

## Editorial Introduction

Heiner Goebbels entitles his preface to this collection ‘*When a Tree is Already Being Mentioned, You Don’t Also Have to Show It*’ wise counsel that should be borne in mind by anyone approaching artistic production or editorial introductions. As the general editor tasked with guiding the reader into this first English translation of his collected writings, I plead guilty to not always adhering to Goebbels’ advice, having been unable to resist including what is ‘already being mentioned’ in my overview. Perhaps it is Goebbels’ capacity to encapsulate, in a sentence or a phrase, a multitude of complex ideas germane to so many aspects of performance composition and reception that makes him so eminently quotable. Of course Goebbels is not simply talking about reiteration; he is talking about a familiar theatrical phenomenon whereby something being expressed in one medium is simultaneously duplicated in another, in this instance the aural and the visual. In the theatre this aesthetic doubling usually involves the *presence* of a performer as the primary expressive medium to which all other modes are inferior. As an alternative Goebbels posits a way of working that respects the value and integrity of all media and pays close attention to the individual qualities of materials.

Writing about developments in performance in the mid eighties, Elinor Fuchs argued that the dominance of theatrical presence was being undermined by the work of the likes of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson who by this time had established, ‘a theatre of Absence which by contrast disperses the center, displaces the Subject, destabilises meaning.’<sup>1</sup> In his opening essay Goebbels cites Fuchs a number of times and explains how he has embraced *dispersal* and *displacement* as strategies in the creation of his own music - theatre works and as principles underpinning his teaching. He also reminds us that despite the volume of works produced by the theatrical avant-garde over the last forty years, the dominance of *presence* has *not* been undermined; that the majority of productions in mainstream opera and theatre still remain predicated on the centrality of performers, ‘self-confident soloists –assured of their roles, characters, and bodies’ (HG: p6).

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<sup>1</sup> E. Fuchs, ‘Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-Thinking Theatre after Derrida’, *Performing Arts Journal*, 1985, Vol. 9, No. 2/3, p.165. [Capitalization in the original].

The essays in this volume map in a circuitous way, the development of Goebbels' engagement with the notion of '*Aesthetics of Absence*' garnered from his own experience at the forefront of innovative music-theatre and performance practice. In this collection he reflects on his own works created over a period of more than twenty years; introduces some of his artistic influences, including the work of his students, and sets out the case for a radical re thinking of theatre and performance education. He demonstrates the breadth and scope of his references across fine art, theatre, literature, politics, anthropology, contemporary and classical music, jazz and folk, which not only inform his multi- textured music-theatre compositions, but are also incorporated in them. However, as Goebbels also points out in his preface to the volume, he is not offering a model or a template for an *aesthetic of absence* but seeking rather to explain 'my own theatrical interest in it' (HG: p2). From theatre for example, he frequently acknowledges the ideas of Bertolt Brecht as a key influence but he does not endorse Brecht's ideological certainty or his didacticism.

As an artist who is prepared to share his research and demystify the processes through which his own works come into being, as a teacher with a coherent pedagogical strategy for educating the next generation of theatre makers, Goebbels brings together practice, research and scholarship. Like his music-theatre works these texts are complex, playful and teasingly elusive in places. The moment we try to pin him down, to *situate* his practice and his ideas, we discover he has moved elsewhere. However, certain themes, historical references and arguments, inflected differently according to context, do emerge threaded through all the sections of the volume. These advocate a break with the established hierarchies of theatrical convention and indicate a strong drive towards the democratisation of theatre; they call for openness of interpretation and trust in the intelligence of the audience. These recurrent motifs coalesce as principles underlying his writing, his works, and his teaching. I draw your attention to three in no order of priority; readers will doubtless identify many more.

Goebbels formal experiments with *materials*, what he terms the 'means'<sup>2</sup> of production; space, light, sound, performers and text, can be seen to have their antecedents in the works of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scenographers Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig. Appia, in his 'For a Hierarchy of Means of Expression on the Stage'<sup>3</sup> recognised the creative potential of light and space as independent elements, although he still positioned the actor at

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<sup>2</sup> See translator's introduction

<sup>3</sup> D. Bablet and M.-L. Bablet *Adolphe Appia 1862-1928: actor – space – light*. London: John Calder, 1982, pp. 57-9.

the top of his 'expressive' hierarchy. Craig on the other hand, frustrated by the limitations of the realistic acting styles of his day looked to non western performance and puppetry as alternative models on which the actor should base his work. 'Do away with the reality of action – and you tend towards the doing away of the actor.'<sup>4</sup> By displacing the actor from his elevated and central position Goebbels gives equal weight to all the theatrical means or elements of performance. In collaboration with stage and lighting designers, sound artists, musicians and performers, he juxtaposes sound, light, text, materials, bodies and space whilst preserving the individual integrity and the separate contribution of each to the whole performance event.

The ideas and influence of the American writer Gertrude Stein appear in a number of the essays. He develops Stein's notion of theatre as a '*thing in itself*'<sup>5</sup> to advocate a non representational, non referential theatricality. Here again there are echoes of Craig's rejection of '*realism*, that blunt statement of life'<sup>6</sup> and the reductive danger of 'connecting actuality and art.'<sup>7</sup> The formal properties of Stein's writing are also at one with his own democratisation of stage space. In *Wars I have Seen*<sup>8</sup> for instance, Stein spreads her attention evenly across seemingly trivial and domestic quotidian occurrences and major historic events. In a similar vein Goebbels pays equal attention to foreground and back ground dispersing the action evenly across the stage space.

His concern to give the audience authority, what he terms '*authorising*' their sight, a verb he points out that is not unrelated to the distribution of power, attests to his belief in the ability of the audience to find their own meanings. There are no messages encoded in his works, neither do they offer the mutual self affirming identification that marks the conventional relationship between actor and audience. His visual dramaturgy, although highly structured and meticulously wrought, empowers the audience to think for themselves, engages them intellectually and emotionally, leaves space for the workings of their own imaginations.

The volume is divided into three parts:

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<sup>4</sup> E.G.Craig "The actor and the über-marionette" in *On the Art of the Theatre*. London: Heinemann, 1911, pp.80-94.

<sup>5</sup> Gertrude Stein: *Plays. Writings 1932-1946*, ed. by C.R. Stimpson and H. Chessman, New York: Library of America, 1998, pp. 244-69, here: pp. 258-59.

<sup>6</sup> E.G.Craig *Ibid.*, p.260. [Italics in the original]

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.257.

<sup>8</sup> G. Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, New York: Random House, 2013 [1945].

## **Texts on Work(s)**

Goebbels himself describes his works as ‘experiments’ and these essays give us unique insight into his praxis. They offer a critical commentary on a rehearsal process that is predicated on having no preconceived vision but rather engages with what is there, with the particularity of the means that he has assembled. As in any laboratory experiment the outcome is not a given; materials are brought together in different formulations, new agents introduced to stimulate reactions until the right balance between all the elements, light, sound, text, music, recorded media and performers is achieved. Always mindful of not offering interpretations but rather striving to find forms as open as music, his works juxtapose the familiar and the strange in unsettling contrapuntal rhythms. With no central protagonist pulling focus, the eye of the audience is free to roam as these *polyphonic* compositions open up the imaginative space between sound and image, hearing and seeing.

## **Texts on Artists**

In the second section, Goebbels introduces us to some of the individual artists and artist collectives whose works have inspired and influenced him. All of these writings reiterate and extend in their different ways many of the thematic threads that he explores in his own works. As a composer, Goebbels is able to analyse in minute detail the intricacies of the opening sound track of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Nouvelle Vague*; he becomes both protagonist and audience when he participates in a performance conceived by his ex students, the collective Rimini Protokoll. There are tributes to Robert Wilson and the stage designer Erich Wonder on the occasions of their being presented with Hein-Heckroth-Stage-Design Awards. The profound influence of Wilson is clearly apparent as Goebbels acknowledges the precision with which Wilson constructs his works to elicit open but ‘far from arbitrary’ (HG 2p18) responses from the audience. In his laudation to Erich Wonder, with whom Goebbels collaborated on a number of projects, he remarks on the importance of the ‘foreign otherness’ of Wonder’s stage imagery. He contends that this ‘otherness’ is a crucial alternative to the trite and predictable visual clichés of the mass media and that Wonder’s singular design aesthetic ‘provides a rare argument for the arts’ (HG 2p24). Goebbels has collaborated with the self organising group of musicians, The Ensemble Modern, over a number of years. Flying in the face of convention, they seem to literally embody the principles that underpin his work. *Eislermaterial* (1998) a work created to honour the centenary of Brecht’s musical collaborator Hanns Eisler had no conductor or finished score and the musicians were spread across the stage space in non affiliated instrumental groups. Collective responsibility for the

performance was shared across the ensemble in the face of many obstacles. That they achieved cohesion against these odds Goebbels considers a fitting memorial to Eisler who consistently engaged with the social and the political in his music.

### **Texts on Education**

Goebbels has a lot to say about education in the performing arts. Currently Professor at the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany, he is on numerous educational boards and a passionate advocate of a more integrated approach to the education of young artists. The dual model operating in Germany, of Conservatoires on the one hand, that provide highly specialised training for young performers to equip them with the skills needed to enter the industry, and Universities on the other, which offer a more broad based research-led approach to arts subjects with less emphasis on skills, has been replicated in many countries across the world. Goebbels makes a convincing case in his final group of essays that this separation does not bode well for the future health of the performing arts. The lack of research and critical engagement in conservatoire training maintains a market led industry, perpetuates assumptions about hierarchies in production and encourages moribund aesthetics that remain unchallenged. Neither do these institutions equip students to cope with the contingencies of professional practice once they graduate by preparing them for a 'more precarious and far more complex future' (HG 3P1). The theoretical bias of many University Music, Theatre and Performance Departments has shifted significantly over the last thirty years with most places offering practical experience alongside theory modules, Goebbels' argues however in the final section of this collection that there is still much more to be done. *Nine theses on the future of an education for the performing arts* (HGRef) sets out a collaborative, non hierarchical model in which no one discipline dominates and in which the integration of theory and practice are core principles. Although he is speaking from his particular experience of performing arts education in a European context the challenge his ideas present to the institutionalised training regimes in place for young actors, singers, directors, musicians, designers and stage managers, have far reaching implications beyond western paradigms.

Other essays in this section give us insight into the philosophy and methodology underpinning his own department, citing works by students that have affected him and calling for the need for laboratory like conditions in which new forms can be explored. He is not against the acquisition of craft skills but rather insists on '[t]eaching craftsmanship at the same time as teaching the ability to reflect on the fact that craftsmanship is not the only thing

that future theatre will bank on' (HG 3P 35). Goebbels reminds us that technology is never neutral 'it has its own dynamic which essentially defines production process' (HG 3 P33). Are we preparing students appropriately for these new modes of production enabling them to creatively exploit the potential of technologies but also equipping them with the necessary analytical skills to critique them? These aesthetic strategies become a necessary counterpoint to the ubiquitous imagery of the World Wide Web and commercial media that have come to dominate the perceptual field. That there are other ways of seeing and hearing is what makes this volume so important. Bodies are fragmented and split by the web and the notion of a single coherent 'assured' self has been replaced by recognition of our multiple *performed* personas. How will actor training, much of which is still based on early twentieth century notions of stable and consistent character, equip actors to engage with the varied demands of performance in the twenty first?

*Aesthetics of Absence* presents a significant challenge to the many embedded assumptions and hierarchical structures that have become 'naturalised' in western theatre production. In a visual and performance culture saturated with hackneyed images and behaviours Goebbels offers us the unseen, the unknown, the unfamiliar. As Marvin Carlson points out, '[t]o simply replace an aesthetics of presence with one of absence ... would merely reverse the traditional structure not reject it. What is needed is a constant field of interplay between these terms ... a field perpetually in process'.<sup>9</sup> Goebbels is not trying to abolish theatrical presence but to redistribute it in ways that bring into being different kinds of perceptual experience. What he achieves in *Stifters Dinge* (Stifters Things) for example his "no-man show" (HG 1p12) is a focus on the *presence* of objects, the *interplay* of elements that would normally form the background of the action. In this work supporting materials are brought to the fore becoming protagonists in playful juxtaposition with light, sound and text.

Many of these writings were originally conceived to be spoken at conferences and symposia where Goebbels was invited to talk about his work, or as laudations delivered in recognition of the achievements of other artists. As our translator for this English edition makes clear, we have tried to remain faithful to that spoken voice rather than attempt to iron out or standardise its particularities and nuances. As an artist talking about his practice and the ideas that have inspired him Goebbels often quotes from memory and on occasion the location of his references cannot be accurately sourced. In discussion with him we have located as many of

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<sup>9</sup> M. Carlson, *Performance a critical introduction*, London: Routledge, 1996, p.134

these as we can but there remain a few quotes that we have been unable to pin down. These are all acknowledged as citations but their precise location remains unclear. We hope readers will accept these omissions as the immediacy and quality of the ideas expressed, in our opinion, overrides the need to strictly adhere to formal academic convention.

The sections provide an organising structure but the volume does not have to be read sequentially as concepts and propositions introduced in the first part are re-visited in the later essays. This is not simply repetition but evidence of Goebbels testing and re-evaluating his ideas over time and in different contexts. Readers might benefit from adopting Goebbels' own approach to his reading of the works of Canetti, taking time and going back to them again and again, discovering something new with each fresh encounter. However, in a similar vein to audience encounters with his music-theatre works, I suspect Goebbels would encourage readers to find their own way, to navigate their own journey as *co-authors* through these inspiring and timely texts, in order to inhabit the imaginative space they open up.

Jane Collins April 2014