psychic behaviour of the actor on stage (...) To concretely put to the test the "method," the scenic exercises, the critical observations of Stanislavski has constituted an obliged passage and my first goal. [28]

It is interesting to compare Fersen's statement with that of Jerzy Grotowski's written in 1959:

> As an actor I was obsessed with Stanislavski: I was a fanatic. I thought that this was the key opening all doors to creativity. I wanted to understand him better

> than anyone else. I worked hard to learn everything I could about what he said or what was said about him. This progressed - according to psycho-analytic rules - from a period of imitation to one of rebellion, or a striving for independence. [29]

According to Grotowski, Stanislavski's primary legacy - his great service to the theatre - was the establishment of the occidental performer's obligation to daily work and training in addition to performance. There are two other qualities of Stanislavski's work and attitude that Grotowski isolates in particular. One is Stanislavski's 'concentration on what is practical and concrete. How to touch the intangible ? He wanted to find a concrete path towards what are secret, mysterious processes.' Secondly (and perhaps principally for Grotowski) Stanislavski was a man in a state of 'permanent self-reform.' Both qualities are implicitly acknowledged in Fersen's own approach to Stanislavski and by the fact that his "act of rebellion" in the form of the mnemodrama techniques never entirely shifts out of the realm of Stanislavski's ideas.

Notes

1. N. Drury, The Elements of Shamanism (London: Element Books Ltd, 1989), pp: 101 - 2.
2. Michael Tucker, Dreaming With Open Eyes, (San Francisco: Aquarian/Harper, 1992).
3. Nick Kaye, "Ritualism and Renewal" in Performance no.59 (Winter 1989/90), pp. 31 - 45.

   In 1943, while a Luftwaffe pilot, Beuys claimedthat his JU87 crashed in the Crimea. While his co-pilot was killed on impact, Beuy was thrown free of the plane to be found and rescued by Tartars '(...) They covered my body in fat to help it regenerate warmth and wrapped it in felt as an insulator to keep the warmth in.' This shamanistic experience of death and rebirth was reflected in Beuys' use of fat and felt as constantly recurring symbols in his later performance pieces.
4. Martin Esslin, Artaud, (London: Fontana, 1976), p. 116.
5. Tucker (1992), p. 191.
6. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview, 30 May 1990.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) p. 136.
8. Frantisek Deak, "Antonin Artaud and Charles Dullin: Artaud's Apprenticeship in Theatre" in Educational Theatre Journal vol. 29. no. 3 (October 1977), p. 346.
9. E.T. Kirby, ed. Total Theatre (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969), p. 68.

10. Emanuele Luzzati, "Testimonianza di un'Epoca" trans. Lorenza Venditteli in La Dimensione Perduta (Rome 1978: private printing), n.pag

11. Giorgio Polacco, "Dell Ricerca, del Laboratorio e di noi" trans. Lorenza Venditteli in La Dimensione Perduta (1978), n.pag.

12. Giorgio Polacco (1978), n.pag.

13. Giorgio Polacco (1978), n.pag.

14. Giorgio Polacco (1978), n.pag.

15. Giorgio Polacco (1978), n.pag.

16. Giorgio Polacco (1978), n.pag.

17. Vincent Crapanzano and Vivian Garrison, eds. Case Studies in Spirit Possession (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977), p. 4.

18. Crapanzano & Garrison (1977), p. 4.

19. Roger Bastide, African Civilisation in the New World, trans. Peter Green (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 86 - 90.

20. Gilbert Rouget, Music and Trance, trans. Brunhilde Biebuyck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 47.

21. Rouget (1985), p. 47.

22. Rouget (1985), p. 48.

23. Rouget (1985), p. 57.

24. I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 175.

25. Martin Werner Horeis, The Afro-Brazilian Candomble Cult (Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 172.

26. Alessandro Fersen, "Itinerario di una Ricerca" trans. Lorenza Venditelli, in La Dimensione Perduta (Rome 1978: privately printed), n.pag.

27. Alessandro Fersen, "Itinerario di una Ricerca" (1978), n.pag.

28. Alessandro Fersen, "Itinerario di una Ricerca" (1978), n.pag.

29. Jennifer Kumiega, The Theatre of Grotowski (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 110.

Chapter Two

FERSEN'S JOURNEY FROM STANISLAVSKI TO MNEMODRAMA

It is the image of the ritual performer abandoned in a state of transic possession, which is implied in Stanislavski's emphasis on the attainment of artistic communion as the desired goal of his ideal actor. His concept of *emotional memory* suggests that the performer is always in mental contact with some other person, place or object and that it is his goal to live fully in these relationships and actualise their energy. In order to be in touch with the artistic inspiration that lies within himself in an unmanifested state (a theatrical equivalent of Meyerhoff's state of *non-form*), the performer must abandon mechanical ways of responding to perceptual stimuli.

In Stanislavski's system it is the pre-expressive technique of *perezhivanie* which enspirits the performer prior to his act of creation. Perezhivanie represents the performer's inward journey from his conscious self to his unconscious in search of his creative soul. It is the realisation of an oneiric condition in which the performer abandons himself to the vision of his creative goal, rather than simply the mental re-enactment of a past experience. In practice, Perezhivanie is *maieutic* in the Socratic sense, taking the form in An Actor Prepares [1] of a dialogue between the director Torzov and the student actor Paul, in which the latter experiences the oneiric dimension of his role - an Oak tree - through responding to implacable questioning from Torzov. The idea is that the actor should be spiritually possessed by the presence of the Oak tree, that it should penetrate his conscious being. In the *maieutics* of perezhivanie the emphasis is on the clarity of mental

vision, the dilation of the mind, from which the body as a creative presence is initially absent. Verbal suggestion stimulates the vision which will later be transformed into the physical manifestation of the role. The degree to which Stanislavski's performer is able to abandon himself to his vision is clearly determined by the degree to which the verbal questioning stimulates his unconscious.

The pre-expressive vision which results from perezhivanie is the resulting co-creation from the dialogue between the director and the performer, a technique which in many ways resembles the curing dialogue between the shaman and his patient. Claude Levi-Strauss [2], for example, makes much of the suggestion that shamanism inverts the psychoanalytic technique for achieving abreaction since in shamanism it is not the patient's but the shaman's speech that fills the therapeutic space. In his example of a Cuna shaman's curing song of *Mu-Igala* for a woman obstructed in labour, he observes that the woman lies silent while the shaman's song fills her with imagery ordering the chaos out of her being. In a similar manner Stanislavski's alter-ego Torzov orchestrates his student's symphony of images from chaos to order.

The first phase of Fersen's laboratory research focussed on Stanislavski's pratique for rationally induced trance by analysing the degree of control required by the performer in order successfully to abandon himself to the perezhivanic vision of his character in performance. Commencing with a series of scripted improvisations with which he explored Stanislavski's *affective memory* techniques, Fersen quickly discovered that the performer's search for the rational biography of his character - the logical coherence of his feelings and

emotions - did not constitute a sufficiently strong psychic lever to trigger the effective participation of his unconscious. From Fersen's point of view, Stanislavski's technique of perezhivanie failed when compared to what he had witnessed in the Candomble rituals. He noted a qualitative difference between the almost organic control inherent in the ritual behaviour - an instinct of natural safeguard from the turmoils of possession - and the control required by the dramatic text which, in his experiments, took on the form of an external coercion. Fersen decided that he had alighted upon the essential paradox of Stanislavski's system [3] : that the urge toward creative abandonment is strictly countered by an insistence that the performer never lose sight of himself on stage; that a careful distinction be preserved between the *I* of the self and the *other* of the character, between real life and art. The structure of the written text results in a dualistic friction in which the occidental performer constantly shifts in performance between a denial of being another ("I am me") and a denial of not being another ("I am the character"). Fersen appears not to have concerned himself at this stage with the question as to whether or not the same paradox faced the ritual performers in Candomble. Instead he abandoned the written text and began to concentrate on the performer's relationship with scenic props in the development of his emotional identification with his character.

Fersen's change of focus is still clearly influenced by and dependent upon the techniques of Stanislavski who, although often sceptical about the wisdom of working from the outside of a character in, recognised the value of physical objects and physical actions in facilitating the enspiriting of the performer by his unconscious. ' From

believing in the truth of one small physical action', he writes, 'an actor can come to feel himself in his part and to have faith in the reality of the whole play.' [4] Why this should be so he explains at another point in his writings:

> As you are drawn to physical actions you are drawn away from the life of your subconscious. In that way you render it free to act and induce it to work creatively. [5]

In other words, having a physical action to accomplish puts the body off its guard and allows the possessing impulses to take over. It is this somatic [6] quality of acting which Fersen now began to discover.

In a new set of exercises, Fersen provided his performers with a set of given circumstances and then invited them to choose a stage prop on which to focus attention, whilst exploring their individual responses to the given circumstances. He required these sessions to be conducted in absolute silence, insisting that all communication take place only through the manipulation of the prop:

> observe how this actor slowly moves the spoon in his coffee cup, then puts it down, brings the cup to his lips - stops - averts it from his mouth - again brings it close - cannot decide to drink the beverage. Could it be he hesitates in taking some important step in his life ? [7]

Fersen's observation highlights one of the problems of his research, namely his predilection for imposing a psychological interpretation on an action which is at best tenuous and at worst ignores the fact that the performer may, after all, simply be role playing the given circumstances. Following a number of these exercises Fersen insisted that, when manipulated by the performer, the prop became a scenic shorthand descriptive of the character's emotional state which could be clearly read by the spectator. The manipulation of the prop enabled the

performer to become the unconscious narrator of the character's state of mind.

As the experiments progressed Fersen became aware that the prop, depending on the emotional power triggered by the given circumstances, appeared to metamorphose into a different identity, in Cole's terms *rounding* from its utilitarian identity to become a symbol of the performer's deepening psychic excavation of himself. Acknowledging his debt to Stanislavski, Fersen identified these initial experiments with props as a *psycho-scenic technique* wherein the performer's relationship to his prop was bound by the psychological assumptions of character in response to given circumstances. Unsure of how to develop his experiments, Fersen ceased all activity in the laboratory in the first of what would become a series of ruptures in his work over the ensuing years.

In 1959 he returned to his theatrical production with the staging of a commedia dell'arte Sganarello and the King's Daughter, adapted from Moliere for performance by the first group of graduating students from the two-year training programme at the Studio. Sganarello was subsequently performed on tour at the Teatro delle Arti and the Teatro Ateneo in Rome and at the Schauspielhaus in Zurich in 1960. At this point Fersen decided to resign his directorship of the Teatro Stabile in Genoa and concentrate all his energies on the work of the Studio and his laboratory reseach group within it.

The second phase of the research commenced with further experiments in the *psycho-scenic technique* in which Fersen abandoned the given circumstances, thereby allowing the performer an element of free play with the prop. During this period a structure

slowly evolved in which an individual performer was seated in front of an empty table in an isolated cone of light, within neutral dark surroundings, from which he was observed by Fersen and the rest of the research company (no more than ten people at any given time). Only the face and hands of the performer and the surface of the table were illuminated. Prior to the start of the performance, the performer experienced a period of isolation sitting in complete darkness at the table and encouraged by Fersen to eliminate all thoughts and sensations. During this short period of preparation, an everyday object - for example, a mirror, watch, pen, ring or key - would be placed in front of the performer by Fersen. Still seated in the dark, the performer was instructed to discover the physical qualities of this prop through manipulation in order, according to Fersen, to stimulate sensory awareness. When the playing space was finally illuminated, the performer was required to focus on the prop whilst continuing to manipulate it:

> *T* sees a golden biro pen being transformed under his very eyes into a periscope: we cannot understand the meaning of the orders he gives under his breath to someone standing next to him. He will later recall having taken part in a submarine war action. [8]

In these exercises Fersen noted that the performer's relationship to the prop varied from individual to individual and within the same individual from performance to performance. Having provided the catalyst for the mnemonic action, the prop would often be abandoned or forgotten by the performer and attention then shifted to his verbal ejaculations. As in the example of performer *T* quoted above, Fersen noticed that the vocal manifestation of the performance was often incoherent, a montage of scattered words and phrases interspersed with

tears and shouts, suggestive, he concluded, of an individual speaking in a dream. When formulated with sufficient clarity, Fersen discovered that the performer's words appeared either as a vocalisation of an interior monologue, or as a dialogue with himself. The latter occurs in the performance of *T* cited above who communicates with a presence whom he alone sees and the answers of whom he can hear but who remains.invisible to Fersen and the members of the group witnessing the performance.

The performer's manifestation of an oneiric vision led Fersen to conclude that the individual had achieved an altered state of consciousness through the manipulation of the prop. This transic state appears to have been signalled by a recognisable change in the performer's face and body, initially announced by a complete loss of tension in the facial muscles, blank staring eyes and sudden accelerations in the rhythm of breathing. Conditions Fersen would have recognised from his Candomble experience and which are supported in anthropological literature by Pfeiffer, [9] amongst others, who refers to the 'vacant stare' of the transic mask which she identifies as one of a number of body postures adopted by the Kung Bushmen during shamanic curing rituals. The structure of *T*'s performance, with its dialogue with an invisible other, also fulfills many of the aspects of Bourguignon's model of *negative* (uncontrolled) trance. Certainly from Fersen's description, the moment of transic experience appears to be fleeting for the performer and terminated by his sudden physical collapse (reminiscent of descriptions of the Balinese state of *engsap*), at the point of which, he is returned to a state of momentary isolation in complete darkness:

> The lights are turned back on; the actor re-emerges into consciousness. Now he is the victim of total exhaustion, he swings and can barely stand straight, he shivers from the cold because of the great amount of energy lost during his "trip." [10]

The structure of the *psycho-scenic technique* at this stage appears to be a realisation of Stanislavski's concept of *public solitude* wherein the performer experiences the duality of his awareness of the audience and yet, at the same time, is alone to the point of experiencing total isolation. For Stanislavski this is the realm of the centered performer ("I am") where physical and vocal forms of expression are no longer necessary. Communication is linked to the ebb and flow of energy from the performer to the spectator, in a process which Stanislavski manages to obfuscate through his use of such pseudo-mystical terms as "irradiation," "ray-absorption" and "ray-emission." What is important, however, is Stanislavski's assertion that the performer's entire craft is exercised toward the goal of rendering himself as a pretext, a medium, a transparency through which life's ruling ideas flow. All will in this ideal performer has been exerted to the end of obliterating any will:

> The eye is the mirror of the soul. The vacant eye is the mirror of the empty soul. It is important that an actor's eye, his look, reflect the deep inner content of his soul. So he must build up great inner resources to correspond to the life of a human soul in his part. [11]

Whether consciously adopted or not, Stanislavski's imagery conjures visions of the transic performer awaiting animation by a possessing spirit. It is a version of Gordon Craig's *ubermarionette* which Fersen appears to have recognised in his *psycho-scenic* experiments and to

which in 1961 he attached the epithet *mnemodrama* ("drama of memory") in acknowledgment of his debt to Stanislavski.

Once the important role of the scenic prop in his experiments had been established and justified through reference to Stanislavski and his experience of Candomble, Fersen began to concentrate on the visceral language which accompanied the performer's transic state in a series of exercises which he termed *spoken mnemodramas*. The structure of the new technique followed almost exactly that of the old but with the addition of a microphone to the performer's table in order that his transic statements might be recorded. Fersen's intention was to be able to furnish his performers with individual profiles of their unconscious mechanisms at work, in order that they could discover ways of eliminating stereotypical emotions when undertaking roles in traditional performances. Fersen hoped that what his performers would reveal in their transic states would be their true emotions, their essential ways of laughing and crying from the depths of their souls. He believed that these codes of behaviour could later be restored in performance, in a parallel of the Candomble adoxu's restoration of the persona of her orixa during her transic possession. Experiments were conducted in extending the range of tonality, rhythm and volume of the voice and Fersen reintroduced work on character and text, in which the latter were broken down into vocal scores in order that the performer could match his vocal response exactly to the psychic projections of the character he was playing.

In 1962 Fersen was invited to present workshops on his *psycho-scenic technique* and its development in the initial experiments in *spoken mnemodrama* at the Festival of Universite du Theatre des

Nations in Paris where he was provided with a group of professional performers and a studio space for a week of experiments. The interest aroused by his work encouraged Fersen to organise the first of two international theatre conferences at his studio in 1964. These conferences served to introduce the interdisciplinary aspect of Fersen's research undertaken with the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino.

What De Martino brought to the enterprise was an independent conformation of the power of ritual performance as it manifested itself in the living remnants of archaic feasts which he had studied in remote areas of southern and central Italy. Typical of his observations was his account of the archaic funeral rites still performed in the region of Basilicata [12] :

> The Wailer from Basilicata who raises her ancient ritual tears on the dead, reaching heights of paroxysmal desperation, does not neglect, in the meantime, the progress of the ceremony which was entrusted to her, observes the duties of hospitality toward the callers, keeps an eye on the payment of the oblations due to her for her professional performance. [13]

Such descriptions were important to Fersen because they served to highlight the balance between control and abandonment in the transic state which he had witnessed in Candomble and which he recognised lay at the heart of Stanislavski's techniques for the occidental performer. The title of the first conference was "Theatre Today: Function and Language" and it was attended by Jerzy Grotowski who used the occasion to observe Fersen's experiments and outline the goals of his own laboratory theatre in Opole. This marked the first of a series of contacts between the two experimenters , the significance of which I will analyse in a later chapter.

Despite the interest aroused in his work, Fersen began to find the experiments in *spoken mnemodrama* arduous. He discovered that the verbal ejaculations emanating from a performer experiencing an altered state of consciousness could not be fashioned into coherent utterances which might communicate meaning when applied to a traditional text. The process from the performer's manipulation of the prop and the stimulation of the psychic vision to the verbal articulation of that vision, seems to have frequently involved the insinuation of a conscious piece of role play. From Fersen's viewpoint, the mnemonic power of the prop at the instant of its *rounding* appeared to undermine the performer's attempt to communicate the essence of the vision in the language of everyday reality. Once again he appears to have made the fundamental mistake of attempting to utilise a ritual structure for the purposes of exploring a traditional occidental theatre framework.

The resolution of this dilemma involved Fersen in the re-examination of his earlier *psycho-scenic technique* and his decision to abandon not only the text and given circumstances but also to substitute the utilitarian props he had used to date for abstract objects such as lengths of rope, sticks and bolts of material. As the following description by Fersen demonstrates, this development of the technique resulted in a ludic relationship between performer and prop which resulted in a montage of images:

> *B* has picked up the rope from the bundle and, lying down, she has placed it on her stomach: she looks at it with dread. She drags herself along the floor gazing hypnotically at the small bundle of rope (...)
> Then she picks it up, gets up, she fashions the tangle of rope on her head, she tousles it; now she resembles a gorgon with

snakes on her head. The snakes dissolve in a continuous transformation of the object's identity and they (the ropes) are gathered up and cuddled like a newborn baby. The tender limbs move whilst the illusory mother caresses them, cradles them, then they stop. *B* is immobile: from her half open hands the body of the rope slips and falls to the floor. *B* wanders away dragging her feet as if she were suddenly older. She picks up another rope, she stretches it from the bottom up and then pulls it; with the imaginary water coming down from the shower she has a purifying bath. [14]

The images created by *B* during her performance shift, according to Fersen's interpretation, between essentially autobiographical memories of being a mother with a child and the daily activity of washing and a brief manifestation of an archetypal image of the mythical gorgon. Again there is a problem because the interpretation of the performance always derives from the perspective of Fersen as the observing director and never on any occassion in his writings is there corroboration from the performers themselves. Without the benefit of this second opinion all images created in this way without a controlling narrative structure, are subject to numerous and often conflicting interpretations from the spectators observing them. This in no way invalidates the power of the image for the performer experiencing it but it does make it nigh on impossible for the observer to distinguish between those which manifest an autobiographical memory and those which surface in the shape of archetypal memories.

What can be stated with certainty from Fersen's description is that the performance centres around the continuous transformation of the prop by the performer in a juxtaposition of images, the flow of which is suddenly and frequently broken by a shift in perspective which temporarily alienates the performer from the prop. From a shamanistic perspective, *B's* performance is full of archetypal images of

ritual death and rebirth, her hypnotic gazing and sudden immobility pointing to the possibility of a fleeting abandonment to the flow of the transic state. It is a pattern of performance recorded so frequently by Fersen in the context of subsequent experiments, that it becomes one of the defining images of *mnemodrama*.

Fersen experimented with the *spoken mnemodrama* and the developing technique which concentrated on the ludic relationship between performer and prop for a period of seven years, finally codifying the new technique as *gestual mnemodrama* in 1974. At this stage Fersen felt able to articulate a typology for the mnemodrama on the basis of the following criteria: *(a)* the type of relationship established between performer and prop; *(b)* the level of consciousness at which the mnemodrama manifests itself in the performer; *(c)* modes of expression and *(d)* the structures of the individual techniques.

Category *(a)* refers to the diverse impact which the prop exercises on the consciousness of the performer. It can be perceived in its concrete identity - a key as a key, a pen as a pen - or in its sensory quality - shape, smell, taste, tactile and/or acoustic sensation - both of which may either separately or together provoke the onset of the mnemodrama in the performer. From his experience, Fersen observes that the performer's perception of the prop in its concrete identity is necessarily drenched in conceptual factual knowledge and the resulting mnemodrama therefore tends to place itself at a level close to the surface of psychological consciousness. However if the prop's impact occurs through one of its sensory qualities, there are greater possibilities that the mnemodrama will position itself at a deeper level of consciousness. It is this latter quality which appears to stimulate the

onset of the mnemodrama in the performance given by *R*, although once again it is difficult to determine the accuracy or validity of Fersen's "psycho-mythical" interpretation:

> whilst manipulating a pencil eraser, *R* has a vision of (we will later find out), the maternal womb. In a state of irrepressible anguish he feels himself transported into the antenatal phase. Gasping, whimpering, talking, he repeats the experience of his own birth. He throws himself under the chair, where, caged, he swims in the amniotic fluid (...) he cuts off the umbilical chord with two-handed strokes and appears to the world. In a psycho-mythical vision, in which many cultural reminiscences are spontaneously involved in the action, he confronts a god father with a goat-like foot, an adversary whom his birth must eliminate (...) he watches him running in circles limping (...) Strong retching, provoked by the organic excitement interrupt the vision and the words. [15]

Category *(b)* refers to the diverse levels of consciousness in which the single mnemodramas position themselves. Fersen states that the gap between the various levels is almost imperceptible and that the same performance, as in the example of *R*, may oscillate between different levels of consciousness during the course of its development. Fersen is convinced at this relatively early stage of his research of the mnemodrama's potential to reveal to the individual performer the large gamut of alternative (unconscious) personas existing within him. The range of possible states encompasses the level of the relatively conscious mnemodrama, where the performer still exerts a self-control born out of his occidental training, to his complete abandonment in a state of total trance akin to that state experienced by the adoxu in the Candomble at the moment when she is possessed by her Orixa and can remember nothing at all about her performance. It is this condition of total trance which Fersen attributes to the *gestual mnemodrama* :

> *H* has thrown himself on his knees, he shouts and cries.

> Uncontrollable is his grief, tears pour down his face. The friend who died in the shipwrecking of a sail boat (the white cardboard box was transformed into the sails of the boat), stands in front of him (...) when he comes to he will be exhausted. He will persistently ask us all, 'What did I say ? What did I say ?' [16]

The modes of expression in category *(c)* included at this point the *spoken* and *gestual* mnemodramas, although Fersen was already considering dropping the former in order to concentrate on the somatic qualities of the latter, which he believed revealed most clearly to those witnessing the mnemodrama the change in the psycho-physical state of the performer:

> *Y* a German actress of great talents, was afflicted by an almost wooden-like angularity in her daily life; during her mnemodramas, all mimed, she became as light as a silk-handkerchief falling through the air. [17]

Finally, the *(d)* category distinguished between mnemodramas of an autobiographical nature and those drawing their vision from the depths of the unconscious. Fersen was at pains to point out that this was not a rigid division in practice:

> mnemodramas are staged which appear to be autobiographical and yet they take place in a state of total trance; others which never totally leave conscious territory nevertheless soar in oneirical spaces. [18]

According to Fersen's model a *gestual mnemodrama* could be tested with a specific prop and a neutral prop; it could be undertaken as a solo performance but also as a duet in which form it assumed quite a different set of characteristics. Commencing in an identical fashion to that of the solo mnemodrama, the performers in the duet were placed either side of the chosen prop and, in the period of initial darkness prior to the performance, were encouraged by Fersen to stretch out their hands and explore the prop. Fersen suggests that this initial point

of contact reveals to both performers the presence of the other whose manipulations of the prop and subsequent visions must remain unknown. Thus the solitary ludic relationship experienced in the solo performance is now transformed into a contest between two players in which the prop becomes the only means of communication between them. The symbolic transformations of the prop are now incarnated in the attitudes the two bodies assume in this reciprocal relationship. The bodies of the performers create a somatic dialogue structured by the fact that they never make physical contact with each other, unless through the medium of the prop. In these duet performances Fersen noted that the symbolic quality of dramatic expression never fell into a naturalistic relationship; when in rare exceptions the performers made direct physical contact, it was perceived by them as an annoying intrusion and immediately eliminated. Although in a state of trance, this stylisitc criterion was always scrupulously observed by both performers:

> *T* caresses with her long hair the stick horizontally held by *O*. Now *O* gets up and tenderly rotates it around *T's* body who languidly twines with it. But the rotation picks up, becomes frenzied. An unexpected aggressiveness explodes between the two: the game torments them into abstract fury. Then the fight is over - tenderness re-emerges. [19]

The focus of the experiments shifted again in 1978 prompted by Fersen's curiosity concerning the moment of initial silence which preceded vocalisation in the *spoken mnemodrama* and the onset of physical action in the *gestual*:

> It was inevitable to ask oneself whether the spoken mnemodrama was only the disguising of a more radical inner happening and the gestual mnemodrama a dynamic translation of more remote psychic situations. [20]

Once again taking the models of surviving archaic rituals in remote regions of central and southern Italy as his points of reference, Fersen investigated the possibility of inducing a collective trance amongst a group of performers, in which the selected prop would become the focus of an ecstatic vision of archaic magnitude and vitality. The inspiration for this new line of research came from the work of the anthropologist Alfonso M. Di Nola who had made a detailed study of the importance of power objects in the surviving archaic cults in central and southern Italy, such as the one devoted to the Serpent cult of Saint Dominic Abbate in the Abruzzi region:

> (...) the snake is present as an object, but the cult's lived experience transforms it into a vision of pain, hope, joy, wait, tension (...) all at the same time: there is therefore an ambivalence inserted in the festive context. [21]

Di Nola, aware of the ambivalence in the word "feast", clearly distinguishes between modern connotations of the term and its traditional meaning by pointing out that the latter is characterised by the presence of participants who are engulfed in the anguish of a profound personal drama. The release from this anguished state is provided through a collective transic abandonment induced with the aid of a power object symbolising the cult and resulting in an ecstatic experience of joy and empowerment in a psychic rebirth. This ritual framework of anguish and abandonment is clear in Di Nola's description of the Feast of the "Madonna" of Vallepietra in Lazio, in which he observed that the inducement of the transic state created an invisible barrier between the members of the cult and the non-participating observers:

> Two steps from the procession walking backward a barrage of photo lenses, of camera flashes incessantly clicking with their

> blinding glare; the pilgrims see nothing. They are in ecstatic communication with the sacred object. In the midst of that crowd of foreign tourists, reporters, scholars, they move in an emotional space, in which a magnetic circuit is established involving the immobile statue at the end of the nave. [22]

Fersen, keen to find parallels between Di Nola's field observations and the structure of his own experiments, observed that the mnemodrama, like the archaic feast, was structured in two distinct phases. The performance itself was characterised by a state of individual anguish defined by Fersen as ' a psychic annihilation at the very limit of existential suffering and endurance' [23] - followed after an interval of time - from a few hours to several days - by a fleeting moment of vital intensity and a feeling of personal empowerment. During the experiments in group mnemodramas Fersen would frequently enter the performance space and stand as close to individual performers as possible, attempting to capture the moment that the transic state manifested itself in the performer's face and body muscles. In the de-briefing following each performance, the performers frequently informed him that either they had been totally unaware of his physical presence close to them, or that he had been perceived as an abstract form, devoid of any recognisable features. Referring to Di Nola's field observations, Fersen concluded that his performers had established as a group a 'field of tensions excluding all other foreign presences' [24] and that the transic state therefore alluded to the creation of an emotional space, sealed off from the physical reality within which the performer was actually located: a conclusion which, in Fersen's interdisciplinary framework, affirms both Di Nola's concept and Stanislavski's theatrical equivalent of the ideal actor experiencing the (transic) realm of "public solitude."

As with the duets, Fersen discovered that in the group mnemodramas the interpersonal relationships were controlled by the presence of the prop:

> the participants' eyes rarely meet and in these cases they assume an interrogative expression; they try to interpret the other's behaviour. Then the eyes immediately return to the object, magnetised by the visions it gives rise to. [25]

The maintaining of eye contact between individual performers inevitably signalled the breakdown of the transic state and a sudden regaining of conscious control in which, Fersen believed, a possibility of aggression was always hovering just below the surface. Further analysis revealed that the performers had experienced drastic contractions in their perceptions of time and space. What for them had been experienced as long periods of autobiographical time were in the reality of performance condensed into brief phases of action sometimes only lasting a few minutes. The concrete space of the studio in which the performances took place lost its objective dimensions and, in many cases, the performers experienced conditions of temporary amnesia during performance. Fersen also discovered that the deeper the level of trance attained by the performer, the more difficulty he or she had in coming out of it; on such occasions he would terminate the performance for them by quietly talking to them, playing soft music and slowly flooding the performance space with bright light.

The latent violence which Fersen had perceived at all stages in the development of his techniques rose to the surface and exploded during a group mnemodrama early in 1978:

> a human cluster crowding around the shape of the clothes stand and animating it with their visions. All of a sudden *A* violently pushes his way through them, takes the fetish and relegates it to

> a corner of the room. The others are dismayed: *P* cries desperately. At that point *D* detaches himself from the back wall, goes to the prop and again places it in the centre. Stubbornly *A* tries to move it another time. A trial of strength is started, in which all are involved. [26]

Although deeply troubled by this sudden outbreak of violence in which several performers were hurt, Fersen nevertheless continued with the group performances. On subsequent occasions when violence erupted during performances, he noted that all aggression was indirect and constantly channelled through the medium of the prop; in other words, the ritual limits of the performance were never violated. In an effort to prevent these violent outbursts, Fersen decided to suspend the prop from the ceiling of the studio so that it became an object of contemplation vis a vis the statue of the "Madonna" observed by Di Nola, rather than an object which could be physically manipulated by the performers. This solution, however, proved to be a frustrating experience for both the performers and Fersen, as the mnemodrama became dominated by an overwhelming desire on the part of the participants to touch and manipulate the prop. Fersen noted that this game possessed the performers to the point where they were able to simulate moments of transic lightness in their bodies and execute incredible leaps in their efforts to bring down the suspended prop, which eventually they succeeded in doing on every occasion.

Interestingly the desire to regain a literal hold on the prop provided the group with a common focus, so that when they once more possessed it the prop began to assume the focus of a collective vision, as the following observation by Fersen illustrates:

> the behaviour is repeated with a black ball (it to suspended at heights reasonably unreachable and it too reached with

monkey-like jumps). The object could be disquieting. Nevertheless, after a few skirmishes, it is placed on the floor and here, one by one, the participants sit in a sunburst and place their extended hands on the ball: almost a pledge to a newborn alliance. [27]

In 1978, Fersen decided to codify the new technique as a *visionary mnemodrama*, thereby drawing attention to what he perceived to be its value as a profane realisation/simulation of the structure of the archaic feast transposed to the theatre laboratory. The identification of the *visionary* technique concluded the main thrust of Fersen's practical experiments, as he set about creating a framework within which the various aspects of his experiments could be unified into something resembling a sequential training technique. At the end of the year he presented a two-week programme at the Galleria d'arte Moderna in Rome at which he presented, for the first time, the various stages of the complete mnemodrama technique. Basically he had decided on a three-fold configuration commencing with an initial training stage which he termed the *neutral play with prop*, a re-working of the original *psycho-scenic* technique which consisted of the retention of the given circumstances and the manipulation or contemplation of a utilitarian prop (telephone or door) but which was performed by a group rather than on an individual basis. The second stage consisted of the original *gestual mnemodrama* - performed either as a solo or duet - in which the given circumstances are removed and the prop is essentially abstract (bolt of cloth or length of wood). Finally, the group is reunited for the performance of collective *visionary mnemodramas* which may be seen as a combination and extension of the previous two stages. In 1979 Fersen presented a workshop with Alfonso M. Di Nola on the influence of the archaic

feast on the techniques of mnemodrama at the Teatro Politechnico in Rome. The workshop coincided with the private publication of a series of papers on the history and philosophy of Fersen's research bearing the title La Dimensione Perduta. A year later he published a book on the history and development of the mnemodrama, Il Teatro, Dopo, and began production on a film which featured a performance of a *visionary* mnemodrama. Entitled "Alle Origini del Teatro - Il Mnemodrama," the film included a spoken prologue in which Fersen sought to define mnemodrama as the living symbol of the birth of theatre; a re-actualisation of the primal moment when, in Nietzschean terms, ritual became theatre in the revelation of visions prior to its eventual codification as a vehicle for the written text.

The philosophical equating of mnemodrama with the ritual origins of theatre stemmed not only from Fersen's own exposure to ritual practices in Bahia and the influence in this sphere of the anthropologist Alfonso M. Di Nola, but primarily from the theories of his earlier collaborator Ernesto De Martino and the observations of the philosopher Giorgio Colli. From De Martino, as I indicated in the introduction, he derived the concept of the *horizontal* and *vertical* aspects of the individual persona as essentially contemporary manifestations of the primal "two-soul" theory. According to De Martino's model, when the horizontal self is faced with a crisis, it attempts to abandon itself completely (as in the case of the olonised individual) and is only rescued from the chaos of mental breakdown through the intervention of the vertical persona, with its roots in the cultural memories and ritual customs of the community. In the process of identifying itself with this vertical persona, the horizontal

self is subjected to the transic state of *non-ego* (the ubermarionette) followed by a period of amnesia and a subsequent feeling of extraordinary ontological fullness. This is the basic paradigm upon which Fersen predicates the mnemodrama as a contemporary manifestation of the primal experience of *participation,* in which the vertical persona takes on the vestiges of the Jungian archetype buried in time beneath the accumulated experience of the historically orientated horizontal self, which remains unaware of its existence:

> The mythical memory goes on with its infinitesimal and sensationally intense activity: a real psychic metabolism operates in the remote ego which becomes the object of a memory transfiguration. It is what the mnemodramatic "dran" reveals; it brings to the surface the ancient event by now altered. Mythicized that is. The ego protagonist of that remote event also becomes a myth: a leading character in a sense heroic. [28]

Fersen's description is Pirandellian [29] in its image of the vertical self as a "mythical character" waiting to be re-born - the past simultaneously wishing to be present - and herein, he suggets, lies the essential paradox of the mythical persona:

> It is a "present" by now past which wants to become a "past" once more present. Since it cannot insert itself in the irreversible course of the becoming, the mneme shapes for itself its own oneirical space, in which it repeats, multiplied, the "feats" which profoundly marked its anterior integrity. [30]

In mnemodramatic terms, the vertical persona of the performer is re-born in a possessed state through the manipulation of a prop which has itself been transformed through the process of transic "rounding." The mimetic impulse of mnemodrama is therefore a manifestation of absence: that which is being imitated is elsewhere in the mythopoeic past and the imitation is present. Fersen's choice of the term "dran" to

describe this impulse is a conscious reaffirmation of Nietzsche's interpretation of the term in the direct impersonal sense meaning "to happen" rather than as in "to do" or "to act."

It is of course Nietzsche who links Fersen with Colli who, on observing the experiments in *gestual mnemodrama* and the initial phase of the group work, declared that Fersen's experiments were an attempt to re-actualise within the individual a manifestation of *Dionysiac Knowledge* which he defined as ' a concrete knowledge which is the experience of living and has nothing to do with conceptual knowledge.' [31] Inspired by this, Fersen proceeded to incorporate the concept of *Dionysian Knowledge* into his concept of mnemodrama, thereby moving away from the explicit influence of Stanislavski's *affective memory* towards the mythical terrain of the archaic *mneme* which Colli suggested was a term applied specifically by the Greeks to the deity of Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses. Traditionally one of the gifts of the Muses to mankind was the true knowledge of *poetic madness*, one of four conditions of madness outlined by Socrates in the Phaedrus which also includes the *telestic madness* associated with Dionysos. Colli observes that *Dionysiac knowledge* contains elements of both *poetic* and *telestic* madness, conjuring a vision of syncretism in which the *mneme* also contains *menos* (vehemence or fury), from which the term "Maenad" derives. Applied to Fersen's research, Colli suggests that the term mnemodrama connotes an image of the furious memory in action, a violent emotion which is born to the surface of consciousness.

One of the problems faced by the chronicler of Fersen's research is the realisation that, in restricting the anthropological aspects of it

exclusively to his own memories of his encounter with Candomble rites and to the observations of De Martino and Di Nola, he wilfully ignores many of the discoveries relating to the transic state made by anthropologists and psychologists who are specialists in shamanistic ritual and whose findings support his laboratory experiments. Far from such exposure diminishing the "uniqueness" of his work (a questionable assumption on his part, as I shall argue in later chapters), it actually strengthens its validity by revealing Fersen to be firmly located within a recognisable framework of interdisciplinary performance research. For example, the findings of Reichel-Dolmatoff in his research amongst the Tukano Indians of Colombia reveals that the manifestation of violence which so disturbed Fersen, is in fact a natural stage in the recovery of the archaic persona:

> The transferral to the hallucinatory level of the acting out of aggressiveness caused by social pressures is, undoubtedly, a procedure of great importance. On the hallucinatory scene, a great psychodrama is being performed and tensions are relieved that would otherwise be intolerable. [32]

The same source also provides a ritual precedent (in the *yage* ceremony of the Barasana Indians of the Pira-Parana in South America) for the avoidance of eye contact which Fersen noted as a constant factor in the performance of *gestual* duets and group mnemodramas:

> I noticed that during the whole night people hardly ever looked at each other; they seemed to avoid facing others and looking into their eyes. Each man talked and sang and danced, but he did not talk to a specific person or dance with a specific partner or neighbor. [33]

To take another example, Fersen's emphasis on the development of the transic vision in his technique is in accord with the research of psychologist Richard Noll, who suggests that training in the vividness

and control of the visionary experience is in fact the hallmark of the shaman:

> First, the neophyte shaman is trained to increase the vividness of his visual mental imagery through various psychological and physiological techniques. Once the novice shaman can report more vivid imagery experiences, a second phase of shamanic mental imagery training is aimed at increasing the controlledness of the experienced visual imagery contents, actively engaging and manipulating the visionary phenomena. [34]

The induction of the shamanic state of consciousness [35] (and by extension the initiate in possessorial cults such as Candomble) is a means whereby the shaman may achieve enhanced mental imagery through the technique of blocking out the noise produced by the external stimuli of visual perception: a technique which requires the shaman (and her counterpart the Candomble adoxu isolated in her pegi) to perform in darkness or subdued light, a process which I would suggest Fersen consciously simulates at the beginning and conclusion of every mnemodrama.

Finally, the mythic dimension of Fersen's *vertical* persona appears to be given credence by anthropologist Colin Turnbull's definition of the term *liminal* as an "other" condition of being that is coexistent with the state of being of which we are normally conscious (the horizontal plane of existence):

> In initiations that I have witnessed it is stated as clearly as can be stated not that the initiate moves from one stage to another, but rather that he becomes something else. And the process by which this transformation is achieved is not so much by the invocation of spiritual presence (...) but rather by painstaking preparation and purification. [36]

Turnbull argues with Turner's concept of liminality perceiving it not as a transitory state of being but as a timeless state that lies parallel to

the experience of social reality, or is perhaps superimposed upon it or somehow coincides and coexists with it. He considers liminality to be a subjective experience of the external world in which roles are dramatically reversed:

> in the liminal state disorder is ordered, doubts and problems removed, the "right" course of action made clear with a rightness that is both moral and structural since the inevitable discrepancies between belief and practice in the external world are among the many problems ordered and removed in the liminal state. [37]

Turnbull's argument touches on one of the paradoxes which lie at the heart of Fersen's work, namely the modes of perception experienced by the performers of mnemodrama in a state of trance and Fersen's frequently subjective interpretation of the symbolic images communicated by the performer whilst in that state. Turnbull points out that the two perspectives are in fact related in that subjectivity is also a mode of perception:

> Used unconsciously,we often dismiss subjective modes of awareness as intuition (...) Our unwillingness to accept this alternative mode of awareness is just another of our many ethnocentricisms, and is easily seen in our long standing fascination with and misunderstanding of rites of passage and liminality. [38]

Ultimately the tension in mnemodrama performances derives from the struggle on the part of both the performers and Fersen to balance this 'alternative mode of awareness' with a more traditional scientific objectivity. It is a struggle which results in both performance and post-performance analysis in a montage of perspectives and images, overlaid with an anxiety on the part of the performers to make manifest the ideal vision which they perceive possesses Fersen but which he does not fully articulate. It is this tension which makes of

Fersen's work a metaphor for shamanistic balance because the unresolved nature of it proves, in practice, to be highly therapeutic for both performers and director: a point of view I arrived at whilst witnessing mnemodrama performances at Fersen's studio over a five day period in March 1992.

Notes

1. Constantin Stanislavski, An Actor Prepares trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 65 - 69.
2. Claude Levi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology trans. Claire Jacobson and Brook Grundfest Scheepf (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1968), p. 10.
3. Alessandro Fersen, "Itinerario di una Ricerca" trans. Lorenza Vendittelli in La Dimensione Perduta (Rome 1978: n.p.), n.pag.
4. Constantin Stanislavski An Actor Prepares (1986), p. 133.
5. Constantin Stanislavski, Creating A Role trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen,1981), p. 240.
6. Shomit Mitter, Systems of Rehearsal (London: Routledge,1992), p.19.
7. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro,Dopo trans. Lorenza Vendittelli (Rome: Bari, Laterza, 1980), p. 66.
8. Alessandro Fersen Il Teatro,Dopo (1980), p. 80.
9. J. Pfeiffer, The Emergence of Man (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 349 -50.
10. Alessandro Fersen, "Itinerario di una Ricerca" (1978) n.pag.
11. Constantin Stanislavski (1986), p. 196
12. Basilicata is a southern region of Italy bordering with Calabria to the west, Puglia to the east and Campania to the north. Both De Martino and Di Nola studied the ritual practices which still survive in the region extensively.

13. Alessandro Fersen, "Itinerario di una Ricerca" (1978), n.pag.

14. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro,Dopo (1980), 95.

15. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro,Dopo (1980), 79.

16. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro,Dopo (1980), 88.

17. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro,Dopo (1980), 81.

18. Alessandro Fersen (1980), 82.

19. Alessandro Fersen (1980), 96.

20. Alessandro Fersen (1980), 100.

21. Alessandro Fersen, "Mnemodrama e Culture Subalterne" a conversation with Alfonso M. Di Nola. trans. Lorenza Venditteli, in La Dimensione Perduta (Rome 1978:n.p.)n.pag.

22. Alessandro Fersen "Mnemodrama e Culture Subalterne" (1978).

23. Alessandro Fersen "Mnemodrama e Culture Subalterne"(1978).

24. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview, 1 June 1990.

25. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview, 1 June 1990.

26. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro, Dopo (1980), p. 106.

27. Alessandro Fersen (1980), p. 108.

28. Alessandro Fersen, "La Mneme Ontologica" trans. Lorenza Venditteli in il Cannocchiale : rivista di studi filosofici, (January - December, 1988), vol. 1 no 3 pp: 413 - 419.

29. ref. the Father in Luigi Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author:

' Our reality doesn't change: it can't change! It can't be other than what it is, because it is already fixed for ever. It's terrible. Ours is an immutable reality which should make you shudder when you approach us.'

trans. John Linstrum (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), p. 54.

30. Alessandro Fersen "La Mneme Ontologica" (1988), p. 416.

31. Giorgio Colli, "Risalendo a Dionisio" trans. Lorenza Vendittelli, in La Dimension Perduta (Rome 1978: np),n.pag.

32. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, The Shaman and the Jaguar, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1975), p. 106.

33. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975), p. 105.

34. Richard Noll, "Mental Imagery Cultivation as a Cultural Phenomenon: The Role of Visions in Shamanism" in Current Anthropology vol. 26 no 4 (1985), p.445.

35. The term is derived from the neo-shamanist writings of Michael Harner, who uses it to distinguish the transic state from that of the normal state of consciousness.
ref: Michael Harner, The Way of The Shaman
(New York: Bantam Books,1986), p. xvi.

36. Colin Turnbull, "Liminality: a synthesis of subjective and objective experience" in Richard Schechner & Willa Appel,eds. By Means of Performance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1990),p 80.

37. Colin Turnbull (1990), p. 80.

38. Colin Turnbull (1980), pp. 79 - 80.

Chapter 3

MNEMODRAMAS

Fersen's studio is currently located in the Via della Lungara in a suburb of Rome, where between the 9th and the 13th March 1992, I was able to witness one performance of each of the first two stages of the mnemodrama technique - *Neutral Play with Prop* and *gestual mnemodrama* - performed by the current research group. In addition, I was given access to the only copy of the video of "Alle Origini del Teatro - Il Mnemodrama" and a second, unedited recording of a *visionary* mnemodrama. A detailed account of these performances and the reactions of both the performers and Fersen to them form the basis of this chapter. As an outside observer I was interested in analysing among other things how the performers altered physically when they entered the trance state; how a performer's critical faculty is suspended when his or her behaviour becomes automatic and how performer-response varies individually from being totally unaffected to being completely possessed.

The current research group of five (two male and three female) had been working together for a period of nine weeks when I witnessed their performance of a *Neutral Play with Prop*. All of them had been drawn to Fersen from reading Teatro,Dopo, together with his local reputation of being a theatrical innovator. Interestingly in every case, the theatrical emphasis which Fersen gives his technique, as a mode of performer training, proved to be of secondary importance to the members of the group who perceived its potential therapeutic benefits. This suggests that Fersen's work is now becoming identified by its

practitioners with a whole spectrum of performance therapies, including forms of psychodrama and parashamanic ritual: a perspective I shall examine in the following chapters and one which Fersen has always been reluctant to acknowledge.

The individuals who make up the current group include Carlo, a professor of Modern History at a local university whose interest in mythology initially attracted him to Fersen's work (no theatre training); Cynthia, a professional dancer who trained with Martha Graham; Ellena, a broadcaster on a local radio station (minimal theatre training); Francesca, a recent graduate from the two-year theatre training programme at Fersen's studio and the youngest member of the group and Heviere, a journalist and aspiring playwright who appears to be familiar with Grotowski's *poor theatre* training techniques.

These five are augmented by a sixth, Paola Bertolone, who is Fersen's most experienced performer and acts in the capacity of his unofficial assistant in the laboratory work. Paola has been an active practitioner of mnemodrama since 1986 and witnessed the experiments for a number of years before that. Like the others, she discovered Fersen and his work through reading Teatro,Dopo on its publication in 1980, when she was an undergraduate in the theatre department at the University of Turin. She claims[1] that she preferred Fersen's writings to those of Grotowski's in Towards a Poor Theatre which was a set text on her undergraduate course and which she found to be imbued with mysticism. It is interesting to note that she recognised a philosophical connection between the two practitioners long before she actually experienced Fersen's work at first hand. On graduating Paola enrolled in the two-year training programme at Fersen's studio, hoping to gain

access to the laboratory group and participate in the mnemodrama experiments. Initially Fersen frustrated her wish, fearing that she would not be emotionally strong enough to withstand what he viewed to be the psychic rigours of the work. Undaunted, she remained in constant contact with the laboratory work, witnessing many performances of *gestual* and *visionary* mnemodramas and noting that the performers always appeared to be 'absolutely fanatical' [2] about the work. Eventually Fersen recognised the strength of her commitment and invited her to undertake a complete training in all three stages of the technique. She is currently completing her Doctoral Thesis on Fersen's post-war Yiddish dramas and teaching theatre history part-time at a local college in Rome.

The theatre laboratory in the Via della Lungara is a large room, well lit and empty but for a few scattered chairs. The mnemodrama performances always take place against a brick wall at one end of the studio, the area (approximately 15 ft. square) marked out by six theatre spotlights on mobile stands. The performers wear their street clothes throughout and no stage make-up or masks are used, nor any scenery and props apart from the "ritual" prop selected by Fersen for the performance. Apart from one or two individuals taking it upon themselves to physically warm-up before commencing, there is no set preparation for the performance of a mnemodrama - for Fersen the spontaneity of the performer is all. The audience for the performance of the *neutral play with prop* consists of Paola, the resident Stage-Manager and myself, whilst Fersen assumes a role akin to that of the *Pai-de-Santo* ("Father of the Spirit") in Candomble ritual. He begins and terminates the performance when he chooses and spends its

duration observing individual actions closely, either from the periphery of the performance space or in the space itself standing as closely as possible to individual performers in order to follow their actions in minute detail. Fersen firmly rejects the role of director in the mnemodrama[3] . He does not attempt to control the progress of the performance by coaching from the sidelines but remains at all times the passive observer. When, later in the evening, Paola performs her solo *gestual mnemodrama* the rest of the company will witness it and in this way Fersen attempts to establish a sense of communitas through initiation into a shared technique, in which the distinction between performer and spectator is eradicated in a simulation of Candomble ritual.

Each performance is preceded by a seminar on the nature and progress of the work, conducted by Fersen with the company sitting in a circle round him. He begins this particular session by reminding them that the purpose of the work at this initial level is twofold: a) to enable each one of them to discover the deepest sources of their own memories and b) to train them in techniques of psychic defence whilst they are in a state of trance. He continually emphasises the point that within the performance of a mnemodrama there is no technique of control in the occidental sense of the performer recognising the duality of his role. He is keen to point out that the techniques of Stanislavski always aimed the performer's pre-expressive work on himself towards a pre-destined goal determined by the specific demands of the text and characterisation. He, on the other hand, is working in what he believes to be the opposite direction, exploring techniques of abandonment in which each individual will discover their own methods of entering a

trance state in order to engage with their subconscious visions. Fersen is keen to distance the technique from any overt psychological process, placing the emphasis of the performance instead on the somatic quality of the experience in which visions from the unconscious, inspired by the manipulation of the prop, enter the consciousness of the performer through the centre of the body.

At the conclusion of every performance of a mnemodrama, the participating performers are required by Fersen to write up a log in which they record as accurately as possible their impressions, particularly their awareness of changes in their own physical and emotional states and the resulting visions. Fersen insists that these logs be purely factual accounts, discouraging any analysis of what took place from the performer's perspective. The seminar I observed proceeded with a detailed analysis of the previous week's performance, when the prop had been an old black desk telephone.

The given circumstances provided by Fersen for the performance with the telephone required that everyone imagined that they were waiting individually for an important call. A call they knew would change their lives in some unspecified way. In the moment of darkness preceding the actual performance, Fersen had urged them to focus completely on a precise recollection of an important phone call they had received in the past. The subsequent action would take flight from this concrete memory, as the performer abandoned himself to the images produced through his interaction with the prop telephone. During the discussion of this performance Carlo revealed that the presence of the telephone initially evoked the memory of his father's death, but that as the performance progressed the prop lost its practical

identity and both it and his memories took on an imprecise abstract quality. He stated that at all times during his performance he was conscious of the presence of the others onstage with him and of Fersen observing him from the perimeter of the playing space. At the climax of the mnemodrama, the theatrical nature of the prop was reinforced strongly for Carlo in a fleeting moment of overwhelming frustration and despair, when he realised that he could not in fact telephone his dead father.

Ellena stated that she had been overwhelmed by a feeling of complete isolation in the initial period of darkness and her subsequent manipulation of the telephone had released an inner voice which insisted that an impending holocaust would destroy mankind, thereby rendering her continued existence futile. Ellena described how she had argued with her subconscious voice until she eventually felt compelled to physically escape from it. Fersen noted that her subconscious narrative had revealed itself in a performance marked by sudden violent outbursts of physical action juxtaposed with moments of complete stillness, accompanied by a stream of verbal mutterings rising periodically to a crescendo of shouts and screams and ending in quiet sobbing with her assumption of the foetal position on the floor.

All the performers expressed surprise at the variety of memories and visions which were unleashed through their manipulation of the prop and the emotional depths which they felt they penetrated during the span of the performance, leaving them in every instance in a state of physical and mental exhaustion. I noted that whilst the seminar continued, Fersen's stage manager was quietly erecting a scenic stage door flat in the centre of the performance space, securing it to the floor

with braces and stage weights. After an hour of discussion, Fersen brought the seminar to a close and slowly and carefully outlined the given circumstances for this evening's mnemodrama. He explained that they were to imagine themselves as a group of people, unacquainted with each other, who were in a place of their individual choosing and who were once again awaiting the delivery of a vital message by a messenger whom they knew would eventually knock on the door. During the period of darkness preceding the performance, Fersen asked them to focus on a concrete autobiographical memory of a message being delivered to a specific door in their past.

The given circumstances having been outlined, the performers spread themselves around the playing space, all of them facing the prop door and three of them leaning against the wall. One or two individuals briefly warm up and then everyone lapses into total silence as the stage manager turns off the studio lights and dims the stage lights to blackout. For just over three minutes we were in complete darkness and I was vaguely aware of the performers turning and facing the wall. When the stage lights were restored to full intensity, the performers were discovered standing far apart from each other facing the wall. Very slowly, each in his or her own time, they turned and faced the prop door once more, intently staring at it to the exclusion of all else.

The dramatic action was initiated by Heviere who suddenly cowered and crawled into a corner farthest from the prop door, creating an image which suggested to me a hunted being seeking escape or protection. Cynthia stood braced against the wall immediately opposite the door staring at it intently and occasionally; between long intervals

of silence and rigid stillness, she stamped her feet hard on the floor. Meanwhile, Ellena slowly paced towards the door, brushing against it as she passed, repeating the action as she retraced her steps building the action into a pattern reminiscent of a guard at one moment and a caged animal the next. Francesca retreated to a corner of the wall farthest from the door but away from Heviere, sliding her body along the brickwork and always in contact with it. When she reached the wall's edge, she grasped the brickwork and pulled at it with all her strength - the effort releasing short, hard, grunting sounds from her. She continued this action for some minutes and then halted abruptly and rushed headlong into the opposite corner, where she fell into a foetal position on the floor, her back pressed into the wall. Amidst all this spasmodic activity I was aware that Carlo had not moved, but simply stood with his back to the wall staring intently at the door.

Cynthia seemed to become aware of her close physical proximity to him, because she slowly edged along the wall towards him, her gaze fixed firmly on the door as she did so. When she finally stood beside him she gently took his left arm and held it tightly. Cynthia's actions were executed without her once making eye contact with Carlo or any other member of the company, a feature of the performance shared by everyone onstage. No one made direct eye contact with any other individual throughout the performance; they seemed to just sense each other's physical presence. Carlo did not respond to Cynthia and they stood frozen in the pose for some time, until Cynthia slowly turned her head and gazed intently at Carlo's unresponsive profile. The gesture had a compulsive energy and was executed with a dancer's precision, which created an image of slow-motion film action.

Simultaneously, Heviere proceeded to remove his shoes and socks followed by his sweater, whilst continuing to glare at the door as Ellena continued to pace and Francesca retained her foetal position. Carlo had not turned his gaze from the door since the performance began and he continued to stare at it as, shaking and trembling and breathing very heavily, he slowly sank to a squatting position, Cynthia released her grip on him as he did so. Francesca suddenly uncurled from her foetal position and began to tear at the wall in long, arching gestures as if trying to remove layers of fabric. The scratching of her nails on the brickwork, the sound of Ellena's boots as she continued to pace in front of the door and Carlo's heavy breathing, were the only audible sounds in the studio at this point.

Ellena suddenly approached to within a few inches of the door and, crouching, listened intently as if for sounds of life from the other side; a move which I interpreted to be her awareness of the approach of her messenger. Almost moving in synchronisation with her, Heviere slowly rose and positioned himself directly behind Ellena, from which position he commenced to mirror her movements for some minutes and then suddenly threw his arms around her waist. From this frozen standing position, the two of them slowly sank into a squatting position facing the door, with their faces contorted suddenly into masks of horror. Having held this position for several minutes, Heviere releases his grip and Ellena immediately rose and continued pacing out her previous floor pattern as if nothing had happened to disrupt it. Heviere, meanwhile, proceeded to empty his pockets prior to removing his shirt and trousers. Whilst this action was taking place, Cynthia approached and leant gently against the door as Francesca

suddenly cried out in English 'leave me alone' and then crawled back into her corner, resuming her foetal position and sobbing quietly.

As the performance progressed I was aware of individuals increasingly interacting with one another, adopting precise, almost sculptured positions in relation to one another, without making eye contact. The atmosphere in the studio was incredibly tense as the onstage relationships formed, broke, re-formed and froze before breaking again in a pattern which resembled a slow dance of fear mixed with anticipation. Watching, I was reminded of I.M. Lewis's assertion that the possessorial dances of peripheral cults like the Candomble are 'danced psychodramas'[4] and, more specifically, the delicate gestures combining images of pain and beauty present a performance of hieroglyphics whose compulsive strangeness put me in mind of the oriental Sankai Juku dance company. Suddenly, as if he had decided that his performance was over, Carlo moved out of the performance space and stood leaning against the wall watching the others from the shadows. The others continued without seeming to be aware that one of their number had transformed himself into a spectator.

Throughout the performance I was aware of Fersen hovering continuously on the periphery of the action and with Carlo's voluntary exit from the performance space, he signalled to the stage manager to switch on a cassette player and the studio was immediately filled with the music of J.S. Bach. The sound of music had the effect of creating a moment of intense stillness amongst the performers, who, when they resumed their individual performances, appeared to become more consciously rhythmical. Together with this apparent consciousness of movement came a synchronisation of vision, as the remaining

performers began to approach each other and embrace, but still without making any direct eye contact. Ellena suddenly let out a single heart - rending cry of despair, which drowned out the music for several seconds and prompted Fersen to bring the performance to a conclusion. He instructed the stage manager to dim the stage lights to half, which had the effect of casting huge Expressionist shadows of the performer's bodies on the rear wall. At this point all four performers had converged against the stage right wall and sat or stood facing the door; Francesca continued to sob louder with every breath. Several minutes pass before the stage manager dimmed the stage lights to full blackout, immediately restoring them to full intensity again, a pattern he repeated three times to indicate to the performers that the performance was now over. For their part they appeared to be exhausted and were very quiet, communicating nothing to each other either verbally or physically, as Fersen moved quietly among them pausing to offer the still sobbing Francesca some words of comfort and a hug. The stage manager quickly removed the prop door as Fersen announced a coffee break. I noticed that Paola who had witnessed the entire performance, was crying. The whole performance had lasted exactly thirty-five minutes.

Following the break Fersen began the first of a two part de-briefing of the performers. Initially he required them to report their reactions verbally to the whole group, encouraging them to describe the sensations they were experiencing and focussing on the images which structured the scenic narrative. Following this, every individual was required to write up a performance log in private, concentrating on an objective description of all physical and mental changes that occured

during the performance. These logs were read by Fersen and became the subject of further analysis in the seminar session preceding the next performance. I noted that in this de-briefing Fersen's persistent and often critical questioning reminded me of the perezhivanie technique adopted by Stanislavski's alter-ego Torzov and that in both cases the goal appears to be the same. The verbal reports were quite spontaneous and vivid and, despite their obvious exhaustion, the group generated an air of excitement which was encouraged by Fersen.

Carlo, for example, initially imagined that a woman would enter through the prop door to claim his life but, as his performance progressed, he realised that she would not appear and that he no longer wished to stand in front of the door. Throughout he felt an extreme sense of loneliness and complete isolation from the rest of the group, whom he imagined to be a tribe of starving refugees lining up at a Red Cross Centre - an image which appeared to be reinforced by the sound of Francesca's continual sobbing. Fersen questioned him on the degree of his conscious control over his performance, to which he replied that he found himself oscillating in and out of both his own performance and his awareness of the group. At times he was fully conscious of himself and the social personas of the company and at other moments he lost his consciousness of both. Much later he revealed to me in an interview that his initially abstract image of the woman focussed during the performance into a clear vision of the Madonna; he, in fact, imagined himself married to the Madonna. Once this image had formed itself he was reluctant to release it, to relinquish what he terms his "aesthetic moment" of contemplation. Following these performances, he finds that he requires at least one hour of solitary,

silent contemplation, before he can once again relate to other people. For this reason he dislikes Fersen's insistence on the verbal de-briefing session which immediately follows each performance. Carlo declares that he is a strict Catholic and it is interesting to note that his "transic" vision should evoke the presence of one of the archetypal images of his faith. In contrast to the other members of the group, his experience of the mnemodrama most clearly approximates the mythopoeic viewpoint of the adoxu in Candomble, which is itself a syncretism of Yoruban mythology and New World Catholicism.

Francesca has discovered that, in every performance to date, she is always attempting to escape from the other members of the group, no matter what given circumstances are provided by Fersen. In the three minutes of preparatory darkness, she had a vision of herself as a patient confined in a mental hospital awaiting the arrival of an unidentified visitor. Fersen criticised the fact that she did not allow herself time to fix an image from her actual autobiographical memory with which to work, but latched onto and then proceeded to develop a spontaneously created image. When the lights came up Francesca declared that her initial image transformed into that of a concentration camp and she felt compelled to hide herself away to avoid discovery by those she expected to enter through the door in order to do her harm. Seeing Heviere in the act of removing his clothes frightened her because she imagined that he was preparing himself for a ritual death at the hands of the same people who were pursuing her. Following her report, Fersen notes that Francesca always appears to tap streams of inner violence in her performances, which she struggles to contain and keep from exploding into violent confrontation with the rest of the

company. Later Francesca reveals that it was the sound of Ellena's boots scraping on the floor as she marched up and down, which triggered the image of the concentration camp.

Ellena informed us that she began her performance feeling very secure and happy. She experienced an initial vision of herself standing on a green hill looking down on the door, which had "rounded" into an ancient marble door. She imagined that she was waiting for a warrior to come and challenge her to a duel. Further questioning from Fersen revealed that this warrior was envisaged by Ellena as a Knight of the Middle Ages who had frightened her in an unspecified way and whose presence haunted her and the rest of the group. Throughout the performance she felt compelled to approach the door and confront her enemy; an action which precipitated great waves of inner rage within her so that she found herself trembling as she approached the door. It wasn't until the final blackout that she was able to convince herself that the warrior would in fact not appear. Ellena viewed herself in interestingly androgynous terms during the performance, a point I wish to take up in more detail later.

Cynthia had a vision in which she was waiting for someone at a railway station, a common occurrence in her daily life and one of only two examples of a mnemodrama performed by this group, that started from the concrete identification of an autobiographical memory. As the performance progressed, this initial image rounded so that Cynthia imagined that the train she was waiting for had crashed and that she and the rest of the group were waiting for news of the survivors. She became convinced that she could hear information concerning the disaster being relayed in whispers by unseen persons on the other side

of the door. Later she became convinced that her friend had survived and that consequently no bad news would be brought to her. She felt for the first time in this series of mnemodramas that she had made contact with her emotional self, rather than simply acting out the given circumstances. She felt compelled, for example, to seek the comfort of another person (Carlo) whilst awaiting news of the disaster and confesses that she was close to tears at many moments during the performance. Fersen asked her if the fact that she knew she was performing before a prop door rather than the real thing, was in any way dislocating for her performance ? 'On the contrary', she replied. She believed emphatically throughout the performance that she was standing in front of a real door which led to the outside world. The other members of the company concur. The illusion that the door was real held good for all of them throughout the mnemodrama. Later Cynthia informs me that her work with Fersen over the past nine weeks has been extremely therapeutic in that it has enabled her to get in contact with her body emotionally for the first time. He has helped her to "re-centre" her self-image, which she claims has led to a freshness and lightness of movement in her professional dance work.

Like Cynthia, Heviere's mnemodrama was rooted in autobiographical memory in that he recalled a recent incident in which he was waiting for someone connected with the magazine he writes for to bring him some information regarding a proposed trip to Mexico. In preparing himself to receive this news, he suddenly experienced an overwhelming desire to strip naked in front of the group and struggled with his own natural inhibitions about this. This dilemma resulted in a performance that was always close to the surface and within which

Heviere was acutely aware of the duality of presence - moments of flow with his visions which were suddenly fractured by an awareness of himself and his fellow performers. These dramatic changes in focus were accompanied by a dislocation in his sense of real time - time appeared to be suspended during the moments of trance - and he was amazed at just how little time had elapsed during the entire span of the performance, an observation shared by the rest of the group. When I interviewed Heviere the day after the mnemodrama, he revealed that my presence as an outsider had had an initial disturbing effect on the company, making them self-consciously aware that they were in fact performing, resulting in performances which he felt were much more consciously controlled than normal and which contained a higher degree of "acting out" and trance simulation.

Heviere's observation coincided with my own feeling that the structure of the given circumstances almost certainly encouraged the performers to role play rather than perform an act of self-revelation. It was in fact extremely difficult to tell whether or not any of them had achieved an altered state of consciousness for more than a fleeting moment and certainly they all remembered their performances clearly. What had been achieved was a state of transic flow or rationally induced trance, a state commonly experienced by traditional performers in occidental theatre, although rarely at the level of the abandoned emotion achieved by Francesca. This flow state appeared to coincide with a montage of visions experienced by each performer with varying degrees of clarity and sustainment. I was also interested to note that the door prop itself was not manipulated by any performer during the span of the performance. It almost took on the quality of

the venerated object in the cults researched by Ernesto De Martino and Alfonso M. Di Nola and again it was unclear whether the prop itself was acting as a catalyst for the performer's images or whether they simply stemmed from the associations derived from the imposition of Fersen's given circumstances. Whilst, therefore, a clearly ludic relationship was not established between the prop and the performers, the mnemodrama did reveal a level of psychic anguish amongst some of the performers (noteably Francesca) which in many ways alluded to the central significance of the suffering individual within the structure of the archaic feast.

Some forty minutes after the conclusion of the de-briefing session, Paola Bertolone prepared to perform a *gestual* mnemodrama. As this was the first occasion for the group to witness this technique, Fersen took great pains to clearly outline the structure of the performance. He declared that, although the scenic prop was still the focus of the mnemodrama, it was now essentially an abstract object lacking any specific utilitarian function in daily life. Like the *neutral play with prop* the relationship between performer and prop at the *gestual* stage remains essentially ludic and the performance itself is a somatic revelation of the ways in which the prop stimulates visions in the performer. Fersen reminds us that there are no given circumstances for this journey into psychic abandonment.

Fersen invites Paola to enter the empty performance space and lie on the floor in a relaxed position whilst he places a stick some three feet in length parallel to her and four feet away to her left. She lies on her back and Fersen instructs her to empty her mind of all preconceptions regarding the performance. He then instructs the stage

manager to black out the studio lights (again this lasts for three minutes), during which time we are aware of Paola changing her position on the floor and removing her wristwatch. When the stage lights come up, she is discovered lying on her front with her eyes closed. She is completely still for a long time and then slowly stretches out and makes initial contact with the stick, grasping it firmly in her left hand. After a slight pause she begins to describe wide arcs with the stick, sweeping the floor behind her head and passing the stick from her left to her right hand, with her arms held rigidly at full stretch. As this movement develops into a firm rhythmic pattern, her legs begin to move in time with her arms, creating the image of a swimmer. This movement is sustained for some time and then slowly transforms into one where she grasps the stick in her right hand and proceeds to rub it vertically up and down the floor in a brisk scrubbing action.

Throughout all of this her eyes have remained closed. Suddenly she changes her position and begins to lever herself forward using the stick as a crutch. As she pulls her body along her eyes begin to flicker rapidly as if she is reacting to a blinding light. It is apparent from her physical exertion and the tension in her body that she is committing her whole weight onto the stick as she slowly begins to describe a complete circle with it. The circle completed, she pauses and sits back on her heels, her eyes flickering rapidly.

The pause is suddenly broken as Paola unexpectedly thrusts the stick away from her with some force and then crawls after it and retrieves it, an action she repeats a number of times until a pattern and rhythm develop in which, prior to grasping the stick, she arches her arm languidly describing a circle in the air which becomes an

exaggerated follow through once the stick has been grasped and rejected. The total image combines a childlike pleasure with the precision of a dancer and is executed so precisely and beautifully, that I am left wondering if this whole sequence is consciously performed by her. Suddenly this image is abandoned as Paola thrusts the stick between her thighs and proceeds to crawl around the performance space, creating a disturbing image which fuses the childlike with an aggressive phallic, almost animalistic, quality. This proves to be a brief interlude before she returns to the previous pattern which, however, is now accompanied by vocal sounds: wordless singing and odd snatches of phrases mumbled indistinctly. Slowly she stands and drags the stick with both hands as she proceeds to walk backwards and I notice that the stick appears to have grown heavier for her. Again this pattern develops with repetition so that it finally involves Paola lifting the stick high above her head and then pushing and pulling it along the ground. She holds her body rigidly and at full stretch throughout this sequence, eyes half closed and eyelids blinking rapidly, as she describes whirling patterns with the stick with increasing vigour, until she finally strikes it with full force on the floor. As this dance progresses she opens her eyes fully for the first time but does not allow her gaze to fall on the stick; it is as if something else, something internal, holds her gaze. Fersen stands close to her throughout but she appears to be unaware of his presence in such close proximity to hers.

The pattern of her movement changes again as she suddenly falls to her knees, using the stick to dig into the floor in a rhythm which takes on an increasing sense of urgency until she rises to her feet and continues moving in a circle, accompanying her actions with strange

hooting sounds. Suddenly she falls to the floor and assumes a foetal position which she holds, quite still, for well over a minute. Then slowly she begins thrusting out her legs again in a reprise of her earlier swimming image, accompanying this motion with the action of lifting the stick slowly into the air and thereby creating a very delicate image. The foetal position is briefly resumed and then abruptly abandoned as she rolls over onto her back, caressing the stick and undulating her body in an image full of sensuous abandon, laughing to herself as her movements become erotically charged and the laughter turns to deep sighs. A scream rips suddenly from her lips and she throws the stick from her with a violent thrust that appears to exhaust her, so that she lies quite still with her eyes closed once more. Again this pause is held for some time until she slowly stretches out her hands feeling for the stick and on discovering it, cradles it gently in her arms and resumes the foetal position, stroking the stick as she does so.

At this point Fersen moves quietly away from her to the periphery of the playing space, from where he signals to the stage manager to play the same music by Bach which concluded the *neutral play with prop*. On hearing the music Paola suddenly clenches the stick between her thighs again, then throws it from her violently, but this time leaves it where it falls and retreats to a corner of the performance space where she once again adopts the foetal position. She now lies completely still, eyes closed, for the longest time in the whole performance. Fersen watches her intently and then slowly dims the lights to blackout, holding it for several seconds and then bringing the studio lights up quickly, signals the conclusion of the performance. No one moves initially as all attention is focussed on Paola who is still lying in her

final foetal position with eyelids flickering , murmuring incoherently under her breath. It takes a good deal of gentle prompting from Fersen to persuade her to sit up and rejoin the rest of us and I note that we are all concentrating on his efforts in total silence. The whole performance of this *gestual* mnemodrama has lasted exactly seventeen minutes and I am surprised by this as it felt much longer, or possibly I just lost all sense of time because of my own absorption in Paola's performance.

During the fifteen-minute de-briefing which follows the performance, Paola finds it hard to contribute but keeps acknowledging that she has had a 'beautiful experience.' As Fersen talks to the rest of us gathered in a circle she remains on the outside, slumped across two chairs, her body limp, in an attitude of total physical and emotional exhaustion. An hour passes before she is able to fully communicate coherently with the rest of us and a feeling of exhaustion remains with her for the entire evening. In offering his own interpretation of the performance, Fersen points out its distinct two-part structure: a slow beginning heating up to a highly energetic second section, during which he believes Paola experienced an altered state of consciousness. Heviere expresses admiration for the fluidity of the performance and contrasts the spontaneity of her actions with what he views as his own calculated performance in the *neutral play with prop*. From her own perspective, Paola states that she was aware of Fersen's presence throughout the performance, not as a recognisable personality but rather as an indistinct personage who might steal her stick. She claims that she was completely unaware of the rest of us, nor was she conscious at any time that her eyes were closed or semi-closed because she had a clear visionary perspective on the proceedings. The stick

retained its physical property throughout, although, as the performance progressed, she did lose the sense of its presence in her hands. She complains that her face aches and is informed by Fersen that this is the result of the contorted nature of the transic "masks" she assumed during the mnemodrama.

Two days later Paola is able to provide me with a more detailed insight into the performance of her *gestual mnemodrama.* She begins by explaining that in the period of darkness before the performance commenced, she attempted to empty her mind of everyday reality whilst remaining aware of the presence of the audience. As the stage lights came up, her initial move towards the stick had been completely spontaneous and in those first moments she found herself listening to the sound patterns created by the contact of the stick with the tiled floor; following this soundtrack intently as she conjured up a vision of the flight path the stick was tracing as it whirled through space. This image of the stick in flight became the dominant ludic relationship in the early stages of the performance and her vocalisations at this point were an attempt to communicate with the stick, to encourage it to fly. As the performance progressed, the stick became very heavy in her hands but what it lost in lightness it appeared to her to gain in power as, for example, when she was lying on the floor in the foetal position and experienced the sensation of the stick animating her by dragging her across the floor. The point when she perceived that the stick was controlling her movements, when she was filled with its presence, marked for Paola the onset of transic abandonment. This moment was realised by a loss of consciousness of her own physical movements and her manipulation of the stick, as well as the audience and the

physical time and space reality of the studio itself, all of which were replaced by the sensation of a huge breath of air which pressed into her 'as if it could and would tear me apart.' [5] It was this sensation which provided her with her 'beautiful feeling.'

Paola recognises that through all her performances of *gestual mnemodramas* runs a strong autobiographical thread which is physically manifested in the recurring childish images of crawling, playing with the stick as if it were a baby and adopting the foetal position. However, all of these images remain on the level of abstract visions rather than the evocation of any concrete memories. What is concrete for her is the half-glimpsed revelation of her *vertical* self, a sense that she possesses a 'great power' [6] beneath her daily social persona, which is partially released during the transic moment of her mnemodrama. Her performances always leave her with the feeling that her daily (*horizontal)* existence is now physically and emotionally deprived, symbolised by the fact that her body feels much heavier in her daily existence than when she performs mnemodramas. Comparing her work with Fersen to her previous formal theatre training she declares that:

> with Fersen one is working with one's own personal narrative, not with a personal narrative designed to stimulate the needs of a character. Stanislavski never asks his actors to abandon themselves. By way of contrast, with Fersen the actor is always searching for themselves - any narrative is always inward looking. [7]

Visionary mnemodramas , the final stage of Fersen's technique, have not been performed for a number of years at the studio and Fersen is therefore forced to rely on his video of "Alle origini del Teatro - il Mnemodrama" in order to convey something of the essence

of this technique. During the five days I spent with him I was able to view this tape (only one copy exists) on three separate occasions: once with Fersen providing a detailed frame by frame commentary on the action from his perspective; once with the other members of the research group who, with the exception of Paola, had never seen it before and a final time on my own.

In the video there are a total of six performers who, as it begins, prepare themselves for the mnemodrama by facing away from the performance space and, leaning on a dance bar provided, commence the process of emptying themselves ; their body gestures indicating that they are all breathing slowly and deeply in a precise uncoordinated rhythm. There is no evidence of any verbal or physical communication between them and all eye contact appears once again to be avoided. Whilst the performers prepare Fersen and his stage manager wind two long lengths of blue and red coloured chiffon into an abstract sculpture, which they then place on the floor midway between the performers and the audience (the camera crew). A three - piece band - violin, flute and percussion - sits to one side of the performance space. In an earlier interview [8] Fersen explained to me that he had worked with this trio of musicians for several months, experimenting with the form and quality of music needed to support the performance of a *visionary mnemodrama.* Between them they had created twelve different themes, regulated in rhythm and length, which Fersen could cue in any order at any point during the performance, directly in response to the perceived emotional needs of an individual performer. This use of music appears to be inspired by Fersen's observation of the importance of musical structure within

Candomble ritual, where the tempo of the samba changes in accordance with the amount of support needed by an adoxu in encouraging her orixa to possess her - the slower the orixa to respond to his call, the faster the samba. Fersen believes that music operates as a powerful catalyst in the creation and physical manifestation of transic visions, although this point is disputed by Heviere and others who find Fersen's current use of recorded music (examples from the mainstream occidental classical tradition) acts as a controlling mechanism, drawing them reluctantly out of their trance states. The music effectively destroys the transic image rather than supporting it. The music used in the video has a distinctly oriental flavour, its insistent rhythms and the fact that it is played live and spontaneously, appearing to have a greater effect in terms of producing an emotional response than the tightly structured music of Bach.

Once the props are in position there is a blackout which, although obviously edited down to a few seconds on video, I am assured by Fersen lasted the usual three minutes. When the lights come up the performers are discovered facing the back wall, leaning on the dance bar, from which they slowly disengage, turn and cautiously approach the scarves. Some kneel in front of the props for some time without touching them, whilst others make initial contact by burying their faces in the material. Very quickly a first group pattern emerges with performers stroking and caressing the scarves, lifting them and creating images of veils as the material floats down over their faces. These actions are repeated over and over as each performer establishes an individual rhythmic response to the ever present drone of the music. As with the live *neutral* and *gestual* performances, I am struck once

again by the slow, dance-like unfolding of this mnemodrama, with performers emerging from individual isolation to create ad hoc groupings which fleetingly interact, before splitting apart and rejoining in a new configuration. These images of pairing and tripling oscillate between the calculated and the random, both states seemingly dictated through the manipulation of the prop. Close-ups of faces reveal contorted, mask-like visages, the pupils of the eyes frequently dilated and eyelids fluttering furiously or completely closed. This physical manifestation of an altered state of consciousness is enhanced when the camera focuses on individual performers holding the chiffon close to their faces and it is seen that they are in fact gazing abstractedly through and beyond it into the middle distance, rather than directly at it. Similarly they appear to gaze through their partners rather than at them and eye contact is again largely avoided.

As the performance progresses, individual actions become more intense until a climax is reached with bodies whirling at speed around the space, or writhing on the floor in an orgiastic image of destruction involving the renting of the material by many performers with their nails and teeth. This frenzy is frequently punctuated by individuals falling suddenly to the floor and assuming the foetal position reminiscent of Francesca's and Paola's actions in their *neutral* and *gestual* mnemodramas. The camera picks up one young woman who is clearly in tears and the flute player who, on observing her state, detaches himself momentarily from his fellow musicians and stands over her playing softly. The woman appears to be totally oblivious of both the musician and the music. Archetypal whirling dance images dominate the latter portion of the mnemodrama as the performers

wind and rewind themselves in the now tattered chiffon. Exhaustion finally overtakes many of them and the action begins to cool down as individuals slump to the floor and lie there distractedly, gazing through veils of chiffon, as the music takes on a final serene and soothing tone. As recorded, this performance of a *visionary mnemodrama* has lasted exactly one hour.

I was able to view a second video of the same group performing a *visionary mnemodrama* on another occasion, which according to Fersen was a dry run for what would eventually become the showcase "Alle origini del Teatro - il Mnemodrama." Unlike the professional quality of that video, this proved to be an unedited assemblage of rough footage, the majority of which had been shot with a hand held camera. Technical shortcomings apart (many sequences were cut just as they were getting interesting), this video did reinforce a number of patterns that I had begun to see emerging in all three examples of mnemodrama performances.

As in the first video Fersen was again using chiffon as the designated prop, only this time it was dark blue in colour. Unlike the previous mnemodramas, this one did not begin with the period of ritual preparation in darkness but with what looked like a consciously constructed dance motif in which the performers moved slowly round the prop in an anti-clockwise circle keeping time to the regular beat of a drum. As the tempo of the drum-beat increased, the dance took on the familiar whirling pattern which eventually split apart as individual performers began to interract with the prop.

The performance contained a number of striking images, including numerous close-ups of individual faces revealing glazed expressions

and eyes out of focus held in a steady gaze by an unseen object. Once again there was no direct physical contact between performers, all contact being channelled through the manipulation of the prop as, for example, in the image of a length of chiffon being repeatedly brushed over a prone body. Ludic images once again abounded, the most striking example being that of a young woman who energetically hurled a long strip of chiffon into the air and let it float down over her head like a veil, an action which she apparently repeated continuously accompanying it with shrieks of delighted childish laughter. As in Paola's performance, childish images juxtaposed themselves quickly with those of orgiastic abandon as performers writhed on the ground, smothering themselves in the material and suddenly transforming themselves into images of shrouded corpses.

Archetypal images of ritual adoration emerge as two performers suddenly anoint a third by the simple device of draping his shoulders with a length of chiffon. This image is embellished by a young woman who prostrates herself before the man, repeatedly salaaming before becoming very still, as the scene freezes into a generic tableau reminiscent of a scene from a Biblical epic. Suddenly the young woman breaks this tableau by running across the playing space and collapsing onto the floor in heart-rending sobs. Later the camera picks her out, leaning distractedly against a wall of the studio, oblivous to everything around her. Towards the end of the video a couple begin to interact with each other; the man dances and the woman mirrors his actions as they flow in a strong, slow rhythm across the studio without at any point assuming direct eye contact. Once again the performance

ends with the performers in a state of complete exhaustion, many of them lying scattered on the floor in foetal positions.

At the conclusion of the screening , Fersen elaborates on his belief that at the *visionary* level the relationship between performer and prop enables the former to experience the mythic dimension of his persona. He points out that the abstract bolts of chiffon are transformed during the performance into sacred veils and the repeated circle dancing takes on ritual overtones which has led Alfonso M. Di Nola to liken them to the frenzied whirlings which mark the transic performances of the cult of Tarantism [8]. Fersen offers Di Nola's observation as a confirmation of his view that, at the visionary level, the mnemodrama is capable of bringing to the surface of conscious performance trace elements of traditional rites. As a proto-rite the mnemodrama, in its three codified stages, emerges with a clearly identifiable pattern of components, most interesting of which is the performer's falling to the floor followed by the immediate assumption of the foetal position. Fersen interprets this action as the symbolic simulation of the experience of death in shamanic and possessorial initiation prior to the rebirth of the individual in a new persona. In the mnemodrama this is transformed into a fleeting awareness of an archaic memory, revealed in sequences of action which are not, he maintains, pre-planned or anticipated by the performer but happen as a spontaneous action during an altered state of consciousness - a viewpoint supported by the experiences of Paola but questioned by Heviere. It is the plausibility of this state as a genuine manifestation of the trance experience I shall now analyse using models drawn from anthropological perspectives.

In their research into the concept of the shaman's magical flight, Peters and Williams found it impossible to take an absolute position regarding the authenticity of shamanic trance:

> It does seem likely, however, that numerous shamans attain a condition wherein they behave in ways atypical of normal, waking consciousness. Even if the behaviour can be explained as role playing, there is a point when role playing becomes intense involvement.[9]

Their comments suggest that the conflict faced by performers of mnemodrama over role playing far from exposing a weakness in the structure of the technique, actually reflects the core of shamanistic experience. Eliade, [10] for example, reviewing Radlov's account of the magical flight of an Altaic shaman, comments on the 'laborious mimed ascent' and concludes that the interest of the rite is dramatic rather than ecstatic. Reichel-Dolmatoff on the other hand suggests that role playing is a central factor in Tukano Indian shamanism, where drug-induced hallucinations are devoid of mystical overtones and serve as a practical means of communication:

> (...) the concept of spirit-possession seems to be completely lacking - A *Paye* (shaman) is always himself; never is he seized or invaded by a spirit; he simply interprets and transmits what this spirit shows him or tells him. [11]

The Tukano world picture is structured on the perception that nature is imbued with human motivations and possibilities of action in which the concept of role play is explicit - the hunter approaches his prey as if it were human and lightning strikes as if it had been cast by a deity. The Nepali shamans studied by Peters and Williams [12] declared that they were always conscious of their experiences and had complete recall of their possession states. They reported being fully aware of

what their gods or ancestors spoke through them, in marked contrast to the Candomble adoxu who loses her social persona during possession and has to rely on her audience to explain the details of her performance to her.

Peters and Williams observe three conditions in constructing a model for shamanic trance: *a)* the shaman's voluntary control of entrance into and the duration of his trance; *b)* evidence of post-transic memory and *c)* evidence of transic communicative interplay between the shaman and his audience during the performance. [13] Like the shaman, the performer of mnemodrama begins in the realm of his or her ordinary state of consciousness and enters an altered state in which he or she briefly experiences possession by an empowering spirit or vision - Paola's sense of being filled with a huge breath - which is experienced as a moment of *proprioceptive* [14] change in which the body feels re-centred and physically lighter. Many of the qualities associated with Bourguignon's model of shamanic trance were also present in Carlo's performance of the *neutral play with prop*. For example, his vision of the woman who slowly metamorphosed into the Madonna was always distinct from his awareness of himself, he was not possessed by the vision in a manner understood by the practitioners of Candomble and he was able to recall the details of his performance clearly.

At the levels of *gestual* and *visionary* mnemodramas the fusion of shamanic and possessorial states of trance is potentially more pronounced. Paola, for example, experienced a moment of rounding from one state to the other when she lost consciousness of her own physical movements and the dimensions of her prop and was

temporarily filled with the enspiriting sensation of the huge breath of air. Like the possessed adoxu in Candomble ritual, she experienced moments of temporary amnesia during her mnemodrama - she was unaware that her eyes were closed or semi-closed for long periods - and although she was aware of the physical presence of the stick, it metamorphosed in the sense that it changed weight and shape during the performance to the point where she was convinced she could make it fly.

In the videos of the *visionary* mnemodramas it was clear that the strips of chiffon were constantly rounding into a variety of symbolic forms, including sacred veils and prayer shawls, as well as more abstract images which I interpreted as images of fear and veneration. Common to all three stages of the technique was the speed with which individuals plummeted emotional depths, revealing in every case a profound anguish which often proved overwhelming for the performer. Linked to this was the fact that every performer appeared to conclude their performance in an emotionally and physically exhausted state, quite out of proportion to its length and the amount of physical exertion expended on it. The prostrate forms of Francesca, Paola and the performers in the *visionary* video echoed the post-transic states of Candomble and Balinese Barong performers.

The lack of control of the transic state evident in mnemodrama stems partly from the fact that Fersen is experimenting with ritual processes without being in a position to root the work in a solid mythopoeic foundation. It is interesting in this context to compare his work with the experiments in ritual performance conducted by Felicitas Goodman in Europe and America since 1972. Primarily

concerned with the exploration of trance states through the simulation of shamanic rituals (a practice which would immediately leave her open to charges of cultural tourism by Fersen), her work sheds important light on the way that trance experience may be read in the body of the performer. Over a period of four years from 1972 to 1976 Goodman experimented with methods of inducing altered states of consciousness in her performers by means of rhythmic stimulation, drawn from her observation of euphoric states achieved amongst Pentecostal congregations. Substituting a gourd rattle for Pentecostal music, she required her performers to respond to fifteen minutes of sustained rhythms and then report on their experiences:

> I had expected the experience to vary minimally, as they did during religious rituals. Instead, they covered a wide variety of body changes, all the way from considerable rigidity to agitation, from feeling the heart beating tremendously fast to not noting any change at all (...) [15]

Lacking the controlling mythopoeic structure which regulates a trance experience in religious ritual, Goodman set about creating a series of 'ritual postures' [16] derived from examples of native American art - 'certain seemingly stereotypical ways of standing or kneeling and holding their arms and hands' [17] - which her performers consciously adopted before embarking upon the transic journey. She discovered that the postures shaped not only the somatic perceptions of the performers but more importantly, the contents of the *visionary* experience which became increasingly homogeneous:

> I went into a cave in a swirling, multicolored cone. The sky lit up as if with strobe lights and I saw a regal white ram. I decided to search for something else and saw a tiger, a fish, a whale (...) [18]

This example of a transic journey reported by one of her performers contains many of the symbols associated with traditional shamanism, particularly the representation of the axis mundi as a cave entrance and the role of animals as tutelary spirit guides. However, the transic framework is textually dependent (native American myth filtered through the neo-shamanic writings of Carlos Castaneda) and therefore far removed from the performer's socio-cultural reality. After conducting numerous experiments along these lines, Goodman decided to incorporate them into specifically choreographed ritual dances complete with masks and costumes:

> After a short religious ritual involving an offering to the spirits invoked, I demonstrate the posture without indicating anything about the nature of the experience that might occur. We then do a five minute breathing exercise of light, natural breaths to help concentration. Then the group assumes the posture once more, they close their eyes and I rattle for fifteen minutes, a rapid even stroke (200-205 strokes per minute). At the conclusion of the rattling, the participants relax for a few minutes and then I ask them to report on their experiences while I take notes. [19]

Since 1983 Goodman has divided her energies between creating and presenting ritual performances and conducting research into trance states in her studio laboratory. These experiments, undertaken in conjunction with the University of Munich, have focussed on analysing what goes on inside the body whilst a performer is in a trance state. Amongst her many findings she discovered that the heart rate of the performer dramatically increased and blood pressure simultaneously dropped considerably below pre-performance levels. In the blood serum the stressors such as adrenalin initially rose slightly and then dropped below normal levels, whilst beta-endorphin made its appearance and stayed high even after the conclusion of the

experiments; thus accounting for the euphoria so often reported after a religious trance experience.

Goodman's experiments help provide a scientific model for the psycho-physical changes experienced by performers such as Paola and Cynthia during their mnemodramas, particularly the sense of euphoria which left them both exhausted for a number of hours following their respective performances. Of importance from the point of view of Fersen's work is Goodman's discovery that the ability of a normal individual to enter a trance state and come out of it on command is apparently genetically transmitted. For example, of the approximately nine hundred participants with whom she worked between 1982 and the end of 1987, she estimates that there were only about fifteen (less than two percent) who were unable to make a voluntary transition from a normal state of consciousness to an altered state and back again. Although his research lacks such detailed numerical support, Fersen has made a similar discovery noting that only those individuals who approach the mnemodrama with the intention to resist it psychologically, actually fail to achieve the transic state.

As previously suggested, Goodman's experiments share much in common with the guided imagery techniques used by neo-shamanists such as Michael Harner and incorporated in contemporary forms of psychodrama and related performance therapies (see chapter five). What she shares in common with Fersen's work is the deliberate stimulation of an altered state of consciousness within a theatrical framework, for the purpose of analysing the resulting individual transic visions. Her work therefore clearly parallels Fersen's in its earliest unstructured phase, but she departs from him in her desire to

establish a precise performance framework within which her trance experiments can be located. In order to achieve this, Goodman is forced to create rituals based on archetypal models which further necessitates the creation of a performance text in which the prop symbolises the outward manifestation of the possessing entity, in an echo of Candomble ritual. Fersen, however, moves in the opposite direction, subtracting identities so that the performance space, the prop and the performer exist in an abstract realm at the level of *gestual* and *visionary* mnemodramas, where identities are in a constant state of flux. The mnemodramatic trance results from the ludic relationship between performer and prop, the autotelic significance of this being addressed in the next chapter.

Notes

1. Paola Bertolone, personal interview (Rome) 12 March, 1992.
2. Paola Bertolone, 12 March, 1992.
3. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview (Rome) 11 March, 1992.
4. I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic Religion (London: Routledge, 1989) p.175.
5. Paola Bertolone, 12 March 1992.
6. Paola Bertolone, 12 March 1992.
7. Paola Bertolone, 12 March 1992.
8. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview (Rome) 9 March, 1992.
9. L.G. Peters & D.P. Williams, "Towards an Experiential Analysis of Shamanism" in American Ethnologist vol 7. (1980) p. 405.
10. Mircia Eliade, Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, (New York: Bollingen Series LXXVI, Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 200.
11. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, The Shaman and the Jaguar (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1975), p.141.
12. L.G. Peters & D.P. Williams (1980), p. 401.
13. L.G. Peters & D.P. Williams (1980), p. 407.
14. *Proprioception*: a term denoting how we "sense ourselves" see: Louise Steinman, The Knowing Body (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), pp: 11 - 21.
15. Felicitas D. Goodman, "A Trance Dance with Masks" in The Drama Review vol.34 no.1 T125, (1990), p. 105.
16. Felicitas D. Goodman (1990), p. 109.
17. Felicitas D. Goodman (1990), p. 107.
18. Felicitas D. Goodman (1990), p. 106.

19. Felicitas D. Goodman (1990), p. 109.

Chapter Four

THE RITUAL PLAY OF MNEMODRAMA

Specialists in play theory such as Huizinga, Piaget and Caillois have all focused at some point on its autotelic nature: the fact that it appears to need no goals or rewards external to itself. The child plays and he knows that he is playing. He believes in his game and even though in certain circumstances he may pretend to play, usually for the benefit of an adult present, when he plays for himself he does not pretend. The lack of pretence in the child's play is controlled by a retroconscience which warns him of the imaginary character of the play he is engaged in, of the fictitious nature of the world he has created for himself. Like Stanislavski's performer, the child in play is both performer and spectator of himself; he experiences the same duality of presence, the co-existence of two personas which allows for abandonment but retains control within the abandonment. This same duality of presence is observable in ritual performances such as Candomble and the Balinese Barong, structured on the basis of sacred play. It is this fusion of the childlike with the sacred that defines the nature of play found in Fersen's technique:

> (Mnemodrama) (...) is characterised by a certain analogy to the semi-oneiric state of the archaic lamentation, concretely related to the rules of the game of childhood. [1]

Johan Huizinga observes that sacred play is more than a symbolic actualisation - it is a mystical one. In it, something invisible and inactual is made manifest. The Candomble adoxus, for example, are convinced that the action of the rite actualises and effects a definite beatification, brings about an order of things higher than that in which

they customarily live. At the same time this actualisation by representation still retains the formal characteristics of play in every respect. It is performed within a playground that has been marked off beforehand and the various stages of the rite contain order, tension, movement, change, solemnity, rhythm and rapture. In Huizinga's terms the Candomble ritual is a *dromenon* or something acted. In other words the rite produces the effect which is not then shown figuratively, but actually reproduced in the action. The function of the Candomble rite, therefore, is far from being merely imitative; it causes the spectator to participate in the sacred happening itself. The fusion of spectator with performer in the action of the ritual determines the festive nature of the event. It is literally played out as a feast in which the role of the spectator is methectic rather than mimetic; the spectator aids the progress of the action. Huizinga suggests that the relationship between the archaic feast and play is very close. Both proclaim a standstill to ordinary life; both move between the twin poles of frivolity and ecstasy and are rooted in a serious purpose; both are limited as to time and place and both combine strict rules with genuine freedom of expression:

> In the form and function of play - man's consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest and holiest expression. Gradually the significance of a sacred act permeates the playing. Ritual grafts itself upon it; but the primary thing remains play. [2]

This fusion of ritual with play was recognised by Plato as a given fact. He had no hesitation in comprising the *sacra* in the category of play:

> Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able

> to propitiate the gods and defend himself against his enemies and win in the contest. [3]

Plato's doctrine contains the essence of *Lila* (the play), the Oriental concept that the world is not condemned and shunned as a fall from grace but voluntarily entered as a game or dance, in which the spirit plays. *Lila* is fundamentally a performative-creative act of continuous playing where ultimate positive distinctions between "true" and "false", "real" and "unreal" cannot be made. As a state of continuous creation combining the opposite forces of creation and destruction, *Lila* symbolises the essence of shamanic balance in that it reveals to the individual multiple realities which are transformable into each other. The *Lila* notion of playing is less bounded, less tame and less tightly framed in time and space than Occidental concepts of play. In *Lila* play is unfinishable. The structure of play shapes and interrrupts the process of playing, imposing end points requiring further starting points.

Richard Schechner is of the opinion that *Lila*, transposed to theatrical connotations of playing, is the presence of the performer enacting the "not" of her role:

> the Ophelia who is not there, who never was there. Ophelia can only exist in the playing field between rehearsal, performers, performance, dramatic text, performance text, spectators and readers. [4]

Schechner emphasises the liminality of the traditional performer's role which shares with the ritual performer and the performer of mnemodrama the re-actualisation of the absent other within the play frame. Victor Turner sought to integrate this notion of liminality within his concept of ritual as essentially anti-structural, creative, often carnivalesque and playful. [5] Play in this context takes on a similar role

in the social construction of reality as mutation and variation in organic evolution.[6] Turner's model is therefore processual and shares with Huizinga's a fusion of the play with the ritual frame.

This primal anti-structural, processual frame of play, is the initial phase of the play model developed by Roger Caillois to which he attaches the term *paidia*. Caillois denotes *paidia* as 'the spontaneous manifestation of the play instinct: a cat entangled in a ball of wool, a dog sniffing, and an infant laughing at his rattle.'[7] According to his theory *paidia* symbolises a developmental beginning in the human being, a phase out of which the child characteristically grows. *Paidia* is therefore a state of pure play. At the other end of the continuum is the state of *ludus* which involves the institutionalisation of the play instinct originating in *paidia*. For Caillois, although *ludus* is a fact of civilization, it is neither a higher nor a more desirable order or quality of play than *paidia*. In fact, as the following extract from his writings suggests, quite the opposite is the case:

> (Paidia) is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary and in some respects inverse tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practising the most embarrassing chicanery upon it, in order to make it more uncertain of attaining its desired effect.[8]

It is the *paidiac* state of play with its echoes of the Oriental *lila* and alluded to in the theories of Huizinga, Turner and Schechner, among others, that most clearly defines the concept of play which binds together two of the three stages of Fersen's mnemodrama. In point of fact Fersen's experiments move in the opposite direction to that advocated by Caillois - away from the initial *neutral play with prop*

which is ludic, towards the unstructured paidiac realms of the *gestual* and *visionary* mnemodramas. On one level Fersen's technique enables the performer to re-discover the spontaneous manifestation of the play instinct as it emerges within the child. The performer is able to reactualise the *illud tempus* of the first conscious moments of childhood. At a deeper level, particularly in the *visionary* technique, the performer fleetingly encounters paidia in its archaic form, defined by Giorgio Colli as *Dionysiac knowledge*: ' a concrete knowledge which is the experience of living and has nothing to do with conceptual knowledge.' [9] Colli atttributes *Dionysiac knowledge* as the root of all knowledge; the primal spontaneous interaction of the individual emotion in full participation with the world of his being. The performer of mnemodrama potentially traverses therefore the terrain of paidiac play, a journey which continually involves a reactualisation of childhood memories and, on occasion and often within the same performance, deposits the individual persona fleetingly on the threshold of the archaic *illud tempus*.

The psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott is of the opinion that, in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative and to use the whole personality and that it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self. This searching for the self, he maintains, can only come from what he describes as 'desultory formless functioning' or from 'rudimentary playing, as if in a neutral zone.' [10] It is only here, in this unintegrated state of the personality, that that which we describe as creative can appear. This process of 'rudimentary playing' provides the individual, according to Winnicott, with an indication for therapeutic procedure: it affords the opportunity for formless experience and for

creative impulses, motor and sensory, which are the foundations of playing. Winnicott developed his concept of play from analysing the mother-baby relationship, especially how the baby learns to distinguish between self and object:

> It is well known that infants as soon as they are born tend to use fist, fingers, thumbs in stimulation of the oral erotogenic zone, in satisfaction of the instincts at that zone and also in quiet union. After a few months infants of either sex become fond of playing with dolls - most mothers allow their infants some special object and expect them to become (...) addicted to such objects. [11]

Winnicott denotes these play objects as "transitional" in that they interpose themselves in between the mother and the baby, belonging to neither. The circumstances in which these transitional objects are used constitute the play of "transitional phenomena" which designates the intermediate area of experience between the thumb and the toy; between the oral eroticism and the true ("not me") object relationship; between primary creative activity and the projection of what has already been introjected.

Looked at from the perspective of Winnicott's model, the relationship established between the performer of mnemodrama and the scenic prop is, at least initially, a reactualisation of the primary contact between the infant and transitional phenomena. Let us take, for example, the performance of the *gestual* mnemodrama by Paola Bertolone in which she engaged in what Winnicott would describe as "rudimentary playing" with an abstract object, in her case a length of wood. Although Paola clearly distinguished between the prop and herself, the nature and pattern of the play remained formless in that the prop was continually denied any specific identity: it did not

undergo any symbolic *rounding* in Cole's [12] definition of the term. Her manipulation of the object was however spontaneous and whilst Paola was always conscious of the authentic property of the stick, she managed to execute limited variations on its true identity through its inclusion as the central focus of her transic dance. According to Winnicott the transitional object is the shamanic *axis mundi*, the symbol of the child's journey of progress towards experiencing the world. He suggests that it would be possible to understand the transitional object whilst not fully understanding the nature of the symbolism, which, as in the case of Paola's mnemodrama, has at the very best a variable meaning for the spectator. Here Winnicott emphasises the precariousness, alluded to by Paola, of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is, he surmises, the precariousness of magic itself:

> magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable. [13]

Fersen's discovery of the protective "magnetic field" (see chapter two) which appears to isolate and protect the performer of mnemodrama during her transic flight, effectively excluding all exterior interference, has its equivalent in the psychic playing area which the child inhabits and which, according to Winnicott, 'cannot be easily left, nor can it easily admit intrusions.' [14] Like the performer of mnemodrama, this area of playing for the child is not an inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world of social reality. Into this liminal space the child and the performer of mnemodrama gather or are given objects from external reality and use these in the service of some sample derived from inner personal

reality. Without hallucinating (in the case of the child but not always the performer), the individual puts out a sample of what Winnicott describes as 'dream potential' and proceeds to live momentarily with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality. In playing, both child and performer manipulate the external phenomena in the service of the dream and invest them with dream meaning and feeling. The experience of Winnicott's transitional phenomena is, therefore, the meeting ground between the child at play and the performer of mnemodrama. The child's is the primary experience, the *illud tempus* of *paidiac* play, the memory of which is fleetingly re-actualised in the performer's transic mnemodrama. The child and the performer create the object but the object, according to Winnicott, was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object. This is the essential paradox in the concept of transitional objects shared by child and performer alike and it is shamanic in that its efficacy relies on the individual's unquestioning acceptance of it:

> In the rules of the game we all know that we will never challenge the baby (performer) to elicit an answer to the question: did you create that or did you find it ? [15]

Winnicott and Fersen share the perspective that the experiential quality of paidiac play is unencumbered by the need for the player to rationalise the experience. What finally makes play play is the quality of acting out, of becoming another, of displaying a normally hidden aspect of the self - and of becoming this other persona without worrying about consequences.

Paola Bertolone's *gestual* mnemodrama remained teasingly on the threshold of form without at any point crossing over into concrete imagery. However, according to Fersen, in many performances this

threshold is crossed: both performer and prop are transformed through the intensity of transic vision and elements of a narrative begin to emerge. The previously cited example of the mnemodrama performed by *H* (see chapter two) revealed that his manipulation of a cardboard box produced a vision of the sails of a boat, which in turn triggered the memory of a childhood boating accident in which a close friend had drowned. The climax of his performance took the form of a dialogue between himself and the invisible spirit of his dead friend, conducted by *H* in what we might describe (following Bourguignon's model) as a shamanic state of trance. Whilst *H* retains his self-concept throughout the performance, the prop is transformed (rounded) and becomes the sails of a boat, a process that causes an eruption of emotion in *H* which allows the suppressed memory to rise to the surface of his consciousness.

In his study of children at play, Leo Frobenius [16] concluded that an eruption of emotion is characteristic of the spontaneous shift of an idea or image from the level of the unconscious to that of sensual consciousness. Following this model in analysing the rounding of the mnemodramatic prop engaged with by *H* , one starts by making the obvious observation that the cardboard box is not the mainsail of a boat and nor, therefore, was it connoted as a mainsail by *H* at the beginning of his performance. Thus the efficacy of the rounding process rests on the assumption that the cardboard box was initially experienced as a mainsail of a boat on the level of the oneiric non-ego and the conclusion of the process coincided with the transfer of this idea to the plane of consciousness. Frobenius suggests that the observation of the process escapes the test of conscious thought, since it enters

consciousness only after or at the moment of completion. However, in as much as the image of the mainsail had manifested itself in *H*, it must, according to Frobenius, have "become." His theory offers a possible two-stage process in the rounding of the mnemodramatic play object: an initial stage of becoming that takes place at the oneiric level and emerges into a concrete image only at the level of transic consciousness. The *becoming* of the prop takes place in the oneiric realm which marks the performer's journey from the ordinary state of consciousness to the shamanic state and the emergence of the prop into an identifiable symbol marks the commencement of the trance state within the performer. The transformation of the prop within the oneiric realm releases in the performer the transic vision drawn from an autobiographical or archaic memory. In the (*spoken mnemodrama)* performances described by Fersen (among others *H* with his cardboard box and *T* with his biro pen which is transformed into a submarine's periscope), the rounding of the prop releases autobiographical memories that are spontaneously played out in a series of fragmented images combined with broken, usually incoherent, segments of dialogue. A fractured narrative is therefore established which becomes the total focus of the individual performer, until the transic vision is exhausted. By way of contrast, Paola Bertolone's *gestual* mnemodrama was a montage of unrelated images in which the prop was forever on the threshold of *becoming* but ultimately remained an abstract presence both for her and those of us witnessing her performance.

According to Fersen, through the transitional element of the prop the performer of mnemodrama re-discovers a memory which is either experienced on an autobiographical or archetypal level and sometimes

both within the framework of a single performance. It would appear that when a prop is perceived by a performer as rounding into a concrete vision - from cardboard to sail or biro to periscope - the resulting performance is more likely to be derived from an autobiographical memory and contain a discernable narrative. However, where the prop retains its abstract, formless, quality - stick of wood or bolt of chiffon - the performance is more likely to cross the threshold of autobiographical memory and begin to penetrate archetypal images of ritual death and rebirth.

In the introduction to his book, The Construction of Reality in the Child , the noted psychologist Jean Piaget defined the play world of the child as:

> A world composed of permanent objects which constitutes (...) a spatial universe obeying the principle of causality (...) without continuous *annihilations* or *resurrections* (my emphasis). Hence it is a universe both stable and external, relatively distinct from the internal world and one in which the subject places himself as one particular term among all the other terms. [17]

Piaget's use of the terms 'annihilations' and 'resurrections' (death and rebirth) points to a nostalgic identification of the play world of the child with the primal *illud tempus,* within which man participates fully in his existence. A world where the individual may be active and effective rather than overwhelmed and deprived of sensations and above all, where he or she may experience the state of grace of being chosen and confirmed, like the adoxu in her cult rather than bypassed and abandoned. Following Piaget, Erik Erikson proposes that the child in fact experiences a range of symbolic annihilations and resurrections commencing with the baby's fear of the unfamiliar face or object:

> The baby's fear of the unfamiliar is only the first experience of

> alienation, a mixture of anxiety and rage which also persists into all later phases of life and can pervade a widening range of relations: the anxiety of being abandoned by what has become familiar - the terror of the evil eye and the dread of being alone in a universe without a supreme counterplayer. [18]

Erikson nominates the sense of guilt as being the principal source of inner estrangement which finds expression, aggravation or resolution in childhood play. According to his research, the playing child in initiating a scene with a chosen toy can often be seen to play out the question of what range of activity is open to him and what direction will engulf him in guilt. This testing of social boundaries through play finds support in Caillois' concept of *ilinx*(vertigo) which he identifies as one of four principal types of play. Vertigo usually refers to a physical condition brought on by fear of heights or motion. Caillois uses the term to define a type of game that is:

> an attempt to destroy momentarily the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. [19]

Caillois observes that *ilinx* is defined by such physical activities as dance, sports and a child's spontaneous twirling spin:

> Perhaps the vertigo we experience is pleasurable because we know it is temporary and artificial: it gives us the sensation of being endangered, of losing control over our own bodies, without the actual fear of the permanence of such a condition. [20]

Implicit in this definition is the working of the individual's retroconscience, which in turn suggests that *ilinx* is a potential pratic for the trance state experienced in mnemodrama.

The child at play, like the performer of mnemodrama, continually and spontaneously experiments with self-images and images of otherness. Through play the individual experiments with and in a visionary sense prepares for, a hierarchy of ideal and evil roles that, of

necessity, go beyond the cultural framework of daily existence. Erikson's research makes apparent that it is through the inescapability of inner guilt as expressed in play, that the dramatic element first enters ontogeny. In my observation of all three stages of mnemodrama many of the performers appeared to be consumed by guilt, which manifested itself as a physical outpouring of a most profound anguish. It is this constant theme of fateful guilt, with its symbolism of death and rebirth, that links the paidiac play of childhood with the darker vision of the *paidiac play* of the archaic feast in mnemodrama, particularly in its *visionary* manifestation. It is the point where the vertigo of the whirling child rounds into the vision of the possessed archaic figure of the madly whirling Maenad, enspirited with the divine power of Dionysos. I have already indicated that a bridge between the two states is to be found in the retention of the abstract quality of the scenic prop by the performer, who opts to experience its flow through a series of incomplete transformations. Supporting this process is the removal of the traditional psycho-physical safety net associated with childhood play, most clearly observed in Fersen's work in his elimination of the security of the traditional Stanislavskian framework between the stages of *neutral play* and *gestual* mnemodrama. Such abandonment of a controlling structure, outside Fersen himself, exposes the performer at the *gestual* and *visionary* stages to a play frame within which feelings of threat, insecurity, harassment and even abuse may be experienced. It is a shamanic realm wherein contradictory realities co-exist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out and in which the game is to maintain a

balance between them without resolving the tension. Advancing on Caillois' theory, Richard Schechner defines this play frame as *dark play*.

According to Schechner, *dark play* is physically risky and may involve the intentional confusion or concealment of the play frame itself. It may, for example, continue actions from early childhood but only occasionally demand that the performer indulge in conscious make-believe. Schechner's concept is an extension in theatrical terms of Erikson's work, in that he recognises the therapeutic value of *dark play* as an agent through which the performer may play out alternative selves. The existence of contradictory realities within the *dark play* frame means that the frame itself may be so disturbed or disrupted, that the performers themselves are not sure if they are playing or not. From Schechner's perspective their actions become play retroactively:

> the events are what they are, but by telling these events, by re-performing them as narratives, they are cast as play. [21]

Schechner sums up *dark play* as 'playing where losing might mean dying', [22] an image which is central to the techniques and experience of mnemodrama which Fersen has defined as an initiatory death. Since the mid 1970s he has observed that almost every performance of a mnemodrama has exposed the performer to a state of annihilation at the very limit of existential suffering and endurance:

> I am troubled every time by the abyss of existential suffering, of self-reduction that these young people, even the more cheerful ones, carry within themselves. I must say that in this field, this extreme state of denial, this fight against self-denial has always emerged. [23]

The quality of *dark play* implicit in Fersen's statement has little or nothing in common with accepted Occidental play frames but is strikingly similar to common forms of shamanic initiation and ritual

practices found in the Orient and in ancient Greece, many of which are shamanistic in origin.

According to Joan Halifax, the shaman is one who is initiated through death:

> he has experienced the ordeal of entering the realm of death. Those who have nearly died, through an accident or severe illness, or who have suffered a psychological or spiritual trauma of such proportions that they are catapulted into the territory of death. [24]

Among the Siberian Yakut, for example, the shaman is an observer of his own ritual death and dismemberment. Sofron Zateyer, a Yakut shaman, states that as a rule the future shaman "dies" and lies in a yurt for three days without eating and drinking. Formerly the initiate had performed a ritual ceremony three times, during which he experienced the sensation of being cut to pieces. The details of this ritual are corroborated by another shaman, Pytor Ivanov:

> the candidate's limbs are removed and disjointed with an iron hook; the bones are cleaned, the flesh scraped, the body fluids thrown away and the eyes torn from their sockets. [25]

Herbert Blau has speculated that it is the death-rite or funeral ceremony, primal rites of separation, that holds the key to the emergence of theatre from ritual:

> There is no performance without separation or division, though the nature of performance may preserve the memory of a time - the *illud tempus* - when there was no separation. [26]

Blau echoes Eliade's contention that a continuous cycle of death and rebirth symbolises the paidiac play of the *illud tempus*:

> we must note this characteristic of the archaic mentality; the belief that a state cannot be changed without first being annihilated (...) It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this obsession with beginnings (...) For a thing to be well done, it must be done the first time. But the first time, the thing,

> this particular behaviour, did not exist: when in the beginning, this object, this animal, this institution, came into existence, it was as if through the power of the gods, being arose from non-being. [27]

Plutarch attempted to describe the presumed process of dying, using images drawn from his experience of initiation into one of the Mystery Cults of ancient Greece. He speculated that at the moment of death:

> the soul suffers an experience similar to those who celebrate great initiations - wandering astray in the beginning, tiresome walking in circles, some frightening paths in darkness that lead nowhere; then immediately before the end all the terrible things, panic and shivering and sweat and amazement. [28]

What is striking about Plutarch's description is its close analogy to many aspects of shamanic initiation ceremonies, in which initiates are physically isolated from the tribe and are forced to undertake rigorous physical tasks, often at night. His emphasis on the physical condition of initiates 'shivering and sweating in amazement' (outward signs of transic manifestation in possessorial and shamanic ritual), finds a close parallel in the writings of Proclus on the Mysteries of Eleusis:

> they cause sympathy of the souls with the ritual in a way that is unintelligible to us and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic, being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods and experience divine possession. [29]

Within the frame of *dark play* described here, a frame obscured for those initiands who fear soul loss within the presence of the divine, the holy symbols appear to fulfil Winnicott's function as transitional phenomena, the *axis mundi* by which the initiate enters the trance state in which he is possessed by the spirit of Dionysos. The experience of Eleusis, of which Dionysos was the central deity, appears from the ancient texts of Proclus and Plato to have been structured on the

antithesis of shamanic balance, moving between the extremes of terror and happiness, darkness and light.

It was the recognition of echoes of the ancient Greek cult within the structure of Candomble ritual which initially fascinated Fersen:

> The sacred possession produced during the nocturnal rites has all the characteristics of the Dionysian orgy and brings about convulsive motions like those handed down by Greek ceramics of the dancing Maenads. [30]

In his discussions with Giorgio Colli, Fersen had discovered the importance of "object toys" - a mirror, a spinning top, a rhomb and dice - to the initiates of the Mystery of Eleusis, examples of which had been discovered in the frescos in the Villa dei Misteri in Pompei. The evidence suggested that these "toys" were physically manipulated by the initiates during the performance of their rituals. Of more importance to Fersen, however, was the fact that at the heart of the ancient Mystery cult lay the primal concept of transformation through an initiatory death and subsequent rebirth. At the heart of the Mystery was to be found *dithyrambos* - the twice born god - an explicitly shamanistic deity through whose mystical death and rebirth, as Dionysos Lord of the Spirits and Souls of the Dead, the individual was initiated into divine (paidiac) knowledge.

In theatrical terms, the classic example of initiation into paidiac knowledge is provided by Euripides in The Bacchae, where the protagonist Pentheus is possessed by the spirit of Dionysos when he undergoes a series of ritual transformations (reminiscent of the adoxu's initiation in Candomble) which serve to annihilate effectively his social persona. Pentheus suffers the stages of his transformation - he dresses in female attire and assumes at least two animal forms (bull

and mountain lion) - in a state of psycho-physical isolation, during which he is ritually dismembered at the hands of his mother Agave before achieving union with Dionysos. This union is achieved in a state of ecstatic abandonment, which, in its archaic meaning (*ekstasis*) implied that the initiate experienced a controlled *hieromania* (sacred madness) in which the soul, leaving the body, winged its way in magical flight to union with the divine. The soul is isolated from the body at the moment of ecstasy as the individual's social persona becomes saturated with meaning and metaphysical presence. It is this ecstatic vision born from within that Nietzsche [31] proposed as the origin of the theatrical event. According to his theory, the theatrical action is an hallucination of the chorus: the chorus sees in its Dionysian ecstasy the scene and the scene that the spectator sees is the mimetic revelation of the primordial vision of the chorus.

In his research into the Mysteries of Eleusis Walter Burkert established that one of the main characteristics of the cult was *makarismos*, the praise of the blessed status of those who had "seen" the mysteries. The ancient texts insist that the true state of blessedness is in this act of "seeing" what is divine, of being possessed by a visionary experience. Giorgio Colli distinguishes in his writings between two different types of visionary experience in the ancient world: *a)* the vision given by the senses, belonging to material knowledge acquired in a normal state of consciousness and *b)* the "seeing" vision in the mystic, oneiric sense which he relates to the hallucination of the transic state:

> It is not that there is a degradation in reconducting these experiences to the visual limits, because it is not an habitual vision, a sensorial vision, but more an experience of a visionary

> type. The vision is born from within. The Greeks never spoke as we do of having a dream, but always of "seeing" a dream.[32]

When, for example, in The Bacchae , Euripides states that the Maenads were beating on the rocks with their thyrsuses in order to make honey or wine spurt out of them, it means that they really did "see" these liquids and consumed them. It was something real to them within the framework of paidiac play.

Fersen acknowledges the archaic dimension of paidiac play within mnemodrama when he states that the performer encounters a succession of visions which are:

> extremely concrete and real to him who is at that moment living his experiences and who sees, touches and feels things and persons non-existent in reality. [33]

Fersen emphasises the point that the visionary experience in mnemodrama is an essentially private and interior process for the performer and remains beyond the realm of precise interpretation by the witnessing spectator. As I observed earlier, however, this knowledge does not prevent Fersen from trying to pin down through rigorous post-performance questioning, such an interpretation.

In the play of mnemodrama it appears that something is always hidden initially from the experience of the performer and awaits to be rediscovered during the process of the performance. Huizinga notes that the identity of the hero is traditionally hidden in sacred ritual:

> he is incognito either because he is deliberately concealing his identity, or because he does not know it himself, or because he can change shape at will. [34]

The performer of mnemodrama, like the shaman, is on a quest for metaphysical knowledge, a process which involves him in the constant practice of transformation, as if moving from one point of view to

another provides the experiential ground of understanding leading to paidiac knowledge. These viewpoints are generally attained through metaphysical vision. They can be termed initiatory because it is precisely the focus of the initiation to open the mystery by becoming it, to transcend death by dying in life, or at least engaging in visionary dialogues with the dead, to pierce duality by embracing the opposites, to reunite the fractured forms.

In Candomble ritual when the orixa arrives from Africa, it takes the life from the adoxu and throws the body to the ground. Cult members claim that the flesh of the initiate is not dead but that the soul has been taken away from it leaving it in a death-like state. It is believed that the adoxu in this state is like an open door which any deity may enter and accordingly, precautions are taken to ensure that only the proper spirit enters the body and manifests itself. Viewed from the perspective of *Asobase-Kotoba* the play language of Japanese Bushido, the Candomble adoxu is playing at dying in life, just as the performers of mnemodrama experience a succession of momentary "play deaths" when they fall to the floor and assume the foetal position. Adopting Huizinga's model, the adoxu and the performer of mnemodrama share the archaic fate of not knowing their true identities and the core of their respective performances therefore revolves around a stripping away of the masks which hide their true personas.

The archaic journey towards self-discovery involves the excavation of the mythic memory. According to Colli, for example, in the Orphic Cult of the Dead the deity of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, took on a metaphysical value. In the Orphic plates that have been found in tombs in parts of southern Italy and Greece, is written with a recurring

formulae, that the soul of the initiate will, after death, present himself to the Guardians who will invite him to participate in a game. This game of chance involved the initiate in choosing between drinking the waters from one of two fountains, the Fountain of Lethe and the Fountain of Mnemosyne. To drink from the former would result in forgetfulness and eternal separation from the divine, but to drink from the latter was to achieve the divine knowledge of *paidia*. Colli suggests that one of the more important notions concerning paidiac knowledge is that it was considered to be the manifestation of something past:

> (...) there is no historic vision of life, that is, history and the passing of time have no positive value, the positive is behind us, not in front of us and thus it is through memory that we rejoin ourselves to Dionysos. [35]

Fersen notes that the post-mnemodramatic memory, fragmented and confused though it essentially is, has a new dimension to it which he terms 'heroic' because it transcends the preoccupations of social reality and takes on this quality of paidiac knowledge. This might be true in the case of Carlo with his vision of the Madonna and members of the *visionary* performances on video, but otherwise seems to be impossible to verify objectively. From his observations of the *spoken* and early phases of the *gestual* mnemodrama, Colli noted the importance of the cyclicity of the phenomena, suggesting that 'an exceptional but not durable experience is realised in the theatrical event.' [36] In other words the trance state experienced by the performer must be annihilated in order for the individual to once again resume his social persona. Colli goes on to observe that since a continuous repetition of the mnemodramatic experience must eventually render the quality of that experience uniform, its actual duration becomes of secondary

importance. What is important is that the psychic abandonment achieved, however fleetingly, is equal to the experience of paidiac knowledge. The Greeks defined this experience as *bakkos* one of the many names given to Dionysos, but at the same time a term which designated "he who has become Dionysos" who through his experience is himself Dionysos. Thus to "play" the *bakkos* signified the true condition of paidiac knowledge.

There are two realities meeting at a single vanishing point in the paidiac play of mnemodrama, *Death* and *Eros*, the experience of relationship and union in metamorphosis, the thing itself and its double, which prepares the ground for ritual performance. The death instinct is the inversion of the transforming spirit-consciousness. It is only through a symbolic death that the individual lives into further consciousness, a state of the holistic self which is present during sleep as well as waking. Death and Eros are therefore the mutual functions of a single being. They create a metaphysical mathematics in which individuals are not added together nor separated from one another but in which there is the original sense of communitas, the *illud tempus* from which through all the transformations of experience, the individual psyche is never finally estranged. The mnemodramatic play always returns the performer to the *illud tempus* of the dawning of childhood consciousness and, fleetingly, to the threshold of theatrical consciousness at the moment when ritual becomes theatre. *Eros* dwells in the body whilst *Death* moves through it as an invisible presence. Eros lives in the instant of bodying forth and Death lives in the instant of change, the one state rounding into the other. The shaman and the adoxu experience this rounding through ritual

initiation and it is their respective goal to maintain a balance between Death and Eros. It is from this experience of balance, of the dual forces moving within the individual, that the concept of *centering* emerges.

Witnessing the Candomble rituals in 1958, Fersen had been struck by the special costumes worn by the adoxus which symbolised their orixas and were called collectively, *roupagem*. The term denotes apparel but, far from an actual physical manifestation of costume, it connotes a set of guidelines that correspond to expectations about how the adoxu feels and acts during her possession. *Roupagem* is the blueprint for role enactment for each spirit category. From the outside observer's point of view, there does not appear to be too much difference between the *roupagem* of one spirit manifestation and another. As Leach discovered, however, the adoxu's report a perceptual difference knowing when they are possessed by one or the other:

> When my Guerreiro incorporates me I am large, very tall. Everyone else is little and far away. My hands are huge. I am strong. I have on a military uniform with the ensignia on my sleeve. [37]

As soon as the adoxu prepares for the trance state her feet and head are bared to allow contact with the earth and air, which are believed to contain the force and presence of the orixas. Clothing is loosened as the adoxu enters her trance and her hands are placed crossed over one another on the small of her back. Costume manipulation takes place during the performance without interrupting its flow as everything is communicated through recognisable visual symbols. The mnemodrama, lacking the *roupagem* that arises from a sound mythopoeic structure is therefore an essentially *de-centred* experience

in which the performer attempts to experience fleetingly the *re-centring* of paidiac knowledge.

Through her performances of the *neutral play with prop*, Cynthia had managed over a number of weeks to experience momentarily a psycho-physical re-centring, which enabled her to commit herself emotionally to her Graham-based dance work for the first time. The two stages of the mnemodrama may therefore entail an initial period of de-centring followed by the magical flight towards the discovery of the rebirth of the vertical memory which is experienced as re-centring. The research of Reichel-Dolmatoff attests to the importance in primal societies of finding the centre :

> The centre (in Tinkano myth and ritual) is associated with the female principle and is also the spot where an axis mundi can be placed, a connecting link between this earth and other cosmic levels that may lie above or below it. The object itself - a staff, a house beam, a tree, a vine serving as a ladder - then becomes a means of communication. [38]

In Paola's *gestual* mnemodrama the stick was symbolically transformed into the shamanic *axis mundi* along which she journeyed in a transic state towards a fleeting encounter with her ancestral or mythic memory, thereby experiencing the potential of her re-centred self. The possession by the other of the re-centred self is revealed through the increasingly fluid patterns of the ludic dance between prop and performer. Part of the verification of the mnemodramatic trance is this fundamental change in proprioceptive awareness (see chapter six), experienced as a bodily lightness by Paola and Cynthia and attested to by Fersen in his observation of the mnemodrama by the German performer *Y.* Fersen has put forward the theory that it is this physical sensation of lightness that may be the origin of the shaman's belief in

his capacity to fly. That the image of centring is archetypal is supported by M.C. Richards:

> when we act out of an inner unity, when all of our selves is present in what we do, then we can be said to be "on centre." [39]

The centring experience is an experience of the archetypal soul in depth rather than in partition and as such it manifests a number of Artaud's concepts for the re-actualisation of an archaic theatre of therapy.

In terms of play theory Artaud's "essential drama" may be defined in Winnicott's model of the "desultory formless functioning" of the individual in search of his ideal self. The emergence of a ludic structure from the pure state of paidia results, as Frobenius indicates, in an eruption of emotion and it is to this eruption that Artaud assigns the epithet *cruelty*. Of necessity, then, cruelty is the residue of *becoming*, or in Erikson's terms, the original manifestation of guilt within man. Only by viewing cruelty within this framework of *dark play* do we get close to understanding the following statements:

> It is cruelty that cements matter together, cruelty that molds the features of the created world (...) effort is a cruelty, existence through effort is a cruelty (...)
> everything that acts is a cruelty. [40]

The power of Artaud's theatre was to be redirective, turning petty sensuality and egotism into a primary metaphysical participation. Ideas of being and becoming were to infuse the spectator with catharsis after a transforming theatrical experience. His theatre existed for the therapeutic task of unleashing the possibilities inherent both in its own materials and within the soul of the spectator, who beheld and interacted with those materials. It was cruel and shocking in order to awaken centres of perception within the spectator, to reveal the cosmic interplay of Death and Eros:

> when we speak the word "life" it must be understood that we are not referring to life as we know it from its externalities, but to that fragile, unresting centre which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our times, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signalling through the flames. [41]

Artaud invested considerable metaphysical importance in every sound and gesture in his theatre. For him gesture was the transitional phenomena which 'narrowly divides us from chaos.' [42] In anthropological terms, Artaud's gesture might be viewed as the signalling of the olonized individual, struggling to recover his soul from the darkness of psychic oblivion. The essence of Artaud's theatre, therefore, was an attempt to rediscover a paidiac state half-way between gesture and thought, through which the contemporary performer could re-experience the therapeutic value implicit in the *dark play* of the Mystery cults:

> in the same way as our dreams react on us and reality reacts on our dreams, so we believe ourselves able to associate mental pictures with dreams (...) [43]

Dreams are the private myths of the performer which, in the rounding of a performance, are transformed into the public dream of the spectator. The performer of mnemodrama emerging from the experience 'like a heavy sleeper slowly waking from a beautiful dream' [44], engages in the paidiac play of constructing a private mythopoeic existence, a form of self-shamanising which relates Fersen's work directly to the theatrical games of psychodrama.

According to Joseph Campbell, the enactment of dreams is the point of origin for not only myth and drama but also psychotherapy. Within shamanic cultures the dream is a journey of the soul back to the *illud tempus*. The process of dreaming expands consciousness through the

transcendence of the time and space realities of conscious thought. Transpersonal modes of being and the life of the soul are revealed through the oneiric state. I have already indicated that within the archaic cosmos, the soul is considered to be the double of the individual and the dream may therefore be considered as the moment of becoming of this double, this image of the soul. The psychoanalyst Gesa Roheim believes that there is a universal basic dream which he locates within the shamanic symbolism of the magical flight into the sky or descent into the underworld. Shaun McNiff, following Roheim, maintains that in all cultures the healing process is achieved through enactment:

> dreams, images and fantasies are acted out and revealed so that the client and the shaman may begin to understand the nature of the problem. [45]

It is only through dramamtic action, suggests McNiff, that the individual can physically confront memories, dreams and imaginary events and begin to reintegrate them into his life. The power of ritual play lies, therefore, in engaging disassociated feelings through emotional contact. The performer of mnemodrama, like her ritual counterpart the adoxu, acts out and becomes the double image of her dream or vision, effectively playing with the different and sometimes conflicting aspects of her personality. Through the process of dealing with these tensions, which are irresolvable within the framework of shamanistic balance, the performer attempts to achieve an experiential integration, a centring of the self.

Through his years of experimenting, Fersen has discovered that the mnemodrama as a "drama of memory" is often charged with an

emotionality that individual performers deem to be superior to the original autobiographical experience to which the performance refers:

> The intensity from which it draws appears to be multiplied: similar in this to the night-time dream which knows emotional powers without comparison with the however intense daytime events that it symbolises. And I would be inclined to attribute to this transfiguring attitude - and thus to the theatrical life - the passion's paroxysm which pushes the great protagonists of dramaturgy beyond any naturalistic reference. [46]

At the origins of theatre, as Nietzsche perceived it, stood the image of the masked performer who transported the spectator beyond social reality into a world where, according to Huizinga:

> something other than daylight reigns; it carries us back to the world of the savage, the child and the poet, which is the world of play. [47]

The Greek actor was literally masked in order to hide his social reality and allow himself to be transformed into another persona, which he did not so much represent in the early history of the theatre, as incarnate and actualise. Initially, therefore, the theatre continued to exist in a paidiac state of play but the development of the Dionysian Festivals functioned to transform the psychic and emotional energies that had produced the original cult of Dionysos into an institutionalised ludus. The eventual arrival of the tragic poets served to objectify the myth through mimesis. This shift in perspective from the paidiac (ecstatic) to the ludic (cathartic) served to distance the spectator emotionally from the event, thereby creating a permanent gulf between ritual and theatre.

Colli rejects the Aristotelian concept of the cathartic nature of tragedy, emphasising instead that the release of the personality into the subjunctive state of awareness occurs precisely because the performer

experiences a fleeting moment of Dionysian paidia through ecstasy. This argument appears to be exclusively based on his observations of Fersen's experiments, which lead him to conclude that :

> this depth can be found in each one of us and it is from there that the theatre is born. [48]

In turn Colli's observations serve to reinforce Fersen's own position regarding his work, which he sees as stopping on the threshold of interpretation. The mnemodrama is mimetic only in the sense that a performer reveals a vision of his profound self, the "other" of his known social persona, in a performance distinguished by its solitary suffering. No attempt is made either by Fersen or the performer to establish a relationship, conflictual or otherwise, with a partner. The props manipulated in performance are not power objects in the shamanic sense of the drum , rattle or thyrsus, but rather symbolise a contemporary aspiration to profane paidiac power. In the context of the performance, however, the prop may sometimes undergo a symbolic rounding which fleetingly manifests potential visionary meanings. The performer projects meaning onto the prop having first established its autonomy as a transitional phenomena, playing with it as if it had power, or as if the meaning derived from it was in some sense powerful. Subsequently the meaning of the prop may reflexively engage the performer in the guise of a visionary power to be reckoned with. The prop in the mnemodrama is therefore an amplifier of visions rather than their originator, as may be noted from the following description given to Fersen by Alfonso M. Di Nola of a young Muslim performer manipulating a piece of cloth which he slowly transforms into a prayer shawl:

> within the anguish experienced by one of your young actors there evidently was a moment of gratification, of happiness, represented by a gestural, clearly gestural, attempt to go back to childhood (...) at the moment of maximum concentration on what you call the prop (he) entered a state of profound sorrow because he was sensing a disturbing personal situation, a sad story of his own, on the other side of the prop. However, he was at the same time recovering his lost paradise, childhood, and was communicating this to the others by means of a theatrical gesture of his own, that is to say the muslim prayer he was already practising in childhood. [49]

Di Nola's statement clearly links the anguish of the performer to that experienced by the initiate in the archaic feast and, at a secondary level, to the paidiac state of childhood.

At the heart of the mnemodrama then stands the figure consumed with existential suffering whose anguish Fersen likens to the great protagonists of dramaturgy and whose performance Colli equates with the essential (therapeutic) origin of tragedy as envisioned by Nietzsche. The ancient continuities of tragedy offer an alternative to medical notions of psychopathology in explaining human misfortune and suffering. Tragedy may be seen as a superior mode of understanding because it is based on shamanistic principles of action, struggle and intervention. Rather than adopting the passivity and dependence of medical theories of behaviour, the tragic protagonist confronts the eternal tensions between opposites in a never ending search for, or dream of, fulfilment. As soon as the tragic tension is lost, life loses its dynamic quality and what is revealed is the kind of passivity and extinction of vitality that Fersen sees as symptomatic of contemporary emotional disorders. Tragedy realises that there will never be perfection in the human realm and there will always be struggle as the

individual grows toward an understanding of the self and its inevitable conflicts.

The *dark play* of mnemodrama is the assumption of the role of *bakkos*, a paidiac state of play that is, at root, shamanisitc play. According to Alfonso M. Di Nola, Fersen has created a contemporary theatrum mundi, a cosmogenic and a psychotherapy that Di Nola considers to be 'salvifying' and which:

> invites us to think about ourselves and our destiny. Thus we come back to a theatre of existence, as was that of the origins. [50]

It is this play frame "rite - theatre" which Ronald Grimes has defined as *parashamanism*, a therapeutic play from the perspective of traditional forms of shamanism that embraces many of the techniques of psychodrama and the theatrical experiments of Grotowski, Goodman and Brian Bates, among others. In the next chapter I will consider Fersen's work as an example of parashamanistic performance therapy.

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Chapter Five

MNEMODRAMA AS A PARASHAMANIC TECHNIQUE

Fersen has described mnemodrama as ' a shamanic experience of death and rebirth' [1] but much of what distinguishes the role of the shaman in traditional cultures - the initiatory call, stories of ascent and descent to other worlds, skills in ventriloquism, mastery of spirit languages and psychotropic plants, magical divination and mediumistic communication - is missing from his technique. In speaking with him and reading his writings, one does not receive the impression that his experiments were conducted in search of a re-actualisation of the shamanic condition but rather that his investigation into the genetic code of the ritual performer slowly revealed the figure of the shaman. In his practical experiments he found himself traversing the same technical route as the shaman once he began to focus the work on the inducement of trance states but his goal has never been to provide anything approaching a training in shamanistic therapy in the manner of such neo-shamanists as Michael Harner and Felicitas Goodman. Fersen's perspective has always been essentially paidiac and his use of shamanistic techniques highly selective, thereby maintaining an historical and cultural distance from his primary source. It is the encapsulation of shamanism within a play frame which leads me to include Fersen's work within the category of *parashamanism*, a performance model devised by the anthropologist Ronald Grimes. Grimes developed his model in order to describe the goals and working methods of experimental theatre workshops with

which he had had personal contact in the early '70s, including the Actor's Lab of Toronto and the paratheatrical work of Jerzy Grotowski:

> Parashamanism is not a "living" tradition in the sense that shamanism was in hunting cultures; it is not passed from master to student, nor is it part of a tradition of spontaneous vision. It is a textually dependent tradition. Each cycle of learning and teaching is mediated through the book, and the book is the teacher, not merely a supplement to teaching. Parashamans are not taught by shamans but by books about shamans. [2]

In traditional cultures, the initiate shaman hunted in the wilderness for animals and birds who were deemed to have the power to become tutelary spirits, aiding him in his quest for knowledge. In the theatre laboratories of Fersen and Grotowski the performers hunt *anima*, the animating surge of the self that is simultaneously within the individual and flows through and around him. Describing the ethos of the hunt this way using Gestalt terminology suggests both the continuity and difference between shamanism and parashamanism. Shamanic *animism* finds the world already alive, whereas parashamanism arises at a specific historical moment when the individual's psycho-physical composition has become mechanisitc, reflecting a secularised and industrialised environment. The shaman's world view finds *anima* unavoidable; it is an external presence desperate to become internalised, to flow through and into the individual. The performers in Fersen's laboratory can barely locate *anima* at all and so things must be enspirited by doing the work, by engaging in the hunt for paidiac knowledge.

Grimes' emphasis on the textual dependency of parashamanic techniques is initially problematic with reference to Fersen's work. It is certainly the case, as I outlined in the first chapter, that Fersen was

"textually dependent" in terms of his own mythopoeic development, but that stage in fact precedes his work in the theatre. It was his own perceived lack of cultural identity which made him responsive to the call for mythopoeic regeneration which he found in the writings of Nietzsche and Levy-Bruhl, in both of whom the shamanistic spirit is implicit. His subsequent reading of Shirokogoroff's anthropological accounts of Siberian shamanism provided him with a text on methodology and supported the practical model he had discovered in his observation of Candomble ritual, but Shirokogoroff did not provide the inspiration for the experiments in mnemodrama. The initial stimulus for Fersen's experiments was the writings of Stanislavski which, with their exploration of techniques that enable the performer to work on himself, contain the essence of parashamanism.

The writings of Stanislavski provided the initial source of inspiration for many theatrical practitioners who have entered the realm of parashamanic experiment over the past three decades, amongst whom must be included Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Eugenio Barba, Julian Beck, Joseph Chaikin and Jerzy Grotowski. What is of interest in the case of Grotowski is that the other textual source for his paratheatrical work has been the writings of Carlos Castaneda, whose texts purport to be an account of his training and initiation as a shaman under the personal instruction of a Yaqui Indian whom he calls Don Juan. Grotowski's reading of Castaneda's early writings, together with a meeting with him in Mexico in 1976, marked the transition from the *poor theatre* (public) phase of his theatre work to the parashamanic emphasis of the (private) Theatre of Sources project.

Before outlining the main points of contact between Castaneda's writings and Grotowski's practical experimentation, clarification is necessary on a number of interesting parallels between these writings and those of Stanislavski. Both writers employ the device of a fictive narrative in order to convey essential truths that contain the essence of a practical methodology which the reader can implement. The concept of role play and, through it, the acquisition of self knowledge, constitutes both the spine of the two authorial visions and the major narrative structure. Stanislavski plays the roles of the initiate performer and the man of (theatrical) knowledge, the shaman-like figure of the director Tortsov whilst Castaneda assumes the roles of the initiate shaman and the mystical Don Juan. These dual roles of teacher and pupil are played out by both authors in the form of a Socratic dialogue in which the maieutic technique of *perezhivanie* is central. I am suggesting that the style and content of Stanislavski's work provides a natural foundation for approaching the writings of Castaneda; that in theatrical terms Castaneda provides the practical application of the shamanistic implications buried in Stanislavski. The writings of Castaneda provide the rounding point for the performer from Stanislavski's concept of training as work on oneself to the shamanistic prerogative of work as oneself.

In the year in which Grotowski met Castaneda, Fersen commenced his experiments in *visionary* mnemodrama, the third and what was to prove to be the final stage of his technique. Whilst Fersen is obviously aware of Castaneda's writings through discussions with members of his company, there is no evidence to suggest that he has read any of the works himself. However, Fersen and Castaneda do

appear to share clearly discernible parallel lines of investigation, a point that has been noted by those company members who have read Castaneda and subsequently turned to Teatro, Dopo for practical guidance and thereafter to the laboratory of Fersen himself. What Castaneda reports he experienced in the mountains of Mexico, Fersen attempts to simulate in a studio in Rome. The interesting conundrum that results from this is whether Fersen has deliberately attempted to distance himself from the influence of Castaneda by ignoring his writings, only to become influenced via the secondary source of his company members who have read the works.

Two years prior to his meeting with Castaneda, Grotowski had written to Jan Soyta, director of the Wroclaw office of the Department of Culture, outlining the future development of his laboratory work. Subsequently published in an edition of Teatr, Grotowski's document outlines detailed plans for the creation of what he describes as a Laboratory of Professional Therapy, designed for performers seeking to remove blocks to their creativity, together with a laboratory with a remit to set up collaborative workshops with psychotherapists and their patients in Wroclaw. It is tempting to see the influence of Fersen in Grotowski's desire to create his laboratory, given that he had witnessed the early stages in the development of mnemodrama and had met Fersen again at the 1974 Spoletto Festival, a few months before the publication of his plans. Whatever the influence of Fersen on his thinking, that of Castaneda's writings was palpable in his Theatre of Sources project that commenced in 1976 and included Ronald Grimes amongst its invited participants. It appears that Fersen was invited to

participate but refused, once again prefering to distance his work from Grotowski's.

The Theatre of Sources project, according to Grimes' account, focussed on the individual meeting the other within and of himself, rather than making contact with other people:

> In the Theatre of Sources one is "alone with others". Even though people work alongside one another in it, they are in solitude. [3]

Located for much of the time in remote forest areas on the outskirts of Wroclaw and involving such activities as night-long ritual hunting games, the Theatre of Sources owed its emphasis on individual solitude directly to the writings of Castaneda. Throughout the first four books Don Juan emphasises the importance of the solitude of wilderness regions because it is in the wilderness of solitude that shamans come to experience their wild or animal selves. This estrangement from their previous human dimension enables the shaman to gain a perspective on life which opens up the mystery dimension of *no-form*. Castaneda describes this dimension as the *nagual,* defining it as that part of the individual persona for which there are no adequate words and contrasting it with the familiar world of the *tonal*:

> we sense from the moment we are born, that there are two parts to us. At the time of birth and for a while after, we are all "nagual." We sense, then, that in order to function we need a counterpart to what we have. The "tonal" is missing and that gives us, from the very beginning, a feeling of incompleteness. Then the "tonal" starts to develop and it becomes utterly important to our functioning, so important that it opaques the shine of the "nagual", it overwhelms it. [4]

Castaneda provides an individual perspective on an essentially Jungian concept of *anima* with his emphasis on the duality of the individual, that becomes operative at the moment of birth. According to his model, the *tonal* is symbolic of the social self (his equivalent of Fersen's *horizontal* self), whereas the *nagual* represents the paidiac quality of the *illud tempus*, a state briefly experienced as an encounter with the *vertical* persona in Fersen's work. The *tonal* and the *nagual* are the two extremes of experience between which the shaman maintains a balance without resolving the tension. In order for an individual to encounter the *nagual*, according to Castaneda, a condition of psycho-physical isolation must prevail. Thus in his writings, Castaneda describes how he is led by Don Juan across the desert chaparral and into the mountains of Mexico. The participants in Grotowski's project, however, embrace the solitude of a Polish forest, engaging in the meta-hunt for the other inside the self, in an attempt to deobjectify their world:

> (...) a hunt for a way of moving that allows earth, sky, foliage, animal and "other" to appear as subjects. The self that is hunted is not just my own private, ego-constituted self, but a self-hood that surrounds me. [5]

What happens in the isolation of the mountains and the forest also takes place in a more limited aspect in Fersen's studio, where the mnemodrama begins with the performer isolated in darkness. It is this constant search for an original, precultural sense of beginning which connotes parashamanic ritual.

In The Art of the Beginner written during the period of the Theatre of Sources project, Grotowski sketches an understanding of the process of reaching below what he describes as the 'technique of

sources'[6] - for example, spiritual sources such as Yoga, Sufi whirling or shamanic healing - to the 'sources of the technique of sources.'[7] For Grotowski as for Fersen this source of beginning is present here and now, not hidden away in some primitive culture. It is no lost golden age, but represents a contemporary capacity for a perpetual sense of discovery. Like Fersen, Grotowski is not interested in imitating or syncretising archaic disciplines, but in finding simple actions to carry on the work:

> To be in the beginning is an experience. Often we ask ourselves what is it like to be a child ? It is not at all the cruelty of the child which is important, nor its egoism. What really touches us in the child is that it lives in the beginning. That which he experiences, is always for the first time (...) To be in the beginning is to allow ourselves to be really in what one perceives and in what one discovers. [8]

Grotowski's concept of beginning embraces the paidiac states of play both from the perspective of the child and that of the initiate shaman, for whom all future ritual performances will constitute a re-actualisation of the original moment of his calling. In A Separate Reality, Castaneda lays stress on the importance of the shaman's experiential knowledge:

> You should know by now that a man of knowledge lives by acting, not by thinking about acting, nor by thinking about what he will think when he has finished acting [9]

and later in the same book he observes:

> a man of knowledge chooses any act and acts it out as if it matters to him. [10]

In Grotowskian terminology, Castaneda's writings offer a parashamanistic perspective on the *via negativa*, the stripping away of the performer's conscious technique as a prelude to an authentic act of

self-revelation; an act which is congruent not with its intellection but with oblivion. For the state of *nagual* is itself a duality, present at the moment of birth and again at the instant of death. The performer, for Castaneda, is a man of action, a warrior, who like Bergman's Knight in his film The Seventh Seal is aware that Death is his constant companion:

> Most people move from act to act without any struggle or thought - the only thing that is real is the being in you that is going to die. To arrive at that being is the not-doing of the self. [11]

Following the Theatre of Sources project, Grotowski adopted Castaneda's concept of the performer as a warrior for his definition of the ideal performer:

> Performer, with a capital letter, is a man of action. He is not a man who plays another. He is a dancer, a priest, a warrior: he is outside aesthetic genres. [12]

This concept is further illuminated by Grotowski through the duality of his (Jungian) *I - I* theory [13] which represents his interpretation of Castaneda's *Tonal-nagual* concept. According to Grotowski, the *I - I* is a process of transformation within the persona of the same being, which is achieved through rigorous, detailed performance. Without the superficial transformation which he attributes to the skill of improvisation, Grotowski indicates that the Performer develops into an *organism-channel* through which he achieves a passive receptivity and an active presence. The *I - I* theory is a development in parashamanic terms of Grotowski's earlier idea of the "body of essence"[14] which he developed during the *poor theatre* phase of his work. The "body of essence" described the theatrical context in which matter and spirit no longer fought each other and the body of the

performer submitted to, or was possessed by, the total control of the spirit. In Fersen's terms Grotowski's performer entered the oneiric state of *non-ego*, Castaneda's "not-doing" of the self. In the *I - I* theory the first *I* represents the body of the performer (the *tonal/horizontal)*, whilst the second *I* is abstract (the *nagual/vertical)*. It is present with Performer as a double not as a dichotomy and represents Grotowski's version of the mirror image of the protagonist found in the classical phase of psychodrama (see chapter six). Grotowski refers to this second *I* as a quasi-virtual presence 'like an immobile look, a silent presence, like the sun which illuminates all things.' [15]

Grotowski's Performer-as-warrior finds a parallel in Fersen's claim that the performer of mnemodrama is a contemporary personification of the mythical hero. In Fersen's work the *horizontal* represents the social reality of the performer, doubled by the *vertical* of the performer's quasi-virtual vision, which is brought into consciousness through the manipulation of the prop. At the *gestual* and *visionary* stages of mnemodrama, the abstract nature of the prop itself connotes a quasi-virtual presence which, as the performer Paola Bertolone indicated, may not be transformed into a concrete vision but remains on the threshold of the *vertical*.

Training in visionary perception links the process explored by Fersen in his laboratory and Castaneda in his writings. Don Juan teaches his initiate to "see" from the perspective of a shamanic state of consciousness, by making a clear distinction between "looking" and "seeing" as modes of perception. [16] "Looking" connotes the ordinary *(tonal)* way in which the individual is accustomed to viewing the world; whilst "seeing" *(nagual)* entails a very complex process by virtue

of which a man of knowledge perceives the essence of the things of the world. Following Castaneda, the neo-shamanist Michael Harner defines "seeing" as a *shamanic state of consciousness,* which involves not only a transic state of awareness but also a learned awareness of shamanistic techniques and perspectives while in such an altered state:

> During his great adventure in the SSC, the shaman maintains conscious control over the direction of his travels, but does not know what he will discover. [17]

The performers of *gestual* and *visionary* mnemodramas fleetingly manifest a visionary state when they are no longer bound to the biographies of their *horizontal* state of reality:

> Then they come to very archaic states in which the actor lives in a traumatic way his pre-natal state and his birth, which is something terrible - crying inside his mother. It is extremely moving. But I have actors who return to a bestial stage. [18]

What clearly separates the experience of the mnemodramatic vision from the traditional framework of the *shamanic state of consciousness,* is that the performer of mnemodrama exists in a chaotic state of abandonment, displaying only a minimum of control over the direction of the performance and the content of the ensuing visions. It is, however, a state of chaos with positive value because it connotes the very beginning of ritual activity itself.

According to Grimes, a crucial element in ritual performance is the diffusion of attention, intention and action on the part of the performer. He suggests that such moments of repetition are not the occasion for boredom or preoccupation, which he considers to be typical responses of the 'westernised, urbanised and theatricalised sensibility,' [19] but are necessary conditions for receiving a gesture from

within the visionary framework, which is the most fruitful way ritual symbols emerge from their sources. In terms of the mnemodrama, it is the cessation of action, the falling to the floor of the performer and her assumption of the foetal position, which marks the emergence of a clearly identifiable symbol rather than the initiation and sustaining of all prior and subsequent actions. If we break the sequence down into its constituent acts, then the moment of falling symbolises the "death" of a specific visionary state; whilst the assumption of the foetal position represents the liminal point between this death and the rebirth of an alternative persona. The performer is momentarily suspended between the two states in a moment of "not-doing." For Castaneda's Don Juan "seeing" is never a matter for the eyes alone, but in order for the initiate to immerse himself fully in the experience of the *nagual* he must first 'stop the world and dream real dreams.' [20] The assumption of the foetal position in the mnemodrama symbolises the onset of the oneiric state in the performer, the moment when the vision is in the process of transition from the deep imagery of the unconscious to conscious thought and subsequent symbolic enactment. The assumption of the foetal position in the mnemodrama, therefore, symbolises simultaneously Castaneda's state of *nagual* (beginning and end) and Grotowski's *via negativa*, the oblivion of technique prior to an act of self-revelation. In his Theatre of Sources project Grotowski placed great emphasis on the performers keeping their eyes open yet unfocussed:

> Diffuse attention was always paid to vistas provided by one's posture, whether standing, prone or upside down. The movements orientated us to the horizon surrounding us, to the sky and the earth. Vision was always to be outward, mobile and flowing - not

introverted, static or choppy. [21]

The Grotowskian vision is seemingly extroverted and continually in action, although the assumption of specific techniques is obviously discouraged along with any inclination towards stasis and dreaming. Above all, it is a guided experience for the performers involved.

In his research into the shamanic vision, the psychologist Richard Noll proposed that some form of "imaginal response training" or stimulus training was an essential aspect of shamanic initiation. [22] Both behavioural and pictorial elements (colour and form) were, according to Noll, systematically reinforced by the master shamans as the initiate progressively increased the vividness of his mental imagery through training. Noll's theory was supported by Reichel-Dolmatoff's field research amongst the Tukano Indians and the bio-informational theory of emotional imagery advanced by fellow psychologist P.J. Lang.

In 1979 Lang devised an operant-conditioning based mental imagery enhancement training programme, in which performers were presented with sample scripts containing response propositions and were asked to imagine the scenes suggested by the text. Following each imagining, Lang asked them to report what they had actually imagined. He subsequently reacted to these descriptions by systematically reinforcing all statements that indicated that the performer consciously experienced himself behaving during his vision. Typical reinforced responses were: 'My muscles were tense', 'I felt myself running', 'My heart was racing' and 'I was gasping for breath.' [23] Stimulus description was consistently ignored and discouraged by Lang. Over a number of experiments, the performers progressively increased reports

of responding in their visions and in the reported vividness of an imagined behavioural experience. Lang followed his initial experiment with a second training programme based on the counter - hypothesis that vivid visionary states are characterised by the number, clarity and specificity of stimulus elements conjured in the vision. In this mind's eye training, performers were reinforced for reports of the colour, form and pictorial vividness of phenomena apprehended in the vision. Lang pressed for more and more detailed content, while he ignored and actively suppressed any reports of individual behaviour in the scenes. He discovered that, at the conclusion of the experiment, these performers also progressed under training and soon came to report rich tapestries of sense impression during visionary experiences. Lang concluded that his results:

> suggest that response training has the effect of causing average subjects to respond to imagery instructions in a way which is similar to that of subjects who have been selected through questionnaire or perceptual recall tests, for their inherent ability. [24]

To a degree Lang's findings are borne out in the writings of Castaneda who in every sense presents himself to Don Juan as an "average subject", lacking any recognisable powers or experience of visionary sickness which might have determined his calling as an initiate shaman in a traditional culture. His training in visionary perception by the Mexican shaman bears a striking resemblance to that recorded by Reichel-Dolmatoff in his observation of a Tukano shaman training his initiate to search for his power object whilst in a state of trance:

> For nights on end the men will sit and chant, asking thunder to favour them with his power. Until, in their

> trance they will see a tree, a piece of wood, or a stone and will suddenly know: this is mine, this is what thunder sent me ! The drugged apprentice will mumble and groan in his trance. Close by the Paye is sitting. " What do you see ? Tell me what do you see ?" he will ask insistently, and the apprentice will then find the words to describe his visions. "There is the bend in the river - a black rock - I can hear the water rushing" - "Go on, go on!" the Paye will insist, his ear close to the other's mouth. "There are birds, red birds, sitting on the lower branches of the tree -." "Are they sitting on your left or on your right ?" the Paye will ask. And so they continue, haltingly, at times in deep silence, until the older man knows what kind of images and voices his pupil is perceiving and can now begin to interpret for him. [25]

What is immediately striking about Reichel-Dolmatoff's account is the Paye's use of maieutics in the form of Socratic dialogue in what might be described as an archaic parallel of the Tortsov/Paul dialogues in the writings of Stanislavski. I suggested in an earlier chapter that the use of this device by Stanislavski illustrated the pre-expressive state of the performer; the moment when he dreams the persona of the character he is about to play into existence prior to realising him as a physical presence in rehearsal. The state of the performer is thus one of mental alertness but physical passivity, as was the case in Lang's experiments and the Tukano initiate shaman. It is the equivalent of the assumption of the foetal position by the performer of mnemodrama and represents one aspect of the master/initiate relationship in parashamanic ritual.

The psychologist Brian Bates, in his experiments in transic flight with students at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, assumed a working method which, sans hallucinogens, was very close to that employed by the Tukano shaman. Working one on one, Bates required his performer to lie on the floor on his back (the starting point

for the majority of *gestual* mnemodramas) and concentrate on his breathing, whilst Bates sat as close as possible in order to be able to whisper in his ear:

> The actor lay absolutely still, except for his eyes which moved about under the lids. "Take your time" I instructed. I knew that if he tried too quickly and failed, he would lose confidence and the project would fail (...) "I'm out" he interrupted in a strange eerily croaking voice. "I'm on the floor." He was speaking with some difficulty. "You're floating along the floor ?" He nodded very slightly. "Yes", he whispered. [26]

It should be noted that Bates' performer achieves a state of light trance through a sustained focus on his breathing patterns and that his eyes are closed throughout, in a simulation of the traditional shaman's performances which are carried out in the dark in order to block out the noise produced by the external stimuli of visual perception.

Bates' performer embarked upon a visionary journey through the environs of RADA and its immediate surroundings, describing in detail the shape and colour of all that he saw in response to Bates' gentle prompting. This journey performed the function of providing the performer with the parashamanic version of a visionary mnemonic, a cognitive map of the culturally relevant materials found in his *tonal/horizontal* existence. In traditional cultures, each individual journey embarked upon by the shaman serves as a collective rehearsal of cultural memories and the retention of mythological beliefs. Like the Tukano initiate, Bates' performer has to struggle in order to clarify his vision and the structure of his visionary mnemonic is arrived at through the dialogue between Bates and himself. In a performance of mnemodrama, by way of contrast, it is the prop which acts as the mnemonic object and which has the power to

rekindle in the memory of the performer the autobiographical experiences to which he or she relates it or, at a deeper level, enables him or her to experience visions from the mythical dimension of the persona. The presence of the object necessitates the bringing into an active state of the contents of the mnemodramatic vision. Incapable of the rational dialogue exchanged between Bates and his performer, the Tukano shaman and his pupil, or Castaneda and Don Juan, the performer of mnemodrama effectively dances her vision in a somatic dialogue with a chosen prop. Eschewing the maieutics of the Socratic dialogue, Fersen's technique alludes to the two experiments conducted by Lang but forbids his performers any recourse to psychological interpretations of their acts. Unlike Lang and Bates, he only enters into a dialogue with his performers once they have completed their visionary flight and are once again grounded in a state of physical collapse. Fersen's dialogue in symbol in fact might be taken to represent the return of his performers to the world of the horizontal self.

One of the essential features that link parashamanic ritual to traditional forms of shamanism is the necessity of isolating the individual in order that training in vision enhancement might be successful. As previously noted, Bates worked on an individual basis with his performer in the RADA experiment, Castaneda is alone with Don Juan and although both Fersen's and Grotowski's participants are organised into groups, the individual is essentially isolated within them. This emphasis on personal solitude distinguishes the experiments of Antero Alli in ritual theatre, which he has been conducting in Boulder, Colorado since 1976. Alli defines his work as

Ritual Theatre because it combines elements from both ritual and theatre, as if it were rooted in the former and branching out into the latter. In common with the examples of parashamanic models already cited, Alli's *Ritual Theatre* is primarily a paratheatrical medium in which the goal is the acquisition of self-knowledge. He acknowledges that his work is of therapeutic benefit to the participants involved but, in an interesting echo of Fersen's stated position, firmly rejects any connection between it and classical models of psychodrama, gestalt and encounter groups.

Invoking the oneiric state of *nagual* which he terms *no-form*, Alli creates rituals of initiation that combine strenuous physical exercise with the performer's withdrawal of energy, attention and identification with the immediate environment:

> When a group meets to work in this medium, they prepare alone for as much as two hours before interacting. This is a device for cultivating the creative tension and individual integrity required to ignite spontaneous offering relatively unbiased by social obligations and insecurities. [27]

Many of Alli's physical exercises are based directly on those created by Grotowski for his Polish Theatre Laboratory between 1960 and 1966 and these are interspersed with ritual sanctifications of the performance space and the identification of psychic "power points" in the surrounding locality. A typical Ritual Theatre workshop takes place in the open and commences with the selection of an isolated setting for the ritual by Alli, which is then sanctified in a manner reminiscent of the ritual performances created by Felicitas Goodman. Individual performers then locate their own power spots and construct a circle

around them, within which they prepare for what Alli describes as the first true initiation through the experience of *no-form*:

> no ritual comes alive without infusing the spark of originating intelligence into its intent (...)
> No-form is the crux of ritual. To the degree intimacy with void becomes a value is the extent that the rituals themselves carry life, form and substance. [28]

The actual initiation sequence commences with a period of silent meditation followed by a rigorous physical workout (spinal flex, stretch and sweat) that lasts between forty minutes and one hour. The performer then embarks on a solitary run around the entire ritual area, during which time he focuses attention on the visions that have come to him during the period of meditation and workout. Returning to his own circle, the performer selects and executes a polarity and follows this with another transitory run during which he expands his focus of attention to include the other members of the group. The ritual concludes with a group circle in which the company describe their visionary experiences, which are duly noted by Alli.

In common with the majority of parashamanic technique, Alli physically isolates the performer in order that he may experience a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field. The period of meditation that initiates the exploration of *no-form* marks the psychological stage of the centring process, which is then developed through the physical exercises and the repeated running patterns. The movement from the splintered plane of existence to an exploration of the centred *no-form* state, is the process whereby the performer of *Ritual Theatre* becomes fully embodied in his own biorhythms and those of the cosmos. Although more highly structured than Fersen's work, Alli's technique shares with it the experience of transic flight as a

state of flow in which the performer undergoes a *proprioceptive* shift in body rhythm. Eschewing the magical connotations associated with the traditional shaman, parashamanic flight might be defined therefore as unintellectualised, unformalised, spontaneous or minimally structured movement; an interior search for the body's native language and the re-actualisation of that moment in infancy when all movement is perception. Such a perspective appears to have been the catalyst for the experimental work of the Actor's Lab of Hamilton, Ontario, which was the original inspiration for Ron Grimes' parashamanic model and which, of all the models discussed thus far, is the closest in methodology to the work of Alessandro Fersen.

The Actor's Lab was founded in 1971 on the campus of McMaster University by Richard Nieoczym, a student of religious studies who had been attracted to the theatre through reading the works of Nietzsche and the early writings of Jerzy Grotowski. As suggested by its original incarnation as *Le Theatre de l'Homme* the Actor's Lab attempted to create what Nieoczym described as a 'theatre of essential humanity' [29] whose themes, gestures and rhythms were elemental and non-narrative. In performance these concepts translated into a strong emphasis on shadow, silence and a flowing form of movement which Grimes characterised as:

> a wavelike circularity, birdlike or serpentine writhing, radiation of energy from central trunk outwards toward head and limbs, avoidance of localized or isolated movements, centering in the lower abdomen and pelvic region, decisive starts and suspended stops, spewed and relatively uninflected barrages of language alternating with unvarnished silence. [30]

Although there was never any contact between Nieoczym and Fersen, Grimes' description suggests clear parallels between the former's performance technique and the stages of the *spoken* and *gestual* mnemodrama. In both cases the audience appears to be made up of members of the group, *spect-actors* [31] whose basic attitude may be summed up as "Let's see what emerges," whilst that of the performers might be portrayed as, "Let's attend to and follow the rhythms and impulses encountered in the performance space." Again clear parallels emerge between the two techniques in the relationship between performer and object, which is a key feature of what Nieoczym described as a performance "study."

In a "study" a performer entered the performance space after having previously placed an abstract object such as a stump or chain in it. The performer then proceeded to manipulate or interact with the chosen object in a manner in which, Nieoczym suggested, a Zen Buddhist might sit with a Koan:

> The goal is to get rid of the object as something "out there" as something thought about or imitated. The intention is to become fully unified with whatever is there (...) [32]

Grimes is of the opinion that what occured in the work of the Actor's Lab was a form of divination:

> People at the lab want to "read" the body as a presence portending the path one should follow in exploring the unconscious. Whether the object of divination is one's body, a space or an object, the intention of working with it is to find a presence in both the religious and dramatic sense of the word. [33]

The performer's search for the presence of an object, in both this and Fersen's technique, symbolises the animistic dimension of

parashamanic performance. In both instances, the sense of object is iconic. By projecting feelings onto a piece of wood, as in the case of Paola Bertolone's mnemodrama, for example, the performer animates it with a resonance that generates a sense of mystery when the spectator sees this dead, inanimate object come to life. Grimes noted in the performances of Lab performers what I observed in Fersen's work, namely, that the prop appears initially to be more alive than its animator-performer. The performer appears to follow the prop and not vice-versa, so that he or she may seem to be possessed when their manipulations of the prop become truly transparent. Whereas Fersen always personally selects the prop for the mnemodrama, the performers in the Actor's Lab were encouraged by Nieoczym to select and place their own objects within the playing space. In both techniques the relationship between performer and prop is essentially ludic because, unlike the power objects cultivated by shamans, these theatrical props are not powers but symbolise an aspiration to power. Parashamanic props are potential meanings that have not yet rounded into actualised powers. The power of the prop is real to the performer but grounded in fictionality. By employing sticks of wood and bolts of cloth as if they had power, or as if their meanings were in some sense powerful, the performers of mnemodrama and those of the Actor's Lab allow their objects autonomy. From Grimes' perspective the props are 'aesthetic-personal' before they round into symbols which are 'metaphysical-social.' [34]

One of the ways in which the two techniques differ is in the degree to which methods of control and abandonment are employed. Like the participants in Grotowski's project, the members of the Actor's

Lab underwent a process of body training more akin to Zen practice (with its repeated emphasis upon emerging, flowing and the present), rather than to shamanic initiation. Grimes noted that the surest way for performers to violate the Lab work ethic was to be 'out of oneself or not fully present in this space at this time,' [35] a situation that the performers of mnemodrama, like the shaman, consistently experience. In therapeutic terms, therefore, the parashamanic techniques of Grotowski, Alli, Goodman, Bates and Nieoczym are all guided and ultimately controlled by the safety-net of specific body training techniques. By way of contrast, Fersen's mnemodrama is purely a technique of abandonment within which notions of therapy are connected with the individual's struggle for a centring of the self in the face of chaos.

One of the most interesting results of the performer's symbolic struggle in Fersen's technique is the implicit association in many of the performances of the archaic vision with the Jungian concept of *androgyny*. It was Jung's belief that the function of the human organism was constantly to strive towards wholeness, towards a union of opposites and that implicit in the structure of the psyche were images of order, totality, and geometric perfection (mandalas), that manifested themselves through dreams and visions as compensation when an individual's conscious existence was in a state of imbalance. It is this Jungian concept of anima which distinguishes Fersen's brand of parashamanic therapy from the other examples cited, in that it is part of the outward manifestation of the performer's experience of centring herself.

Fersen experienced himself the symbolic power of the androgynous being in his field observations of Candomble ritual in 1958. In the adoxu's training , the *Ere De Grau* is always a manifestation of the male which, in this exclusively female cult, symbolises the oppressor. The adoxu has to recognise and absorb the male aspect of herself in her journey towards possession by her orixa, who, though normally a male deity, metamorphoses into an androgynous being on possession of his female disciple. In the performance which accompanies the possession, the male attributes of the deity are represented by props and choreographed gestures only. It is the woman dressed in female attire who dances the role of her orixa in reality. The conflicting male/female personas are thus reconciled in the adoxu's divine possession by her orixa, resulting in an empowered vision of sexual unity shared between performer and spectator. It is important to note here that the androgynous state is essentially a reflective one, in that male observers of the Candomble rites are permitted as long as they dress in female attire. Fersen was therefore only permitted to witness these rituals because he assumed the role of an androgynous being. A role heightened no doubt by his absorption in Dionysian ritual and his identification of the adoxu with the figure of the whirling Maenad, and himself as a Pentheus-like figure for whom the adoption of female attire was a symbolic acknowledgement of the birth of his feminine persona.

Like the Candomble initiation, in the performance of a mnemodrama the androgynous state is conveyed through the interaction between performer and prop. In Paola's *gestual* mnemodrama, for example, her movements with the stick fluctuated

between strong, aggressive, masculine images and light, delicate, female ones. The androgynous image manifested itself in a repeated pattern of thrusting movements, in which the stick momentarily rounded into a phallic symbol with which Paola penetrated an invisible other and then transformed herself into the other and was ritually penetrated by it. In a second example, the video of the *visionary* mnemodrama revealed a sequence in which male performers explored their femininity through repeated images of veiling and unveiling their faces and bodies with the chiffon material. In these sequences, their bodies appeared to sustain a lightness and fluidity of movement that was replaced elsewhere by heavy, violent images of male domination. Finally there was the interesting preoccupation in Heviere's mnemodrama with the removal of his clothes, which was interpreted by Fersen as a symbolic stripping away and examination of the nature of his sexual identity. By removing his clothes, he was attempting to return to the beginning, to be reborn in a new persona. In a fusion of the dual aspects of anima inhabiting Fersen's work, Heviere symbolised the hunter searching for his elusive identity, his performance reflecting his vulnerability in the face of that unknown other.

These fleeting images of androgyny which recur frequently in performances of mnemodrama share a special correspondence to traditional shamanic rite , where androgyny acts as a physicalisation of the spiritual unity the shaman remembers. Joan Halifax suggests that:

> The neophyte ultimately embraces the mystery of the totality that existed in "illo tempore", becoming that totality, a process of profound recollection. The occasional androgyny of the shaman is one inflection of paradise, where the two become one. [36]

The image of the androgyny together with the repeated patterns of falling and assuming the foetal position in a dual image of death/rebirth, are the mnemodramatic fulfilment of what Ron Grimes asserts to be the basic therapeutic strategy of all parashamanists namely:

> to create a nest of symbols and a small, supportive but temporary group to enact those symbols.[37]

Fersen's work represents the beginning of this process in that the discovery of symbolic meaning in any of the acts is isolated within individual perception; symbols are always in the process of becoming and always in counter-point to the reality of the individual discovering them. Like all parashamanic ritual, the mnemodrama itself is a symbol of the potential process for change rather than change itself. It enables the performer to confront her creative blocks and reveals the benefits accruing from the gradual disarming of the historical self and its replacement by what is innately spontaneous. The quasi-virtual presence of the prop provides the catalyst for the resurrection of symbols through spontaneous play, in which the performer is able to explore both who she is and who she is not. The structure of the mnemodrama as a somatic soliloquy allows the performer to work from the traditional basis of aesthetic distance, playing with moments of drama and conflict, until a point of balance is discovered between self and other and a moment of centering is experienced. In psychodramatic terms the protagonist-centered focus of the mnemodrama suggests that the performer's exploration of "who I am not" requires them to take on the role of their own auxiliary ego, a doubling of the self. The performer abreacts, overtly transferring unconscious conflicts and resistances to the newly discovered self,

where they can be played with at a conscious level. This sense of transference also applies to the presence of Fersen himself in his role as director/observer.

In the first stage of the mnemodrama - *neutral play with prop* - Fersen fulfils the traditional role of the director, outlining the given circumstances of the performance and choosing ānd setting up the prop to be used. At this stage the mnemodrama is a guided technique similar to those of Bates, Goodman and the members of Grotowski's team who led the Theatre of Sources project. As the actual performance progresses, however, Fersen effectively loses his physical identity from the perspective of the performers. Although he is physically present in the performing space with them, his actual presence is quasi-virtual until the performance is brought to an end by him, at which point he reassumes his role as director. This transference of identity from director to observing presence is complete in the succeeding stages of *gestual* and *visionary* mnemodramas, in which, apart from choosing the prop and beginning and terminating the performance, Fersen is an observing presence only. His physical abstraction is reminiscent of the relationship between Carlos Castaneda and the shaman Don Juan who, at various stages in the former's training , was experienced by him as a presence rather than a physical reality, despite the fact that to all intents and purposes Don Juan maintained that he was always physically present. The change in perception in both examples signals the onset of the transic state and the performer's creation of an exclusive magnetic field of vision. It is finally the degree of abandonment experienced by the performer in the

transic state that distinguishes most clearly Fersen's technique from the other models of parashamanic activity cited.

The distinguishing feature which separates the trance state of mnemodrama from the techniques devised by Bates *et al* is the absence of spoken dialogue. In the case of Bates it was his constant questioning that effectively guided the RADA student through his transic journey, stopping him at will to clarify or expand on what were perceived to be important details. In the work of the Actor's Lab the prop used for study could be replaced by what Nieoczym called a *metaphor* and which Grimes described as:

> (...) a word, concept or phrase with which one works to become fully identified, but about which he or she does not think during the session. [38]

The repetition of fragments of ancient texts and the singing/chanting of traditional songs have formed an important part of Grotowski's experiments in his ritual arts work that developed out of the Theatre of Sources project. Chanting in particular has been observed to be a catalyst for inducing a mild state of trance in these experiments. What is important in all these examples is that the presence of verbal communication indicates a controlling mechanism guiding the trance, which effectively places the performer in a relationship akin to that of the hypnotised subject with the hypnotist. In other words, the performer's social persona is still very evidently in control during the transic state. In the trance technique employed by Felicitas Goodman, it is the rattle which effectively speaks to and controls the transic journey of the performers. For Antero Alli it is the elaborate physical emphasis which ensures that the transic experience is rationally controlled. Only

in the mnemodrama is there a sustained silence in the relationship between the performer and the director.

Just before his death in 1947, Antonin Artaud wrote, in Ci-Git Precede De La Culture Indienne, that all true language was incomprehensible to the superficial thought-structures of contemporary man but able to communicate directly with primordial man. Part of the process of parashamanism is the revelation of this true language through performance and in the mnemodrama Fersen has discovered techniques of abandon that enable the performer to re-actualise the very beginnings of the theatrical process itself:

> In mnemodrama you reach such deep stages where there is acting, vision, but not yet the words. When you arrive at this stage you discover that the origins of theatre were always in vision, in dance, in mime. Other things were added afterward. Aristotle tells us that dialogue came after a long time to theatre. [39]

In referring to the past, Fersen is not expressing any concern for historical problems in the theatre but for a contemporary loss of meaning in existence. Through the ritual of mnemodrama he has attempted to create conditions through which this sense of loss might be met. By basing his work on the shamanistic techniques of trance and the manipulation of power objects, he seeks to provoke a confrontation between the performer/*spect-actor* in order to stimulate explorations of autobiographical memories and archaic dreams that question the inevitability of this condition:

> Only theatre has the possibility to save the ancient human structures which can be the home of modern contents and which will save contacts between people. Not only the utilitarian contact we have in life, but also festive contact which is important, and ontological contact. This is the real future of theatre. [40]

Unlike Grotowski, whose most recent work in Italy has included the exploration of body training techniques introduced by Korean Shamans, Fersen maintains a careful distance from the shaman who remains a powerful allusion rather than a dominant figure in his work. For, in looking to the shaman, such work does not look toward a defined and available centre but to a figure who engages in a profound recollection of that which is now gone. The parashamanic focus of Fersen's technique is an invitation to the performer to work as oneself, within which the image of the shaman clarifies the mnemodrama's relationship to the contemporary context and symbolises Fersen's faith in the possibility of renewal.

The potential for theatrical renewal has arisen in recent years in two main spheres of work, both of which have been concerned with the expansion of Occidental technique. The Theatre of Images has attempted to synthesize traditional acting theories with techniques derived from new dance, film, popular cultural forms, painting and sculpture; whilst Eugenio Barba has sought to establish the theatre practitioner as a "man of knowledge" through a comparison of Occidental and Oriental techniques in the hybrid discipline he defines as *Theatre-Anthropology*. Mnemodrama, then, has a potential importance as a training technique in new modes of interdisciplinary work.

Notes

1. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview (Rome) 9, March 1992
2. Ronald L. Grimes, Beginnings in Ritual Studies (New York: University Press of America, 1982), p. 256.
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Chapter Six

MNEMODRAMA, THERAPY AND MONTAGE:

Towards an application of Fersen's technique

When it comes to public statements about the validity of his work within the context of contemporary occidental theatre practice, Fersen assumes the same shifting perspective, often contradictory, which is found in the work itself. He is adamant on the one hand that the techniques of mnemodrama form an important aspect of the training of the contemporary performer, complementing the traditional emphasis on physical and vocal training by focussing on the psychic instrument:

> the mnemodrama offers the actor a new human and artistic dimension which confers upon his work a profound dignity, constitutes an incentive towards the research of his expressive originality and renders him aware that his work, far from being a purely mimetic "routine", can bring about profound and decisive experiences of life. [1]

On the other hand, he states that his technique 'doesn't concern the actor of today' [2] and has no immediate utilisation on the contemporary stage, both because of the uncontrolled nature of the trance experience and because that experience is essentially solitary for the performer, even at the stage of the *visionary mnemodrama*:

> mnemodrama stops on the threshold of interpretation and therefore it does not cross over into interpretation. So what is the quality of transformation in terms of theatre ? The mnemodrama is specific - it cannot be transformed into other types or styles of theatre (...) [3]

Let us now consider a potential solution to Fersen's dilemma by locating his technique within a contemporary framework of therapeutic training for the performer, which is essentially psychodramatic and of which the most influential model is that devised by Jerzy Grotowski during the *poor theatre* phase of his work. A comparison between the experiments of these two practitioners reveals the central importance of *montage* as a mode of performance. I intend to establish a case for mnemodrama performances as a montage of perspectives (linking the ideas of Walter Benjamin with the shamanistic experiences of Michael Taussig and the recent theories of Franco Ruffini) and thereafter I propose to examine Fersen's use of the technique in his own productions Le Diavolerie (1967) and Leviathan (1973) which stemmed directly from the mnemodrama research, together with an unrealised outline for exploring the character of Lady Macbeth through the technique of *gestual* mnemodrama. In so doing my intention is to demonstrate the potential value of Fersen's technique as a (pre-expressive) training for performers participating in the creations of such practitioners as Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba and Pina Bausch [4] (to name only those of whose work I have had personal experience), each of whom , together with Grotowski, has pioneered the development of montage as a mode of presentation in the contemporary theatre.

Fersen's position regarding the relationship of mnemodrama to the codified systems of psychodrama and other performance therapies has always proved to be ambiguous. In April 1984 he was invited by Zerka Moreno to inaugurate the 42nd World Congress of the American Society of Psychodrama in New York with a lecture on the history and

development of his research, followed by a screening of his 1981 video "Alle Origini del Teatro - il Mnemodrama." The event provided Fersen with the first international platform for his work and he later repeated the programme at the university theatre departments of Yale and Stony Brook (New York State) and at the Cafe La Mama. In his address to the World Congress he adopted what can best be described as an anti-therapeutic view of his work, claiming it to be of value only as a method for training theatrical performers. He was also at pains to distance mnemodrama from any relationship to the techniques of psychodrama, a position he defended in the 1984 interview with Bonnie Marranca following his appearance at the Cafe La Mama:

> Firstly, psychodrama has its roots in psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. The roots of mnemodrama are only anthropological. Secondly, psychodrama is directed toward persons who are deeply disturbed psychologically. Mnemodrama is addressed to very sound, very healthy people. You can't undergo a mnemodrama if you are not such a person. [5]

Fersen's antipathy towards psychodrama finds its initial expression in the pages of Teatro,Dopo [6], in which he suggests that it is a "protected technique" with built-in narrative barriers which, he claims, effectively obstruct the protagonist's descent into the deepest levels of the unconscious, stopping only at the level of the interpersonal problems of the patient. This is in marked contrast to his view of the mnemodrama as 'the intentional sacrificing of a psychological cover' [7] by performers who 'experience the novelty of a technique in which they repeatedly expose themselves to the risks and fortunes of an inner acrobatics without a safety net.' [8] Elsewhere he alludes to psychodrama purely in terms of its classical structure as

defined by its founder J.L. Moreno, suggesting that he is not conversant with recent developments such as the *surreal* and *intrapsychic* techniques. These, far from being rooted in 'solid psychological assumptions'[9] appear to be based more like his own work in flux, ambiguity, intuition, play and shifting role definitions. They owe as much to the transpersonal and imagery based work of Jung and the existential/shamanistic approach of R.D. Laing [10] as to the creative action techniques of Moreno.

In the classical (protagonist-centered) psychodrama there is no script; the drama is spontaneous, created in the moment by the protagonist, the auxiliary egos and the director. As devised by Moreno, this interpersonal technique usually borrows the theatrical conventions belonging to Aristotelian narrative: it tells a story; it draws its material from autobiographical memory; it sets sequential scenes; it calls upon actual characters (mother, father, etc) and it often issues in the cathartic expression of feelings. Such a psychodrama may be contested by the perceptions of significant others, in as much as there may be different versions of the same scene as experienced by different characters within it, but unless the protagonist is delusional, his drama may be seen to refer to a verifiable social context.

The *surreal* psychodrama, on the other hand, is a technique in which the world of paidiac play replaces that of everyday reality. According to one of the exponents of this technique, Peter Pitzele [11], the protagonist does not only play himself but all the roles which he manifests in his imagination , in a performance of constantly shifting perspectives. The personal self in the dream or fantasy is fictive and the truth to be found in this drama comes from exploring all the facets

of imagery (vision) displayed by the imagination. Zerka Moreno (wife of the founder) describes *surreal psychodrama* as a technique belonging to the world of "surplus reality" in that the scenes and events dramatised therein are mythical and 'have never happened, will never happen or can never happen.' [12] She acknowledges, however, that the ability to experience these scenes (with their associated *dark play* images of fear, emotion, fantasy and wishes) is one of the magical strengths of the psychodramatic process.

In the *intrapsychic* technique there is rarely a story to be told and Pitzele defines it as 'a kind of action sociometry exploring the individual-as-group.' [13] The purpose of this technique is to discriminate roles and inner voices, the pulls and counter-pulls of death and Eros as they exist at a given moment in time within the individual-as-group:

> Intrapsychic work aims to uncover, even as a geologist might uncover the strata of a personality, working from the surface through the layers, going down, going in.' [14]

The dominant form of the *intrapsychic* performance is the dramatic soliloquy, theatrically the most direct form of verbal self-presentation. Like Pirandello's six characters, each persona in the internal world of the protagonist takes his or her time at centre stage, each needing to experience the moment of *becoming* through speech. Pitzele notes that unlike the more realistic interpersonal psychodrama, the quality of acting out in the intrapsychic technique may tend towards stylisation because many of the internal characters have not yet been defined by the personal style of the protagonist. Pitzele refers to them as, in effect, 'potential roles, drawn from the conserve - imaginary or derived

through literature, observation, popular culture - and may take on an almost allegorical appearance.' [15] The technique involves a two-stage process in which the first stage is given over to playing with roles that are then formalised in the second stage. The staging of defined characters in the second stage represents an advance from the threshold of *becoming* to the focused *being* of identifiable characters. To accomplish this the protagonist moves from the perspective of advocate to that of sculptor:

> As advocate, it is the work of the protagonist to voice and give gesture to his internal parts. As sculptor, it is his task to step back, survey his cast, and shape them into a design that organises his internal world.' [16]

In this shift of role from advocate to sculptor, the protagonist adopts what Moreno defined as the "mirror role" [17] which he defined as the protagonist in his double position as the observing ego of his own performance. The *intrapsychic* technique is therefore an initiation into the potential realities of the self and it is within this framework that it offers one possible theoretical model for the therapeutic value of mnemodrama training for the occidental performer. For the performer of mnemodrama is likewise exploring the multitude of selves lying dormant within the unconscious, but doing so through a technique of trance, where the manipulation of the transformative phenomena of the prop provides a somatic soliloquy in place of the spoken soliloquy of the *intrapsychic* performance. As a play structure the *intrapsychic* technique moves from the initial paidiac state of free play to the ludic structure of character definition and blocking, thus parting company with Fersen's workshop explorations but again

providing a possible model for his theatrical creations based on mnemodrama.

The three stages which constitute the technique of mnemodrama rely for their success on the transportation of the performer out of his or her normal state of consciousness into a transic journey of self-discovery. Since this journey can result in catharsis it obviously shares something in common with the techniques of psychodrama, as I have briefly indicated above, and it is therefore appropriate at this point to compare Fersen's technique with that developed by Grotowski during his *poor theatre* phase, a technique which draws its cathartic emphasis from the model of psychodrama and which, in recent years, has itself provided the model for para-theatrical work in therapy. [18] Fersen's apparently nonchalant public dismissal of any suggestion of parallels between his own work and that of Grotowski's [19] belies the fact that both men were very aware of each other's work during the period of Grotowski's *poor theatre* phase. In fact so closely does the one mirror the other, in philosophy if not in practice, that Fersen might be forgiven for feeling that any originality in his own work has been rendered almost invisible by the overpowering attention accorded by both theatre practitioners and academics alike to Grotowski's work. Whilst it is impossible to gauge who exactly influenced whom[20] , the wealth of material on the early years of Grotowski's research, locating it clearly within the realm of therapeutics, provides a useful signpost to the parallel intentions in Fersen's work which remain mysteriously unarticulated by him.

When Grotowski attended the conference organised by Fersen at his studio in 1964 he was able to outline the philosophy behind his

training techniques, which he had started to devise three years earlier in preparation for his production of the Indian drama Shakuntala:

> What is an association in our profession ? It is something that springs not only from the mind but also from the body. It is a return towards a precise memory. Do not analyse this intellectually. Memories are always physical reactions. It is our skin which has not forgotten, our eyes which have not forgotten. What we have heard can still resound within us. [21]

Grotowski shares with Fersen at this stage an emphasis on a "drama of memory" derived from Stanislavski's "affective memory" technique but focussed on the somatic skills of the performer. The production of Shakuntala was an indication of two separate but directly interconnected themes in Grotowski's work which he amplified at Fersen's conference. One was his passionate interest in all aspects of oriental culture and the other was a preoccupation with the possibility of recreating meaningful ritual in the contemporary occidental theatre. From this perspective arose his image of the performer as a sorcerer or magician, a shaman/priest capable of leading the audience into the unknown territory of full mystical participation:

> The education of an actor in our theatre is not a matter of teaching him something; we attempt to eliminate his organism's resistance to this psychic process. The result is freedom from the time lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses. [22]

At the core of Grotowski's poor theatre aesthetic is therefore the concern with the performer's process, rather than his experience of playing a role. For him performing involves 'an act of laying oneself

bare, of tearing off the mask of daily life, of exteriorizing oneself.'[23] The poor theatre performer is thus more concerned with the psychodramatic task of self-revelation than with portraying a character in fictitious circumstances. This focus on the performer rather than his role led Grotowski to postulate three conditions essential to the art of acting: the elimination of resistance and obstacles in the body and mind; the stimulation and process of self-revelation and the means of articulating this process to an audience. At his laboratory in Opole these physical and mental obstacles were overcome through a regimen of demanding psycho-physical exercises developed by Grotowski and his performers. Despite the amount of time required to perfect these exercises, they (in Grotowski's terms) constituted an inductive rather than deductive approach to training since they were concerned not with the collection of skills but the eradication of psycho-physical blocks. An approach which Grotowski defined as *via negativa*:

> All the exercises which merely constituted an answer to the question: "How can this be done ?" were eliminated . (...) The exercises became a means of overcoming these personal impediments. The actor no longer asks himself: "How can I do this ?" Instead he must know what not to do, what obstructs him (...) This is what I mean by *Via Negativa*: a process of elimination.[24]

The application of Grotowski's training method to rehearsal and performance was not concerned with the exploration of the text, the playwright's ruling idea, or bringing a character to "life." It focused on the performer and his revelatory journey within the context of a particular text and characterisation as, for example, in the performance of Ryszard Cieslak in Grotowski's production of The Constant Prince , a performance witnessed by Fersen at the Festival dei Due Mondi in

Spoleto in 1967 where he was presenting his own production of Le Diavolerie.

An important part of the poor theatre ethic was an attempt to break down the barriers between performer and spectator during a performance, in order to make all present active participants sharing the unity of time, place and action in which those observing became, in Grotowski's term, a *witness* to the action:

> A witness keeps to the sidelines, does not interfere but wants to be aware, to see what happens, from the beginning to the end, and to retain it in his memory; the picture of events ought to remain in him alone. [25]

Grotowski's poor theatre performer was not performing for the audience, but rather undergoing a personal experience witnessed by it. This experience resulted, according to Grotowski, in climax and catharsis, 'self-penetration, trance *excess*, the formal discipline itself - all this can be realised, provided one has given oneself fully, humbly and without defence. This act culminates in climax. It brings relief.'[26] Grotowski uses the Latin term *respicio* to personify the attitude of the witness who , in Fersen's mnemodrama, has been transformed into the "androgynous" being *spect-actor*, personified for me in the image of his leading performer, Paola Bertolone, witnessing a performance of a *neutral play with prop* with which she appeared to identify emotionally to the point of physical exhaustion. Her subsequent performance of a *gestual* mnemodrama (see chapter three) left many of the witnessing group who had just performed the *neutral play* in the same state, verifying Fersen's assertion that performers of mnemodrama are often too emotionally overcome by what they have witnessed in a peer's performance to be able to perform themselves.[27]

Grotowski's concept also applies to mnemodrama on the level of "giving witness" - authenticating experience by giving voice to it - wherein the witnesses reveal to the performers the somatic content of their trance experience of which they are not conscious. In Candomble ritual, it will be remembered, the supporters of the adoxu give witness to her actions whilst she is possessed by her orixa and in the Balinese Barong the witnesses bridge the gap between the periods of *inget* and *engsap* experienced by the performers in the sword-wielding chorus. In both examples the ritual performers are able to reach levels of trance where the feelings evoked appear to be so powerful that they blot out entirely their psychic control mechanisms. The witnesses are therefore a necessary part of the action in that they assume the active role of performers who restrain the transic impulse within themselves specifically in order to assist those who are in a trance. At the profane level of the mnemodrama, the role of the witness is a simulation of the same ritual function, as can be seen from Fersen's account of the temporary amnesia suffered by *H* ,mentioned earlier , and as I observed in the reactions to Paola Bertolone's *gestual mnemodrama.*

Grotowski maintains that the catharsis experienced by the performer on his journey of self-discovery can in fact effect a cathartic experience in the audience, when its members choose to accept the performer's act of self-penetration as an invitation to explore their own psyche.[28] In peripheral cults such as Candomble, only those who have undergone initiation are privileged to savour the therapeutic values of the ritual performances through active participation. The performer/spectator relationship in Fersen's work constantly shifts between these two states in an effort to create a feeling of mutual

support and group solidarity. The fragility of this feeling of communitas is noticeable when, as in my own case, the work is exposed to a stranger who is uninitiated in the techniques. At such times it appears that the traditional roles which divide the active performer from the passive spectator are unconsciously re-established, except that it is still the performer who experiences catharsis because he is playing an aspect of himself and not a character. The confusion rests with the audience member who may be expecting to suspend his or her disbelief in the traditional acceptance of the fictional nature of stage reality, only to be confronted with an actual event to which they are suddenly a witness. Interestingly, Grotowski observed during his *poor theatre* work that the invitation to members of an audience to embark on their own cathartic journey, to experience a psychic rebirth, 'often aroused opposition or indignation ' among mainstream audiences.[29]

Apart from his rejection of the physical aspects of training and the total abandonment of text and for the most part, public performance, what distinguishes Fersen's approach to the psychic revelation of the performer from Grotowski's is the intensity of the trance experience. Grotowski's method, which built on Artaud's performer-in -trance concept, is in practice a variation of a rationally induced trance which, according to Charles Marowitz, is within the domain of all occidental performers:

> The actor - learns his lines through repetition. The actor in effect, hypnotises himself by repetitions into his role. The fact that he is still conscious, still aware of everything going on around him on the stage and in the auditorium, does not alter the fact that his "performance" is the result of these hypnotic repetitions.[30]

For Grotowski, the performer in trance is always 'highly aware of his surroundings'[31] despite being involved with the performance at hand: a state of being comparable to that of a powerful traditional performer such as Olivier, whose stage "presence" could often deeply affect his audience without disturbing his total involvement with his character. Such a rationally induced state of trance is an organic phenomenon generated not by a performer's intention to "show" technique but by a total commitment to "do" what he is doing and thereby sublimating technique. The performer of mnemodrama, by way of contrast, uses a recognised (archaic) technique for inducing a state of trance [32] but often has no control over the content nor any post-transic memory of her performance. What she does possess is a commitment to the manifestation of aspects of her persona lying dormant in her unconscious, a process which is undertaken without the safety net of a known text or structure of physical actions. In this respect the mnemodramatic trance is the "savage" precursor of the controlled state advocated by Grotowski.

Given that Fersen and Grotowski are both concerned with the efficacy of ritual performance, it is appropriate at this point to note that Grotowski distinguishes the witness of such performances from the traditional theatre spectator through the placement of montage. He suggests that in a traditional occidental production, 'the spectators' minds are the place of montage' whilst in his para-theatrical rituals, 'the montage takes place in the minds of the executants.'[33] This concept receives implicit support from such recent writers on shamanic ritual as Michael Taussig who, in reaction against what he sees as an occidental obsession with binding primal ritual to Aristotelian concepts

of narrative, evokes Artaud's vision of ritual theatre as an infinite perspective of conflicts. He believes that the shamanic trance state is experienced as a montage of essentially ludic elements by the executants, an assertion based on his own experience of participating in a *yage* ceremony with Putumayo shamans in South west Colombia:

> Interruptions for shitting, for vomiting, for a cloth to wipe one's face for going to the kitchen to gather coals for burning copal incense, for getting roots of magical "chondur" from where nobody can remember where they were last put, for whispering a fear, for telling and retelling a joke (especially for that), for stopping the song in mid-flight to yell at the dogs to stop barking (...) and in the cracks and swerves a universe opens out.[34]

Likewise, the mnemodramatic trance appears to be experienced as a spontaneous montage of elements and images in conflict with themselves and colliding with other elements in a constant state of flux, the somatic interaction of body, prop, nerves, emotions, memories and instincts obliging both performer and witness to perceive several levels of reality simultaneously. In fact the following description by Taussig of his *yage* induced trance in many ways supports the observations by Fersen's performers of the chaotic experience of a group mnemodrama such as the *neutral play with prop*:

> flashing back and forth from self to group; not simple self-absorption broken up and scrambled by participation in the group or with one or two members of it, but also through such flashing back and forth from self to group and group to self a sort of playground and testing-ground is set up for comparing hallucinations with the social field from which they spring. Hence the very grounds of representation itself are raked over.[35]

Taussig's depiction of the shamanic trance as a montage of experience is a fusion of Artaud's ideas with Walter Benjamin's theory

that the epic theatre of Brecht pointed towards a new concept of theatrical production, in which the utilization of new techniques such as film would work towards the destruction of continuous experience and emphasize the discontinuous. Despite the fact that that great exponent of cinematic montage , Sergei Eisenstein, actually formulated his model in theatrical terms[36] , very little theoretical work has actually been carried out in relation to the application of montage techniques to theatrical productions despite the adoption of forms of montage in the recent work of Peter Brook, Pina Bausch and in particular Eugenio Barba. In what follows I am therefore indebted to the research of Franco Ruffini in this area and specifically to his notion of *horizontal* and *vertical* montage, which serves to clarify Grotowski's statement and at the same time offers a potential model for applying Fersen's technique as a method of training for the performer, both in a personal sense and in relation to the construction of a performance text.

Ruffini confines his examination of theatrical montage to traditional occidental theatre practice and therefore approaches it from the point of view of the spectator. His main concern is to discover the way in which montage creates and controls the patterns of communication which takes place between performer and spectator during a production. In order to do this he offers two alternative models - communication through *similarity* and communication through *difference* - by which a performer can control the way in which the spectator endows his performance with meaning. Communication through *similarity* proceeds through affirmations, wherein the spectator is moved by the performer from a position of not understanding (for example, the interrelation of characters at the very

beginning of a play), to full understanding (everything is clearly resolved as the curtain falls at the end). Ruffini views this type of communication as operating within a generalised sphere of understanding which is non-specific and non-threatening for the spectator, because it confirms an existing cultural perspective. Communication through *difference* , on the other hand, proceeds through negations, in which the performer effectively breaks down the spectator's desire for a sequential pattern of events leading to meaning and replaces it with an accumulation of images from different perspectives, any or all of which add up to the meaning of the performance:

> In communication through difference, everything that is altered remains as a basis and literally constitutes the density of one specific meaning. And it is only through this type of communication that what anthropologists describe as complex thought can be expressed, this being composed of multiple, even contradictory, aspects. [37]

While, therefore, communication through similarity tends to transmit shared, stable meanings based on the hypothetical notion of the spectator as a member of a homogeneous audience, communication through difference tends to transmit unstable meanings that are not shared and to be based on an essential variability amongst a group of spectators.

Before applying these examples of communication control to forms of montage, it is important to note that Ruffini distinguishes between cinematic and theatrical concepts of montage by suggesting that, in the former, the spectator starts with the film (put together in a pre-arranged sequence by the film's director) and builds a story, whereas in the latter the spectator starts with the performance and

builds a "film" (insofar as what is involved is a series of pictures) and from this "film" proceeds to a second stage and builds a story:

> In the theatre, the audience see continuous images and from these images derive pictures (that is, they produce their own sequences), from which they complete the composition. So it is the audience that creates the montage, since what is seen is strictly a personal interpretation of each individual spectator.[38]

The montage created by the audience may, according to Ruffini, take two contrasting forms, both of which are framed within the concept of communication through *difference*. The first he designates as *horizontal* montage or montage in sequence. According to this model, the spectator receives a series of distinct stage pictures which succeed each other in time, separated by a process of division (which might include act breaks and/or the entrances and exits of specific characters) and on the basis of this discontinuous process of succession the spectator engages in the cognitive act of reconstituting continuity. The other form of montage he defines as *vertical* or *simultaneous* montage. In this model the images which interact among themselves are not necessarily visual ones and the pictures derived from such images do not succeed one another in time but are simultaneous. Where in *horizontal* montage the focus is on the spectator's reaction to the whole production, in the *vertical* form it concentrates on what Ruffini refers to as the performer's micro-performances:

> A unit of performance is made up of the integration of the actor's micro- performances (assuming only one actor is involved) and various components of the staging. There will be a set of micro-performances - gestural, verbal, sonic (which includes other than word units) etc. All these micro-performances, together with the pictures that

> derive from them, are present and working simultaneously, and do not follow one another through time.[39]

In essence, every *vertical* montage is concerned with communication through difference. Therefore, communication between performer and spectator tends to be varied and unstable: the spectator at any one performance picking out different meanings; those meanings changing radically for the spectator at succeeding performances. From Ruffini's perspective, it is this perception of difference on the part of the spectator and performer which constitutes individuation. In his scheme of things *vertical* montage naturally precedes *horizontal* montage, as the latter is made up of sequences consisting of the micro-performances of the former.

It is the notion of individuation experienced through the oscillating perspectives of the *vertical* montage, which most clearly suggests a link between Ruffini's model and Fersen's techniques. Any attempt on the part of the performer/ spectator to understand the multiple meanings of a performance built on *vertical* montage involves the activation of memory and it is tempting to equate Ruffini's *horizontal* and *vertical* modes with their counterparts in the De Martino/Fersen memory model. Certainly the *vertical* montage would appear to possess the same therapeutic potential as the vertical memory, enabling the performer of mnemodrama to become thoroughly absorbed in the fluctuations of his own micro-performance, without concerning himself with the need to communicate any aspect of that performance to an observing witness. On the other hand, when the role of the witness becomes paramount -

as is the case in a public performance - then it is the degree of balance maintained between the *vertical* and *horizontal* modes of montage which determines the degree of mutual therapeutic participation between performer and spectator. In general terms, in occidental mainstream performance, the vertical is suppressed and the horizontal dominates in order to create the illusion of a seamless, unified piece of work; whereas in experimental pieces, including ritual, the emphasis is almost exclusively on the individual performers' montage of micro-performances. Fersen's two productions, derived from his experiments in mnemodrama, clearly demonstrate a methodology for the transformation of a *vertical* montage from the sphere of personal training in the studio to the realm of public performance.

In 1967 Fersen was invited to present a theatrical production at the Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto and decided to create an original piece derived from his initial experiments in *gestual* mnemodrama. The resulting work, entitled Le Diavolerie, was a history of the devil based on European and South American legends and the chronicles of the Jesuits:

> what interested me, beyond the six stories touching more or less all continents, was a scenic language by now inspired by my theatrical conceptions. On stage, only a practicable raised level with a slide down to the floor and some benches on which the actors were initially seated.[40]

During the performance the boards and trestles from which the benches were constructed were gradually dismantled by the performers and transformed by them into scenic elements including a Chinese forest, a storm at sea and the mountains of Mexico. The manipulation and continual transformation of these props beyond their utilitarian function, demanded a creative response from the spectator who was

expected to connote the symbolic rounding of both performers and stage scenery. Fersen's creation of a *vertical* montage involving the interaction of performer with scenic prop, was paralleled by Grotowski's presentation of The Constant Prince at the Festival, in which the performer Ryszard Cieslak used the character of Don Fernando as a pretext for an act of self-revelation through an absolute focus on his own micro-performances. Grotowski viewed Cieslak's creation as an example of a "total act" consummated in creative action:

> This act can be attained only out of the experience of one's own life, this act which strips, bares, unveils, reveals, and uncovers. Here an actor should not act but rather penetrate the regions of his own experience with his body and voice (...) At the moment when the actor attains this, he becomes a phenomenon *hic et nunc*; this is neither a story nor the creation of an illusion; it is the present moment. The actor exposes himself and (...) he discovers himself. Yet he has to know how to do this anew each time (...) This human phenomenon, the actor, whom you have before you has transcended the state of his division or duality. This is no longer acting, and this is why it is an *act* (actually what you want to do every day of your life is to act). This is the phenomenon of total action. That is why one wants to call it a total act.[41]

Grotowski is explicit in recognising the therapeutic value of Cieslak's performance and it was this phenomenon of "total action" which Fersen was beginning to discover in his studio experiments and which he was attempting to transfer to the public arena via Le Diavolerie, although it appears that he was more interested in the performer's ability to manipulate and transform the production's scenic elements than he was in the cathartic power of individual psychodramas.

The presentation of The Constant Prince coincided with the publication of a translation of Grotowski's article "Towards a Poor

Theatre" in the first edition of the Italian periodical Teatro, which chose to ignore Fersen's production. Increasingly, the Italian theatrical establishment viewed Fersen's experiments as pale imitations of Grotowski's work, choosing to ignore the fact that a shared mythopoeic perspective and montage style of presentation had resulted in two quite different approaches to the task of excavating the primal memory of the performer and thus the genetic code of the performance impulse rooted within the individual. Where Grotowski would continue to develop his rigorous body-training techniques, Fersen confined his experiments to an exploration of the ludic relationship between a performer and his scenic prop.

In 1973 Fersen revised Le Diavolerie for presentation at the Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw and commenced work on another original piece for that year's Spoleto Festival. Using the production techniques of his earlier piece as a model, Fersen wanted to see whether it was possible to simulate the transic conditions experienced in *gestual* mnemodramas onstage and recreate them afresh for every performance. His initial step toward creating this new work was to film performances of gestual mnemodramas over a two- month period and then require the performers concerned to study the resulting footage, with a view to recreating accurately their performances. The enactment of the gestual sections provided the core of the production, around which Fersen created a text made up of ritual incantations derived from Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Italian, French, English, German, Russian and Spanish:

> To recount this show is impossible; it is a parable of man and his history: from an original Eden to the first act of

> violence (Cain and Abel); to the proliferation of wars; to the quest for power; the modern technological chaos and the consequent existential void; to the oppression of man in prisons and factories; up to the new/ancient Biblical monster the Leviathan to be specific, with its consumeristic fetish (...) and in the end to its final apocalyptic disintegration.[42]

Entitled Leviathan , the final format of the piece was a montage of interactions between performers and scenic props over which was superimposed a textual montage employing techniques of rhythmic speaking derived from the experiments in *spoken mnemodrama*. Once in performance, Fersen quickly discovered that the highly fluid acrobatic gestures which the performers had assumed during the original transic state , could not be reproduced on demand within the structure of a theatre piece:

> The trance gave those bodies a lightness close to a state of levitation. Compared to the elegant and dizzying movements depicted on the video, each attempt at reproduction seemed awkward and without grace. The actors looked like fallen angels, hindered by those same wings which helped them to "fly" in the mnemodramatic trance.[43]

Despite his reservations about the final product, Leviathan proved to be a major success and, as the number of performances increased in response to popular demand, the performers frequently reported that they experienced fleeting moments of trance during the performance. The structured nature of a production had shifted the transic experience from the paidiac to the rational, a refocussing which momentarily transported Fersen's work into the realm of Grotowski's.

In terms of montage, Fersen based the entire creation of Leviathan on the micro-performances of the performers who

constructed their individual montages by altering the "natural" or "spontaneous" behaviour of their original transic states in order to produce a very precise performance "score" which amplified behavioural and psychological processes. The end result of what Eugenio Barba would call a "performer's montage"[44] is actually a restoration of behaviour, a term which Richard Schechner uses to define the creative process in all performance forms from shamanism to aesthetic theatre:

> a restored behaviour is a living behaviour treated the way a film director treats a strip of film. Each piece of film must be re-systemised, reconstructed. This is independent of the causal (social, psychological, technological) systems which have created it: it has its own behaviour. The original "truth"or "motivation" of that behaviour can be lost, ignored or covered, elaborated or distorted by myth. Originating a process - used in the course of rehearsals in order to obtain a new process, the performance - the strips of behaviour are themselves no longer processes but objects, materials.[45]

Viewed from the perspective of Schechner's model, all Fersen's work is a " restoration of behaviour" and in fact traverses Schechner's suggested terrain from (para) shamanism to aesthetic theatre in that his experiments do lead him eventually to theorise the possibility of applying the mnemodramatic model to an existing character in a text. In Il Teatro,Dopo he offers a tantalizingly brief description of Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene [46] as an example of a mnemodrama drawn from the autobiographical level of consciousness in which the character's hands, or rather the perceived blood stains covering them, are transformed into the manipulated prop:

> Dunsinane Castle is already wrapped in premonitions of death, when Lady Macbeth acts out her nocturnal mnemodrama. The mnemodramatic "object," invisible,

> impalpable takes on a suggestive concreteness specifically because of its physical absence. Lady Macbeth manipulates it and gazes at it with horror; she "washes" her hands incessantly, she observes them, she smells them. The hallucination mobilizes all her senses. Around the object her visions rotate, the words come tentatively out of her mouth.[47]

Fersen suggests that the scene provides an excellent vehicle for demonstrating the essentially hallucinatory nature of the mnemodramatic experience, but he appears not to have been interested in pursuing this concept in any practical sense. What his example suggests, however, is that the potential does exist for incorporating the mnemodrama within a traditional theatre context. One could envisage a performer working with the technique at a pre-expressive level of preparation which would of necessity involve a two-stage process commencing with a personal experience of the technique followed by a mnemodrama performed in character, the latter possibly assuming all the trappings of a *surreal psychodrama*. To be of value in the rehearsal process, these pre-expressive exercises would have to be recorded in some way (Fersen's use of videotape in creating Leviathan provides an obvious model) in order that the raw material could be "restored" in performance.

Whilst it may not be possible to credit Fersen as a direct influence,[48] it is nevertheless the case that pre-expressive work by performers focussing specifically on enhancing visual imagery awareness, through the development of a ludic relationship with a prop, has played an important role in the initial stages of creating performance pieces for practitioners such as Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba and Pina Bausch. During his African sojourn with the members

of the Paris-based Centre International de Recherche Theatralè, Peter Brook, for example, created with Yoshi Oida a series of exercises with sticks designed to develop his performer's skills in rhythm, timing, agility, balance, speed and awareness. Through a daily routine of playing, in which he insisted that the sticks be 'followed' and 'listened to'[49] Brook attempted to create the circumstances through which performers might experience the oneiric state of non-ego as they became transically possessed by the presence of the stick. This version of a mnemodrama found its ideal performer in the person of Oida:

> In his hands a stick really does take on a mysterious power. It becomes an extension of his body. The more he works on the stick, the more fundamental it becomes - the stick isn't intended to train just the body and the mind. Somehow the stick can bring both into contact with ultimate reality.[50]

Sticks became the central metamorphosing images in Brook's productions of the Conference of the Birds (1978) and the Mahabharata (1985). Similar exercises using sticks were developed by Roberta Carreri in preparation for her one woman show Judith (1989) [51]. which she created for Barba's Odin Teatret:

> When I work with an exercise for months I begin to form pictures. The body's movements create internal pictures, and I see landscapes in front of me. I experience body positions I have never before been in. The movements become dissected and fragmented.[52]

The willingness to enter a ludic relationship with the prop, to flow with the somatic perceptions, shapes the content of the visionary experience. Carreri used both stick exercises and further experiments with "dissected and fragmented movements" using a chair:

> The cheapest chair I could find that could also be folded up (...) a deck chair, like the ones used on the beach. Some of the first images that came up were of the beach. Which beach ? (...) after working on the chair for a while, an energy with a certain quality of presence arises from within these images. It was not just a puppet-like response. The pattern began to repeat itself like a rhythmical progression.[53]

The resulting production of Judith might best be described as a danced mnemodrama, in which Carreri manipulated a series of props in a montage of continually metamorphosing physical images. It is interesting to note that descriptions of this production focus on the therapeutic quality of the performance in an echo of Grotowski's earlier theatrical productions:

> This is an image of the life of the actor. The actor's actions are not life itself but shadows which are given vitality and materialized on stage. Memories and dreams become visible and exist in the present. The actress does not tell a story or simply analyse the dramatic conflict, but dances with it and within it. At one moment she is Judith, thinking back to what has happened; the next moment she is the subject of what has happened and uses the severed head as the object of her love and an irresistible erotic attraction; the next moment she herself is the object of what is happening with the props, which seem to have a life of their own and direct her responses.[54]

I have chosen to include the work of Pina Bausch in this context because it, too, is essentially a therapeutic theatre of images derived from personal memories, with evocations of childhood and adolescence through which she summons up universal emotions. Her "danced mnemodramas" point to an interdisciplinary application of Fersen's technique which he himself finds difficulty in acknowledging, despite the fact that his work has attracted a number of dancers over the years all of whom have found it to be therapeutic in terms of

proprioceptive awareness. As I indicated in earlier chapters, the mnemodrama is rooted in dance and therefore shares with various contemporary body therapies a concern for evoking the unconscious persona through the body's memory. Dr. Lulu Schweigard[55], for example, has pioneered a technique called *Ideokinesis,* which relies on the coordination of mental imagery to release and activate muscles. Schweigard's students might be asked to visualise movements within the deep structure of their bodies while they are lying still on the floor. Through visualisation Schweigard maintains that it is possible to change the habitual patterns of messages being sent from the brain through nerve pathways to the muscles. Irene Dowd, a dancer and researcher who studied with Schweigard, has integrated *Ideokinesis* into her own work of communicating the relationship between the aesthetics and science of movement and the language of perception:

> Sometimes I imagine that (...) there is a lake in the bed of the pelvic floor. Beneath the lake is a fissure in the earth through which volcanic fire erupts. Meeting the water in the lake, the fire creates steam that sends a geyser out of the once mirror-calm surface of the lake, out through the centre of the torso and up through the top of the head, leaving a sun-lit veil of spray all around the body. [56]

A common factor linking various body therapies is a rejection of the traditional master - apprentice model, where the individual attempts to take on someone else's highly individual movement style, in favour of the individual embarking on a lone journey into the unconscious in order to recover the body's native language. In this sense body therapies are (parashamanic) rituals which acknowledge implicitly a therapeutic link with such transic dance rituals as

Candomble and Tarantism and share a common genesis with mnemodrama in the abandoned, whirling dances of the Maenads of Dionysos.

The examples cited above share a common view of the performer as *bricoleur* , a term used by Levi-Strauss [57] , to connote the idea of the shaman as a transmitter of theatrical creativity. In his parashamanic manifestation he is a performer who is adept at displaying a number of diverse skills [58]. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of the game are always to make do with whatever is at hand - with a set of props and materials which is always finite and also heterogeneous. What it contains may or may not bear any relation to a particular performance project (as is the case in the majority of Fersen's experiments) but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to restore and enrich an individual's creative potential with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. For Grotowski, Brook and Barba, among other leading theatre practitioners and performance artists, the figure of the shaman is the inspiration for transformative theatre, a therapeutic vehicle capable of inducing a (cathartic) change in the consciousness of performer and spectator alike. This concept embraces the practice of a theatre of images in which the *vertical* montage of the performer assumes a position of primary importance and in relation to which Fersen's mnemodrama may be seen as a potentially valuable form of training at the pre-expressive level when the performer works on himself prior to the act of creation.

Alessandro Fersen was once aptly summed up by his friend and theatrical collaborator Emanuele Luzzati in the following phrase:

> For me, Fersen has had the gift or the disgrace of saying or doing things too out of time. Almost always too soon; sometimes also too late.[59]

From this perspective, although a pioneer of post-war occidental experimental theatre, Fersen nevertheless remains a "lost man" almost completely unkown in Europe and America and only remembered in Italy for his productions of the '40s and '50s as the director of the Teatro Stabile in Genoa. The publication of Il Teatro,Dopo in 1980 coincided with the conclusion of his cycle of experiments in mnemodrama and ushered in the experiential phase of the work which still continues at the time of writing. Yet in the past thirteen years no one has emerged from the ranks of performers to continue or develop the work, thereby making it available to a wider public beyond the confines of Fersen's studio. We cannot therefore speak of a "school of Fersen" in the same way that the term is applied to the work of Stanislavski or Grotowski. The reason for this state of affairs lies within the complex character of Fersen himself and his continual struggle to keep his work going in the face of often fierce political opposition and financial deprivation, which has resulted in an almost pathological need on his part to protect every aspect of it in order to keep it pure and free from outside influence. This explains his stubborn refusal to acknowledge any similarity between the techniques of mnemodrama and psychodrama or the obvious parallels between his own mode of research and that undertaken by Grotowski.

Whilst accepting the above both he and his work manage to assert a powerful presence when revealed to the uninitiated, as I discovered when I accompanied Fersen to the international

conference on "Performance , Ritual and Shamanism" organised by the Centre for Performance Research in Cardiff as part of their continuing series examining "points of contact " within the performing arts. In what has now become his standard mode of presentation , Fersen screened "Alle Origini dei Teatro -il Mnemodrama" and followed it with a forum on the development of his work and the philosophy behind it. This was the first occasion I had viewed the tape with an audience who were unfamiliar with Fersen's work and I was interested to note the effect it had on them. The majority appeared to be attracted by the sheer elemental power of what they had seen; by the sudden invasion of something that was both recognisably occidental and potentially archaic at the same time. Inevitably questions were raised regarding the authenticity of the trance experience Fersen claimed that the performers in the video were experiencing and which he attempted to answer with reference to his Candomble experience. By the end of the conference he was besieged by scholars seeking translations of his writings and young performers and students eager to journey to Italy to enrol in his studio and study mnemodrama. When questioned, the latter were not motivated by what they saw as an interesting technique of performance, but by what they perceived as a therapy with the power to 'sensitise them as human beings first and actors second.' [60] A perspective shared by Alfonso M. Di Nola, who summed up the importance of Fersen's work to him as follows:

> we find ourselves in the presence of experiences which are, for Italy, extremely new and profoundly archaic. Ancientness is the rediscovery of a "sacred" level of acting and being belonging to the great cultural traditions which have been forgotten, those, for example, emerging in the whole shamanic, possessorial and dionysiac current,

> disintegrated, broken up or deprived of its significance by the consumeristic and superficial type of culture within which we are immersed. [61]

What Di Nola touches upon is the political dimension of Fersen's work which both gives it its power (realised by the participants at Cardiff) and envelopes it in continual controversy. He is not a modern artist but a traditionalist imbued with a mythopoeic spirit and determined to actualise from his own perspective the ancient healing power of the theatre.

Fersen has now concluded his own practical journey of discovery. Having developed and codified the various stages of *mnemodrama*, he has abandoned practical research in favour of writing and a return to his first love, philosophy. His practical work is still in demand however and he conducts a weekly workshop in the techniques of *mnemodrama* in his studio in Rome. A practical technique having been clearly established, Fersen's work now requires willing disciples who are prepared to embark upon the next stage of the journey - the application of *mnemodrama* to contemporary occidental theatre training and practise, and to the developing discipline of Drama Therapy.

Notes

1. Alessandro Fersen, "Itinerario di una Ricerca" trans. Lorenza Venditelli in La Dimensione Perduta (Rome: privately printed, 1978), n.pag.
2. Bonnie Marranca, "Alessandro Fersen" in Performing Art Journal PAJ 24 vol.viii no 3. (1984), p. 20.
3. Closing remarks by Alessandro Fersen to the international conference on "Performance, Ritual and Shamanism" held at the Centre for Performance Research (Cardiff): 8 - 10 January 1993.
4. I am thinking particularly of Bausch's use of montage in her piece "1980". See also Nadine Meisner's interview with Pina Bausch, "Come Dance with Me" in Dance & Dancers (November, 1992) pp: 12 - 16.
5. Bonnie Marranca, "Alessandro Fersen" (1984), p. 22.
6. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro,Dopo trans. Lorenza Venditelli (Rome: Bari, Laterza, 1980), pp. 82 - 84.
7. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview, (Rome), 12 March 1992.
8. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview, (Rome), 12 March 1992.
9. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro,Dopo (1980), p. 83.
10. R. D. Laing, The Politics of Experience (London: Penguin Books, 1967), pp: 120 - 139.

11. Peter Pitzele, "Adolescents Inside Out" in Psychodrama: Inspiration and Technique eds. Paul Holmes & Marcia Karp, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 16.
12. Paul Holmes, "Classical Psychodrama: An Overview" in Psychodrama: Inspiration and Technique eds. Paul Holmes & Marcia Karp, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 12.
13. Peter Pitzele, "Adolescents Inside Out" (1991), p. 17.
14. Peter Pitzele (1991), p. 23.
15. Peter Pitzele (1991), p. 30.
16. Peter Pitzele (1991), p. 17.
17. J.L. Moreno, "Drama as Therapy" in The Uses of Drama ed. John Hodgson, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), p. 138.
18. Steve Mitchell, "Therapeutic theatre: a para-theatrical model of Dramatherapy" in Dramatherapy Theory and Practice 2 ed. Sue Jennings, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp: 51 - 67.
    Uses Grotowski's "poor theatre" techniques as a model for therapy that lays stress on an artistic enquiry into healing from a ritual perspective.
19. Bonnie Maranca "Alessandro Fersen" (1984), p. 26.
20. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview (Rome), 3 June 1990.
    Apart from their meetings, Fersen has read various articles on Grotowski's work printed in the Italian press, although he claims to know nothing about Grotowski's current research based in Pontedera. He also claims that Grotowski has copies of both Dimensione Perduta and Il Teatro, Dopo. Neither is mentioned anywhere in Grotowski's writings.

21. Jennifer Kumiega, The Theatre of Grotowski (London: Methuen,1987), p. 120.
22. Jerzy Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre (London: Methuen,1976), p. 16.
23. Jerzy Grotowski (1976), p. 212.
24. Jerzy Grotowski (1976), p. 175.
25. Zbigniew Osinski, Grotowski and His Laboratory, (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), p. 112.
26. Jerzy Grotowski (1976), p. 38
27. Alessandro Fersen, personal interview, (Rome) 9 March 1992
28. Jerzy Grotowski (1976), pp. 37 - 46
29. Jerzy Grotowski, (1976) p. 202
30. Charles Marowitz, The Act of Being (London: Secker & Warburg,1978), p. 100.
31. Jerzy Grotowski (1976), p. 34.
32. Roger N. Walsh, The Spirit of Shamanism (New York: Mandala,1990), p. 179.
33. Zbigniew Osinski, "Grotowski Blazes the Trails" in The Drama Review 37 no.1 T129, (1991), p. 107.
34. Michael Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 441.
35. Michael Taussig (1987), p. 441.
36. Sergei Eisenstein, The Film Sense, (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), p.181-183.
37. Franco Ruffini, "Horizontal and Vertical Montage in the Theatre" trans. Susan Bassnett in New Theatre Quarterly 5 (England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 35.

38. Franco Ruffini (1986), p. 30.

39. Franco Ruffini (1986), p. 34.

40. Giorgio Polacco, "Della Ricerca, del Laboratorio e di Noi" (interview with Alessandro Fersen) trans. Lorenza Vendittelli in La Dimensione Perduta, (Rome: privately printed,1978), n.pag.

41. Zbigniew Osinski, Grotowski and His Laboratory, (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), pp: 85-86.

42. Giorgio Polacco (1978), n.pag.

43. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro, Dopo, (1980), p. 102.

44. Eugenio Barba, "Montage" in The Secret Art of The Performer , eds. Eugenio Barba & Nicola Savarese (London/New York: Routledge 1991), p. 160.

45. Richard Schechner, Between Theatre & Anthropology (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 35.

46. William Shakespeare, Macbeth Act V scene 1.

47. Alessandro Fersen, Il Teatro,Dopo, (1980), p. 85.

48. Apart from his meetings with Grotowski, Fersen met Peter Brook at the Spoleto Festival in 1974 where Brook presented a version of "Conference of The Birds." Eugenio Barba has been attempting to make contact with Fersen, according to Fersen, since last year.

49. John Heilpern, The Conference of The Birds (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p.169.

50. John Heilpern (1979), p. 169.

51. I witnessed a performance of Judith at Leicester University in Spring 1988. The performance was followed by a workshop in which Carreri demonstrated her exercises with sticks.

52. Roberta Carreri, "The Actor's Journey: Judith", in New Theatre Quarterly (England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 138.

53. Erik Exe Christoffersen, The Actor's Way (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), pp: 150-151.

54. Erik Exe Christoffersen (1993), p. 149.

55. Louise Steinman, The Knowing Body (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), p. 19.

56. Louise Steinman (1986), p. 20

57. Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Sorcerer and His Magic" in Structural Anthropology (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 185.

58. Peter Brook has always maintained that his ideal performer, the perfect instrument, would be an acrobat, juggler, singer, dance and clown, as well as possessing the more conventional occidental theatre skills.
see: A.C.H. Smith, Orghast At Persepolis, (London: Eyre, Methuen, 1972), p.59.

59. Emanuele Luzzati, "Testimonianza Di Un'Epoca" trans. Lorenza Vendittelli in La Dimensione Perduta" (Rome: privately printed, 1978), n.pag.

60. Betty Caplan, "Points of Contact" in Plays & Players, (March 1993), p. 37.

61. Alfonso M. Di Nola, "Fra Teatro E Sapienza" trans. Lorenza Vendittelli in La Dimensione Perduta (Rome: privately printed, 1978), n.pag.

Appendix 1

THE MNEMODRAMA - STUDIO FERSEN

COURSE BROCHURE

The Mnemodrama - literally a "drama of memory" - is a psycho-theatrical technique of anthropological matrix, finalised to self-knowledge and to the expression of one's deep/profound identity.

Historical Data

The creation of mnemodrama is tied to the research carried out "in the field" by the director Alessandro Fersen in 1958 during a prolonged study sojourn amid the ethnic population living on the outskirts of Bahia Salvador, Brazil and practising the Candomble. This is an old ritual of African origin transplanted to the western coast of Latin America at the time of the slave trade. The Candomble is a cult of "possession", considered as a means of contact between man and the various other divinities which are cult objects in this still primitive world. The deep states of consciousness - states of trance - which accompany the possessory event, have the power of arousing extraordinary interior energies ignored in daily reality: it is not by chance that the rite's followers ascribe them a "divine" origin.

The "Fersenian" project of a psycho-theatrical technique, constituting the modern equivalent of those archaic procedures for descending within the profound and for the original expression of one's buried potential, was born out of these anthropological experiences. The experimentation, started in the laboratory of the "Studio Fersen" and conducted with the "technical" advice of famous anthropologists, ethnologists and psychologists, has led to the

elaboration of the technique of "mnemodrama" in its various expressions: "spoken", "gestual", "visionary", "musical." Presented and introduced at specialist congresses and conferences in Italy and abroad, today "mnemodrama" is placed at the avant-garde of research into behavioural techniques in the psychological and pedagogical fields as well as in the theatrical one.

A Psychic Training for the Modern Man

During the 42nd World Congress of the "American Society of Psychodrama", inaugurated with the screening of a documentary (produced by the "Studio") on "mnemodrama," Fersen has defined this "method" of his as a 'technique aimed at strengthening the personal feeling of existence.' The definition has to be understood in a broad sense: in an era characterised by an increasing mental and emotional flattening, by widespread states of anxiety and by a progressive loss of personal identity, the "mnemodrama" has proved, at a statistical level (it has been practised in the "Studio Fersen" for 25 years), to be a precious instrument for an existential rehabilitation, based on self-knowledge, and as a strong stimulus for artistic and intellectual creativity.

In this sense, there is a difference between the "mnemodrama" and other imported psychic disciplines such as Zen and Yoga because, contrary to these, it has its roots in the *humus* of European culture and thus corresponds to the sensitivity and the psychic structure of Western man. Furthermore, there is a distinction between the "mnemodrama" and psychodrama (naturally also with psychoanalysis and all other forms of clinical psychotherapy), for it is directed to individuals who are fundamentally healthy and equipped with a solid

psychic constitution enabling them to deal with the overwhelming experiences of this "trip" inside one's personal and ancestral memory.

Application Procedures (How to Participate)

The "Studio Fersen" has been organising "mnemodrama" stages since 1958 within the scope of its activities as an "open laboratory": these stages have a trimestral duration (one session per week) and can be prolonged if agreed by the members of each single participating group. Admission is conditional upon a series of tests which take place before the beginning of the sessions; participation is not subject to age limits. Each stage is reserved for a "closed number" of participants with a limit of ten people per group.

Curriculum

The Fersen Scenic Arts Studio was created by the producer/director Alessandro Fersen in 1957, with the authorisation of the Ministry for Public Education. Since then the Studio has developed its activities without interruptions, promoting experimental and cultural researches, setting up teaching courses and staging plays. In 1959 it created, with the co-operation of the Casa Cinematografica Vides, a school for cinema actors; the selection was carried out throughout Italy by a committee formed by Luchino Visconti, Vittorio Gassman, Gillo Pontecorvo, Franco Cristaldi and by Fersen himself.

In 1959 the Studio staged a "Commedia dell'Arte" entitled Sganarello and the King's Daughter interpreted by actors graduated from the Studio in Rome. In 1960 it staged a second play, The Theatre of the Absurd, which anticipated a formula that later became famous. In 1961 it created as an experiment a musical comedy section in collaboration with Carlo Alberto Cappelli. In 1962 it presented the

"Psychoscenic Actor's Technique" and the first stage of the mnemodrama, based on anthropological researches, at the Universite du Theatre des Nations in Paris. In 1964 the Studio organised an international theatre seminar: the theme was "Theatre Today: Function and Language." In 1965 a second seminar was held at the Studio entitled "Stage Problems."

At the Festival dei Due Mondi, Spoleto, in 1967 it staged La Diavolerie, a research performance based on a text by Alessandro Fersen (the same show was re-staged in 1988 at the Teatro della Cometa, Rome; and was taken on tour to the most important Italian cities in 1972; at the Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw with a Polish version in 1973). In 1969 the Studio participated in the National Congress of the Directors of Psychiatric Hospitals, with a report on the dissociation of the actor's personality. In 1970 it gave a seminar on "Tragedy from text to stage" for High School teachers, organised by the Ministry for Public Instruction in Rome. In 1971 it staged the Italian premiere of Peter Handke's Insulting the Audience.

In 1972 the Studio presented the "Psycho-scenic Technique of the Actor" in a seminar held at the Sorbonne in Paris as part of the "Ten International Days of Theatre" Festival. In 1974 it staged Leviathan by Alessandro Fersen, based on the technique of mnemodrama (the play was staged in various Italian cities in 1975 and was included in the repertoire of the Teatro Stabile di Bolzano in 1976). In 1978, at the Museum of Modern Art in Rome, it presented a two-week programme on "The Lost Dimension" within which the mnemodrama was presented for the first time in its three-fold configuration with the help of the Research Group of the Studio.

In 1979, at the Teatro Politecnico in Rome, a conference-performance on "Mnemodrama and the Archiac Feast" was organised with the help of the research group. In 1980, a seminar held at the CRT in Milan on "Mnemodrama, Profound Latitude", a seminar in Naples on "Mnemodrama and the Archaic Feast" and an open laboratory at the Theatre Institute at the University of Rome. In 1981, a seminar at the Centre Pompidou in Paris on "The Lost Dimension" with video tape show and live demonstrations; a round table discussion at the Theatre Institute at the University of Rome on Il Teatro,Dopo by Alessandro Fersen, which theorises the techniques of the mnemodrama; a seminar on the "Notion of Feast" at the Institute of Theatre, with the participation of eminent anthropologists and ethnologists and with a screening of documentaries on folklore. In 1982, "Three lessons on the psycho-scenic techniques of the actor" at the University Opera of Rome and production of a medium-length film entitled "At the Origins of Theatre, the Mnemodrama."

In 1983-84, two four-month long seminars on "The School of the Spectator" and on "Psycho-scenic Technique and Mnemodrama"at the University "La Sapienza" of Rome; a seminar with a viewing of the film "Alle origini del Teatro - il Mnemodrama" at the University in Genoa; a seminar in Lecce with two weeks of mnemodramatic training.

In 1984, the opening of the International Congress on Psychodrama in New York with a viewing of "Alle origini del Teatro - il Mnemodrama" and subsequent debate; similar seminars at the Theatre Department of Yale University and New York State University (Stony Brook) and at the Italian Institute for Culture in New York. In 1984-85, a seminar with a showing of the film at the famous avant-

garde theatre, Cafe la Mama, in New York; seminars, viewings and debates at the Academy of Arts in Naples, at the University in Pisa, at the Teatro Stabile in Bolzano, at the Arts of Representation association in Vicenza. In December 1985, there was an interdisciplinary conference on "The Theatrical Origins of Culture" with the co-operation of Massimo Cacciari, Alfonso M. Di. Nola, Alessandro Fersen, Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, at the Teatro Politecnico of Rome; there was a conference by Emanuele Luzzati on "The Actor and Scenography" at the Limonaia of Villa Torlonia in Rome.

In April 1987, at the Teatro Piccolo Eliseo, there was a seminar performance on "The Theatres of Mourning and Eros in the Archaic World". Speakers: Alfonso M. Di Nola and Alessandro Fersen; actors: Piera degli Esposti and Cosimo Cinieri. In May 1987, there was a debate between Fersen and the public on "Theatrical Quality" which was held at the Studio headquarters (Limonaia of Villa Torlonia).

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Appendix 2

OF THE EGO AND THE NON-EGO IN THE THEATRE

by

Alessandro Fersen

- Fiction ? fiction !
- Fiction, Reality !
- No, do not believe it ! Fiction fiction !
- What fiction ! Reality, reality, gentlemen ! Reality !

And in that confusion, the stage manager in Six Characters in Search of an Author , like King Claudius, when the performance commissioned by Hamlet from the players begins dangerously to mimic the recent court misdeeds:

- Lights ! Lights ! Lights !

From Pirandello to today, very little light has been shed upon the theatrical ambiguity, in spite of the spotlights pointing from contrasting angles. The surveys do not give guidance. The confessions of those directly involved renounce themselves: betrayed by the use of an inadequate terminology.

There are still those who believe in the reality of the scenic event and - dear nineteenth -century jargon - "losing oneself in the role", "living" (Stanislavski-like) his character. Which does not prevent them from going backstage, unscathed by the life so intensely lived only moments before, beaded at the most with strictly physiological perspiration. And there is he who - actor of mature and disillusioned professionalism - honestly swears on his art as pure

fiction of great craft which can exhibit with detachment the believable appearance of non-existent passions. But maybe he in turn, neglects Hamlet's advice to the players:

> Be not too tame neither (...)

Do not let yourselves be domesticated, do not let yourselves be too dominated (...) by an excessively conscious trade, precisely. There is a deceitful lexical tyranny which is illicitly exercised over our conscious choices: these words, cut out with hasty scissors from the fabric of concrete experience, are aimed at simplifying at the expense of profound comprehension. Thus, these communication instruments of ours are exploiting us: unaware or, in fact, guilty of not periodically re-comparing them with the realities on which their jurisdiction is exercised.

What is fiction and what is life lived on stage ? But do we really want to believe that an appropriate composition of vocal inflections accurately chosen to imitate the impulses of passions or that a masterly sequence of physical attitudes and mimic expressions, do we really want to believe that such a display of peripheral superficiality creates theatre ? Is the theatre ? Because this, and nothing but this, is the meaning of the term "fiction", or the more sophisticated term "detachment." And, on the other hand, do we really want to believe that the actor is such a biological "monstrum", organically structured for a life in slices, with suspensions regulated by the division of scenes and acts ? Because this, and nothing but this , is the meaning of "living" on stage, of believing in the reality of the theatrical events.

By still passing such cultural pebbles back and forth, the research is buried in sand. It is instead necessary to skin them, these words, in

order to see with one's own eyes the raw flesh which their sclerosis petrifies in distorted definitions. It will then be discovered that the theatrical "quality" is something else. It will be necessary to proceed by consecutive approximations resorting to models of behaviour offered by an interdisciplinary comparison.

Let us observe, unobserved, the child's game. Here is an activity which we will qualify, I believe, without difficulty as elementary (but careful ! Elementary does not mean simple: on the contrary ....) In its elementarity it reveals unexpected ambiguities: the child plays and he knows he is playing. He pretends ? The sum of energies which he spends in the game, the fidelistic impulse he puts into it - with tremendous seriousness - cannot be reduced to lifeless fiction. There would be no fun, no *joie de vivre,* no emotional generosity in the child, if he were conscious that his game is pure fiction. He "believes" in his game. He may, if ever, in certain circumstances, pretend to play: when he plays, he does not pretend. And there is, however, in him at the same time a "retroconscience" which warns him of the imaginary character of the game, of the fictitious personality of his partners, of the illusory tenuity of the scenery which is the frame of the ludic event. An involuntary wound or the annoying intervention of adult authority is enough for the consistency of the game to evaporate and for crude reality to intrude into that enchanted space.

Here, then, is an existential condition in which the protagonist is actor and spectator of himself, thanks to the simultaneous presence of two inner attitudes variably changing according to the vicissitudes of the game. In conclusion, an inner area exists which belongs neither to fiction nor to the reality of real life; a territory in which the two "egos"

co-exist and condition each other in turn according to primary behaviour which cannot be assimilated to external simulations, nor to physical or mental certainty. But terms like the English *play* or the German *spielen* (which simultaneously indicate game playing and theatrical playing) are witnesses to a sure kindred between game and theatre. And they hypothesize the possibility of an independent theatrical attitude, emancipated from the traditional alternative between fiction and dramatic fidelity.

The Wailer from Basilicata (a southern region of Italy bordering with Calabria to the west, Puglia to the east and Campania to the north), who raises her ancient ritual tears over the dead, reaching heights of paroxysmal desperation, does not neglect, in the meantime, the progress of the ceremony which was entrusted to her, observes the duties of hospitality towards the mourners, keeps an eye on the payment of the oblations due to her for her professional performance. Simple "technical hypocrisy" ? Modern anthropology more subtly recognises in the Wailer a semi-oneirical state, in which the role of the mourner is not disturbed by the attentive observation of what happens nearby.

Even more astonishing is the case of the Bergdama: during the ceremony, the change from the strength of the grief to the interval, in which there is conversation and laughter, is instantaneous and followed, after the interval, by the desperate resumption of tears flowing in abundance. The conclusions which from such attitudes, exemplified in numerous cases, are drawn by the anthropologist ? The establishment of a "duality of presence" institutionalised in the archaic funeral lamentation. And thus the possibility of two attitudes

apparently antithetical - a sincere emotional participation and the mechanical practice of a trade: a contradiction which melts in the particular psychic status, in which the ceremony takes place.

A duality of presence in the ego itself had already been perceived by classical psychiatry, which recognised in the so-called "molecular dissociation" typical of schizophrenia (quite distinct from the "massive dissociation" of hysteria), the fleeting co-existence of two different "egos" : or at least a more rapid interchange, a more elastic fluctuation between the two states of consciousness. More interesting evidence is offered today by psychoanalysis on certain interpersonal behaviours of a neurotic nature. In the transfert, which is realised in the first phase of psychoanalytic treatment, the patient, as is well known, transfigures the analyst in the paternal and /or maternal figure, charging this imaginary kinship with contradictory emotions. The neurotic thus behaves like the actor with his scenic partner: he attributes to the psychiatrist the identity of a character and he believes in this temporary character with all the strength of his emotional commitment. (The analyst must, in turn, often defend himself from the emotional trap set by his pathological partner ....). There is, however, in the patient the other "ego", aware of the "performance" which the other "ego" is improvising with his psychoanalyst-character, which he invests with all his traumas, his complexes, his grudges and his unfulfilled loves. Thus the transfert moves on a problematic ground which does not pertain to pure fiction nor to pure reality, instituting between patient and analyst a relationship bearing certain similarities to that which is established between two actors on stage.

These quick notes on possible approaches in the theatrical area, started by such different cultural places of origin, allow the identification of a scenic behaviour which, even with its autonomous characters, could have some connection with those "second" states of ludic, ceremonial and psychopathological nature. I must, at this point, reveal the results of years of experiments, conducted in my laboratory, on the onset of the theatrical event in the actor and in the community context in which he acts. The examples provided by the actor's "psychoscenic technique" could be quite numerous, but I will restrict myself to certain considerations which can be gathered from the practice of "mnemodrama."

Terminal point of an itinerary towards the profound, the mnemodrama reveals, firstly, the presence of a state of consciousness whose depth is dependent upon the different dosages of control and abandonment which I would call dodecaphonic, since so insensible is the passage between one level and the other, following a psychic continuity in which any clean cut or any attempt at schematisation would be arbitrary. Every single mnemodrama generally attests itself - in relation to the subjects and the moments - at a defined level, but can, during its course, go from the "highs" to the "lows" and vice-versa, of this internal keyboard. Extreme landing place is a state of trance (voluntary: rare example for the Western mentality), in which, however, a subtle margin of control persists (at least at a level of physical safeguard) and also the memory of what happened, after the conclusion of the experiment, even if full of gaps, can still be retrieved. But there should be no confusion between the mnemodrama, even in its disturbing phenomenology, and the psychic dissociation clinically

well defined, in the course of which a different "ego" installed itself in the consciousness of the patient, expelling the usual "ego" for the whole duration of the crisis. In the mnemodrama this sharp alternation between the two egos (the private one and the scenic one) does not exist. And maybe the boundary between the basic sanity of the theatrical event and pathological behaviour lies in this difference. The fundamental balance of the human being resists even the exceptional measure of the psychic tension (which may even act as an element of compensation for possible lack of psychic balance), of the actor.

There is further information given by the mnemodrama which allows us to put forward another hypothesis on the dimension of the scenic event. Taken into consideration in its more restrictive meaning, the mnemodrama as "drama of the memory", is charged with an emotionality which often seems superior to that which was originally experienced in the real situation to which it refers. The intensity from which it draws appears to be multiplied: similar for example to the night-time dream which knows emotional powers without comparison with the daytime events that it symbolises. And I would be inclined to attribute to this transfiguring attitude - and thus to the theatrical life - the passion's paroxysm which pushes the great protagonists of dramaturgy beyond any naturalistic reference.

Here, then, is the authentic theatrical quality as it emerges from interdisciplinary explorations and laboratory experiences conducted on a statistical scale. Different from the psychic dissociation known to psychiatry, characterised by a certain analogy to the semi-oneiric state of the archaic lamentation, concretely related to the rules of the game of childhood. The duality, which swarms in it, feeding a symbiosis of

unceasing conflict between two presences of opposite sign, must not deceive us about the organic oneness of theatrical behaviour: only a conceptual vivisection can distinguish and separate the two moments of abandonment and control. In the workman-like concreteness of the theatrical work this distinction or division is unthinkable. A mathematical formula such as "abandonment + control = scenic behaviour" would be the sign of a regression to abstract schematisations.

The scenic latitude glides between the level of real life and that of external mimesis, following an adventurous diagram of oscillations which from the extreme pole of trance extends itself up to the cautious control dictated by a superior histrionism. Two abstract poles in their schematic purity which have no use other than that of being points of reference. The actor does not act in the first person, nor does he "become another" by himself, following an old textbook definition. It is not the Ego and it is not the other which occupies the theatrical space: from their encounter and conflict there emerges instead in its scenic physicalisation, the ambiguous and fascinating figure of that which I will then call the *Theatrical Non -Ego*. In all its oneiric lucidity, with all its scenic weight. In this palpable non-being of it lies the true, profound existential paradox of the actor. The cry of the Father at the end of the comedy ("Reality, reality, gentlemen ! Reality ") has this specific meaning: the six characters oppose the dimension of their own non-ego to the actors, who tried to adapt the dramatic event to their own private - professional egos. Confronted with the blind mimesis of the potboilers/money-grubbers (resented as a parody and an offence) they claim their own "reality" all the more dense when more

unreal. In this ethereal intensity the more authentic timbre of theatrical quality can be perceived.

Outside the metaphor, these notes only want to be a contribution to the factual knowledge of the theatrical event. After dismantling the nomenclature of convenience, the cliches, the philological abstractions, it seems necessary to formulate, at last, some hypothesis which must be dictated by the cognitive instruments of our culture understood in an interdisciplinary sense, and then to proceed then to a redefinition of the theatre and of its specific action within society.

Appendix 3

MNEMODRAMA AND SUBALTERN CULTURES

Alessandro Fersen in conversation with

Alfonso M. Di Nola

Fersen

Now that you have witnessed some mnemodramatic experiences in my Studio and have noted how they are based on psychic procedures provoked by a particular relationship between the actor and the prop, causing a state of "trance", you have to ask yourself the first question. In formulating this anthropological - theatrical hypothesis I was inspired by some models and examples offered by cultural anthropology: prehistoric examples such as the rhomb and drum, or protohistorical examples like the thyrsus of the Bacchantes. Does anything similar exist in the feasts of subaltern cultures which you have explored and on which I read your reports - for example the Feast of Saint Domenico Abbate in Abruzzi - ?

Di Nola

If I understand you correctly, you are talking about the use of external stimuli, which you theatrically call "props", that create an operation symbolising (...)

Fersen

Exactly. The prop, during the mnemodrama, becomes the symbol of something else, which in turn constitutes the theme of the mnemodrama itself.

Di Nola

In all cultures - not only in the subaltern ones - rituals with a festive character (we would here need to agree on the term "festive"), always rely on the meanings which the group attributes to the symbols. The most classic and current example, which I myself have studied, is that of the cult of the "serpent" in Abruzzi. The snake is present as a "festive" object, but the group's lived experience transforms it into images of pain, hope, joy and tension all at the same time: there is therefore an ambivalence inserted in the festive context. With regards to the use of the object as material of the popular festive context, one must bear in mind the profound ambivalence of the term "feast." We, in our consumeristic society, have practically destroyed it. But at the level of traditional communities it maintains a multivalence and an ambiguity of its own in the sense that whoever participates in the feast is the bearer of a profound human drama which is, in the first phase, not in the least a fullness of time - and thus an acquisition of good, of prosperity - but often sorrow, suffering, to become, after the festive release, after the freeing from anguish, a moment of fullness, the moment of vitality. Whereas in a feast such as that of Saint Gennaro (Patron Saint of Naples) which most certainly does not belong to a traditional society but to tourists, there is only a big collective "hubbub" where the fundamental element is missing - the presence of the man who suffers. In the feast centred on the snake as a symbol these two contrasting valencies exist and thus the two phases through which the group passes.

In order to give another example of a traditional feast, a similar phenomenon occurs around another object represented by that strange iconographic, not liturgic, symbol which is the Trinity of Vallepietra, the last municipality of Lazio on the border with Abruzzi, where the annual arrival of the faithful has considerably increased in the last three to four years (up to one million two hundred thousand people between May and October). In this case the object is a triple figure, repeated , with Byzantine like eyes, strongly suggestive and influencing. This figure - often wrongly interpreted by the faithful themselves who falsely call it "The Madonna" - becomes the centre of a collective psychodrama in which the symbolism is relived and transformed always in two phases: the phase of aching intensity of the man naked in front of power, followed by the phase of relaxation which sometimes, in the case of Vallepietra, reaches obscenity.

Fersen

This multivalent interpretation of the festive event is of extreme interest to me , for it may explain a similar parabola which regularly comes true during the course of the mnemodrama. The first phase is a phase of abysmal anguish, multiplied - in my opinion - with respect to the possible anguishes of real life : even if I always suspected this state of anguish to be accompanied by a thread of happiness, of subterranean joy. Subsequently, hours later or the day after, the moment of vital intensity, of joy, of fullness comes. I have noticed the presence of these two phases almost statistically, with only a few exceptions - reducible to the fact that the mnemodrama, in this case, was not acted in full. This correspondence between a laboratory

experience and the essence of ancient festive recurrence seems to me to be quite significant.

Di Nola

From what I was able to observe in the course of the experiments in your studio - I would see a correspondence also in another aspect. Within the anguish experienced by one of your young actors there evidently was a moment of gratification, of happiness, represented by a gestural, clearly gestural, attempt to go back to childhood. He was, I think, a young Muslim who, at the moment of maximum concentration on what you call the prop, entered a state of profound sorrow because he was sensing a disturbing personal situation, a sad story of his own, on the other side of the prop. However, he was at the same time recovering his lost paradise, childhood, and was communicating this to the others (naturally, for those who could decode it) by means of a theatrical gesture of his own, that is to say, the Muslim prayer he was repeating from childhood. Thus, this correspondence between your mnemodrama and the two moments of the feast most certainly exist.

I would like to ask you one thing: the techniques which I have seen you use resemble techniques of other kinds of cultural experiences and, in them, what you call the prop becomes an important element. This prop I have seen used in two different ways: either it is a <u>non</u> - movable prop - for example, the door in a certain phase of your experiences - or else there is a prop that is moved, manipulated by the person who is experiencing the mnemodrama. This second aspect of your technique is particularly interesting because in all cases in which

we use exterior objects in other experiences - not in your theatrical one but, for example, in Yoga - the concentration, the meditation, the loss of conscious awareness and the regaining of it, are always subject to the non movable condition of the prop. Namely, the object must be non movable, even if it constitutes part of the body as in the case, for example, of the monasteries of Athos, in which the monks reach conditions similar to those you reach in your laboratory through the contemplation of their navels. In my experience the manipulation of the sacred object by the cult member is unknown, whereas I was under the impression that in some of your experiments this manipulation became particularly important. Why are you reaching this technical form which modifies what we know, deep down, about the object - person relationship in experiences of this kind ?

Fersen

The use of the door which is an immovable prop is part of the technique (*Neutral play with prop*) that precedes the terminal technique which is that of the mnemodrama. As you have seen, it is a technique which is realised on a collective level and, at least in theory, on a more naturalistic and psychological level (even though the latest experiments, which you have seen, demonstrate an overcoming of possible psychological assumptions and a dive into a strange experience which borders on a sort of collective mnemodrama). But it is still essentially a door, a stage element with its own individuality and its own function: it is a door made to be opened and closed. On the other hand, the manipulation of the prop in mnemodrama is suggested because it is already expressive per se in that it resorts to the secondary quality of the prop itself - form, colour, a particular sensitivity to the

touch - making the unleashing of deep forces and behaviours which are beyond our everyday psychology easier.

I must also tell you that I do theatre and thus I aim for expression, even if it is reached by starting at the deepest levels of the ego. Thus I am in a different position with regards to techniques, like those of Yoga, whose goal is a form of ataraxia, of immobility and interior contemplation. Furthermore, even if you do not consider the theatrical factor, I move within Western culture and in favour of the Western man. Personally, I suspect that, for us Westerners, the application of Oriental techniques, born of millennia of cultural experiences very far from our own mentality, is not workable and I do not know if they can be adopted by us except at a level of intellectual experience.

Di Nola

I would like to ask you one further question: in the past three to four years we have been able to verify the surfacing (not expected and, I would say, not welcome from our point of view) of the theme of death, of the anguish of death amid the young. Statistically we know that there is an increase in the suicide rate amongst the young. We also know, thanks to a series of surveys conducted "in the field", that beneath seemingly great explosions of joy, for example the ephemeral joy of the metropolitan Indian, there is an emptiness identifiable with the sense of death. Now, within the experiences of your laboratory, does this sense of death, this living through experiences by means of the prop - movable or non-movable - the reappearance of that which Freud discovered as one of the "fundamental instincts" after 1914, does it emerge or does it not emerge ? This particularly interests me.

Fersen

As a procedure - I distinguish procedure from content - the mnemodrama is already a kind of death, an initiatory death. It is conceived precisely in these terms, and here all your boundless doctrine has been of great comfort to me, helping me to work on the basis of an anthropological - theatrical hypothesis. The state of mnemodrama, I was saying, is a kind of initiatory death, death of the initiated who is then reborn in that different dimension of which we have spoken. As for the contents, almost every mnemodrama presents a state of annihilation, at the very limit of existential endurance: and I am troubled every time by the abyss of existential suffering, of self-reduction that these young people, even the more cheerful ones, carry within themselves. I must say that, in 15 years of experience in this field, this extreme state of denial, this fight against self-denial has always emerged. I could not say if today this phenomenon has been emphasised: before it was socially masked, but it was always present, so much so that there have been years when I stopped making mnemodramas because I could not cope with the tension and responsibility. Afterwards, it was the young people themselves who asked for it again. In any case, I am really convinced that in the presence of this strong call of the instinct of death, the mnemodrama itself bordering somehow on the interior of death, redeems the individual from death itself and brings back the experience of the fullness of life, at least temporarily.

Di Nola

Evidently a death to be understood not only as a physical or psychological extinction, but also to be recognised as a series of adequate

or equivalent or homologous signals which can be interpreted as the father, or the return to the mother's womb, which I was able to verify in one of the experiences of the actors, or the terror of opening a door, or the fear of the unknown which lies on the other side of the door. We are close to all techniques having an initiatory character which have a reintegrative value of man in a lost condition of his own. The extreme importance of your experiments consists of the fact that they prove the actuality, the acute, disturbing, heavy modernity of the initiating techniques which the cultures have structured as a form of defence against the risk of not being historical (Heidegger and subsequently De Martino). Cultures have invented certain systems, initiations, which help transform the dead into the living, to open up the individual to a new life; we have lost these meanings, but have a deep need for them, circulating inside our times. And I would say that the present dispersions, the non-meanings, the non-sense, come directly from a condition of chaos - which is the one preceeding your technique of mnemodrama - to a situation of freedom. When I speak of the recovery of actual contemporary meanings in techniques of initiation, I am far from referring to the initiations of secret societies as fundamental structures of archaic cultures which we have totally obliterated. Our initiations have become debased initiation techniques: they teach the young how to build the car, or how to cure an illness - all types of initiation ordered by the need for profit in the consumer society. Instead, the archaic initiation reached the depth, the root of the exposed creature: and thus yours is a return, an answer to the thirst for "being" that there is. In Fersen there is this, which at first may seem like confusion but then becomes extreme logical clarity, this meeting

between the being of today and the being already in the cultural future, but using, to create it, all that we have in our past. We must remember what G.B. Vico said: that the youngest in the world, and thus those who can give the most, are those who lived in the more ancient times, who lived at the beginning of the world. And so, going back to a perspective creation of the future, at the beginning of the world, we must bring back to an aged world such as ours the values of human authenticity and of youth, which consumerism has destroyed. I think this, all things considered, is the meaning of Fersen's work.

Appendix 4

LADY MACBETH'S MNEMODRAMA

by

Alessandro Fersen

> Out; damned spot ! out, I say ! - One; two:
> why, then 'tis time to do't. - Hell is murky. - Fie,
> my Lord, fie ! a soldier, and afeard ? - What need
> we fear who knows it, when none can call our power
> to accompt ? - Yet who would have thought the old
> man to have had so much blood in him ?
> (*Macbeth* V : 1)

Lady Macbeth, lantern in hand, advances in an unreal glow. The Doctor and the Lady assist frozen in terror, not just because of the terrible truths coming to light in the broken sentences of the Queen, but also for the unnatural state of her person and her speech. The character reaches here the highest tragic levels.

Dunsinane Castle is already wrapped in premonitions of death, when Lady Macbeth acts out her nocturnal mnemodrama. The mnemodramatic object, invisible, impalpable, takes on a suggestive concreteness specifically because of its physical absence. Lady Macbeth manipulates it and gazes at it with horror: she "washes" her hands incessantly, she observes them, she smells them. The hallucination mobilises all her senses. Around the object her visions rotate, the words come tentatively out of her mouth.

The staring eyes do not take in the presence of the Doctor and Lady: they only see the absent interlocutor, Macbeth. The blood on the hands and gowns of the two regicides is a thing of the past, but the

mnemodramatic condition materialises it and gives it an unlimited dimension:

> Here's the smell of the blood still: all the
> perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

Lady Macbeth is forced again to cleanse it off her hands and this abstract manipulation evokes the consort, to whom she is addressing herself. The procedure is perfect and by now we know it. The dead appear from behind the invisible interlocutor: the King covered in blood, Banquo's ghost (...).

No page of western dramaturgy gives a more pregnant image of the intrinsic quality of mnemodrama. There is difficulty of speech in Lady Macbeth's monologue, which the actress will study carefully and there is this appearing of absent presences, thanks to the contact with the object. Surely Macbeth is not far from the castle: but she talks to the faraway Macbeth of her recollection, to the reluctant Macbeth (now unrecognisable in his desperate courage) and talks of anight marked by the supreme sacrilege. It is a night of "memories", but the psychology is absent. Time with its mutations has changed their nature. Death now besieges the two main characters barricaded within Dunsinane. The emotional control of the woman has cracked: Lady Macbeth becomes human, opens up to remorse.

And then even the memory of what happened is charged with an intensity superior to the one felt at the time of the action. Surely, the psychic tension finds its natural release in the real action, whereas in the absence of action the inner pressure increases. But it is also the prerogative of memory to dilate and alter the dimensions of the lived experience. Thus in Lady Macbeth's mnemodrama - as in any other

mnemodrama having personal recollection as a theme - a still undefinable quality is felt, radically different from the personal memory and the psychological revivification, asking fundamental questions on the nature of the mnemodramatic memory.

all translations by Lorenza Vendittelli,

and John Green, 1991.

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