Visual Essay

Trinity: Visual Dramaturgy, the body as scenographer and author

Abstract
This visual essay will introduce Brave New Worlds' costume-led devising process in the creative evolution of their production*, Trinity.* Brave New Worlds is a collaboration between movement specialist and director Valentina Ceschi, and artists and scenographers Guoda Jaruseviciute and the author. Their work centres on the body as scenographer and on collective authorship of design and direction and examines the following research questions: How can a costume direct the body's movement and this movement direct the design development? How do you create a dramaturgy from the scenography, invoking concept and narrative? If body scenography is the central focus for the performance how do other design aspects collaborate to create a complete scenographic experience? This visual essay will present the working methodology of a visual dramaturgy, examining the use of the body as the instigator in the scenography, the dialogue between the costume and the performer, and between the designer/performer as subject, author and object of the design. It will explore the stages of production, and creative processes involved, from initial research on concept through design development to the implications of site-specific locations on the scenography and final dramaturgy. In the process, it places costume as author and dramaturg.

BRAVE NEW WORLDS is a performance collective based in England and Lithuania. It was founded by theatre maker/ performer Valentina Ceschi, scenographer Guoda Jaruseviciute, and the author, an interdisciplinary artist and scenographer. Our practice sits on the border between performance art, dance and theatre with the scenography as a central dramaturgical component.

Our work focuses on examining the images which form our collective cultural visual rhetoric and through our distortion and manipulation of them aims to challenge the audience's perception and interpretation. We do this through costume as prosthesis, which enhances and distorts the body. The role of costume to represent character becomes a secondary function for the performer, instead its function in the production works as both scenography and dramaturgy, forming a visual dramaturgy.

In the introduction to *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, Jürs-Munby, Carroll and Giles state that "character" sometimes makes way for a "focus on the body" and therefore a "revalorisation of the 'material' components in postdramatic theatre." (Jürs-Munby, Carroll and Giles, 2013 : 3). The lens we use to create and view the work therefore follows this postdramatic use of the body as both scenography and dramaturgy.

Our production, *Trinity,* was an exploration of the aesthetics and ideas around the sacred in western culture. It aimed to challenge the objectification of the female form and the process of transcendence from flesh to icon. Our visual research started with looking at depictions of the female form from the Venus of Willendorf to contemporary referencing of iconographic images of the Virgin Mary in pop culture and fashion shoots. The resulting performance looked at the representation, mutation and transformation in our collective visual consciousness, from both Simone de Beauvoir's perspective of the 'woman as other,' and Berger's ways to view and to be viewed. (De Beauvoir 1997, see also Berger 2008)

The dramaturgical framework of the devising process was rooted in an exploration of how scenography could be the catalyst for the drama/performance, focusing on design and the signification embedded in the visual. Lehman describes postdramatic theatre as having a "complex visuality". Our aim was to present the audience with "a scenic poem, in which the human body is a metaphor, its flow of movement in complex metaphorical sense an inscription, a 'writing' and not 'dancing'." (Lehman 2006: 105) The result was a piece of theatre that lacked text but drew its language from the body and the embedded metaphors in the costume as visual dramaturgy.

This visual essay will present our process as an experimental case study examining how we approached the creation of the scenography as a complex visual matrix, looking at key dramaturgical points, and how the design worked within these aspects. It will address the

following questions: how can a costume direct the body's movement and how can this movement direct the design development? How is a dramaturgy created from scenography, and how can it invoke concept and narrative? What is the role of the audience in this? If the body is the central focus for the performance, how do other design aspects collaborate to create a complete scenography experience?

THE VISUAL AS TEXT

Our initial concepts for *Trinity* were an examination of women and the sacred. We started by exploring the different roles that women are labelled within society, for example mother, daughter, sister, muse. These gendered stereotypes led us to examine how the female form, often via the gaze of the male artist, has been reduced to singular identities. As a collective we have a shared European and Roman Catholic heritage, (Italian, Lithuanian and British) and this influenced our lens when looking at the roles of women in society and their visual representation in art. We were drawn to the image of the Virgin Mary as an interesting case study, and her recurring visual representation. We examined how this has evolved beyond a figure in religious iconography into a repeated reference now adopted into mainstream visual culture, from classical paintings, to fashion spreads and music videos. Her iconic figure became our central focus and a way into exploring how these images can directly lead the dramaturgy. We looked at framing and recreating specific iconic moments that came from recurring motifs, for example the image of Mary as both the Virgin *and* the grieving mother.

Figure 1

THROUGH THE BODY

The design and devising process behind *Trinity* was a fluid interchange between the costume and performer to create character and meaning, exploring how the costume physically directed the movement. For this the company drew on Lecoq's methodology. Our knowledge of his

process was informed through both Ceschi having studied at Lecoq, with the additional Laboratory for the Study of Movement (LEM), and myself completing a LEM masterclass run by Pascal Lecoq and Krikor Belekian in 2007. This training was engrained in our process and was what Lecoq called "a profound sensitivity of the body towards the observation of reality." This was how we approached the interchange between form, body, space and movement. (Lecoq et al., 2013:166). It fed into our understanding of the "mimodynamic" process of observing and creating that drew on what Lecoq refers to as a "universal poetic awareness." (Lecoq et al., 2013:47) This concept, of how costume forms have inherent movement qualities fed into our choices within the design process. The mimodynamic process relied on creating empathy in the audience for the abstracted costumed characters, despite their representations as otherworldly and sometimes deformed grotesque figures. This required from the audience, as participators, what Machon termed a "chthonic response," that is a "primordial, pre-verbal, communication process." This had been present within the decision making in the collaborative practice, and then emerged again later within the interaction with the audience and their interpretation. (Machon 2011:22)

Our methodology demanded an observed and embodied knowledge of body, movement and use of costume, which demanded a multi-sensory approach through play. This could be described as similar to what Machon describes as a (syn)aesthetic approach to performance making - the performer's body, as both the sight *of* performance but also the site *for* performance. (Machon 2011) The body, according to her, becomes the 'stimulus, content, form and site of performance.' (Machon 2011:27)

This (syn)aesthetic approach to making and directing, and the role of the audience in interpretation, created an interesting tension in developing a visual dramaturgy, relating to Lehmann and his description of postdramatic theatre where the sense and the synthesis within

the production has disappeared and the audience is integrated into the development of meaning. (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 91)

Turner and Behrndt have argued that the "new dramaturgy", in which the postdramatic is classified, draws upon the development of postmodernist practices requiring constant "redefinition and recontextualization." (Turner & Behrndt 2008: 92). Thus the spectator and critic are offered new ways of reading the work, allowing them to suspend their disbelief and permitting them to create narrative and meaning from the abstracted forms presented on stage. As the critic Luke Jennings wrote in the Observer about Trinity "The enigma, and the not-quite-knowing, are all." (Jennings 2016). The effect on the audience becomes a visceral form of recognition, the abstracted images and symbols could be read both for their symbolic pictorial quality as well as their physicality. We relied on the audience to develop empathy both from an intellectual reading but also from a primordial understanding of the body and its movement.

COSTUME AS AUTHOR, COSTUME AS DIRECTOR

After our first research and development at the MacBirmingham in 2014 we had a series of residencies during the Spring of 2015, firstly at the Barbican as part of their OpenLab programme, then at the Plateau Gallery in Berlin, and later as part of the Acts Re:Acts festival at Wimbledon College of Arts. During this development process we examined how the costume could both direct the movement and the movement direct the design development. In our OpenLab at the Barbican in 2015 we spent the week composing tableau vivants from sourced costumes and toiles of costume elements. Working with the photographers Camilla Greenwell and Richard Davenport we were able to frame moments which were later developed into storyboards and then woven into a visual script, creating an approach to navigate both how you approach a visual dramaturgy and how you document the process. Figure 5

The exploration and development of the Red Belly and its dramaturgical significance was explored through this interchange between design and photography, enhancing an approach to dramaturgy from a visual perspective. In our exploration of the Blue Man (discussed later) the Red Belly, conceived/perceived as a glimpse under a black costumed figure, worked as an oppositional character to this grotesquely oversized pregnant figure. Our first iteration of the Red Belly was styled out of several skirts with the red pleats hinting at the absence of a possible pregnant belly, a literal loss. In its first iteration, however, we found it lacked a substantial movement or continued presence, it acted according to Lecoq's translations of colours in mimodynamic terms as an explosive moment (Lecoq et al., 2013:49). This lack of sustained presence in its form beyond its first appearance fed into the decision to use the costume as a more symbolic moment, a transitional component, moving from one figure to another. This we read as a symbol of blood figuratively and a motif of suffering – the pain of childbirth, the death of Christ and the Virgin's grief - which passed between the female figures. In this way the motif of suffering started from an absence of a form (the pregnant belly) to a physical presence being handed from one figure to another. Figure 6-9

The oversized pregnant costume of the character Blue Man was an example of how the performer's body, the performance space, and the costume developed the dramaturgy. The choreography of the costume was directed through the performer's body using Lecoq's methodology of oppositional forces, the push and pull, to read the movement quality within the costume form. (see Murray 2003: 134) The restrictive weight and shape of the large ball under the costume, pushed through space in opposition to the performer's petite and wiry form pulling back. This push/ pull dialogue between the body in the mask and the bulging belly became the vocabulary of the form, the motif and language it spoke. In this way the costume dictated and directed the pace and weight the performer had to adhere to in their movement. This approach, however, had a danger that it would create a singular repetitive form, a costume

that had one dynamic and one pace. This could create a less empathetic form through its one-dimensional existence. We avoided this through approaching the development of the costume as forms in the same way you approach mask work, specifically the Lecoq approach to playing the expressive mask and finding the "counter-mask". This allowed opposition and contradiction to be played and enabled the wearer to "transcend type" and create an action which could create drama or an event - the dramaturgical catalyst. (Chamberlain & Yarrow 2002:78). We developed this through multiple small costume progressions and transformations, exploring how the character evolved through these interventions, physically going through the metamorphosis on stage. The series of costume changes both directed the physicality with which the performer embodied the costume and allowed a more multidimensional development of character.

The other major influence on the dramaturgy around this character was the performance space. The final performance was in a semi-derelict chapel which created a difficult arena to navigate, for example the only entrance into the performance space was down some stairs. The performer, virtually blinded by the costume, had to rely on the hands as a sensorial device to navigate the space, this action added a vulnerability to the character, their physical weaknesses being witnessed by the audience. The vulnerability fed into the signification of the final transformation. Instead of revealing an exposed pregnant form, the liminal space of the chapel, coupled with the vulnerability already exposed in the character, allowed a re-birth and transcendence, the golden wings becoming almost symbolic of a phoenix rising and leaving the stage bare. Figure 11-14

The Coal Man, the final costume within the production, was developed through this process of investigation and experimentation in the rehearsal room, allowing the costume form to dictate the movement and influence the design development. We explored the form for what rules it could present, directed in our interpretation by how the performer could play with it. This was

done through approaching the costume as a form to be animated, obeying its inherent quality for movement and not imposing external, intellectual interpretations. This demanded a conceptual abstraction between object and movement, developed from our experience on LEM. (Murray 2003:89)

The first toile of the Coal Man had strategically placed artist charcoal within the actual coal on the costume. We felt that the physical materiality of the coal would be heightened through the act of drawing with it, dictating its purpose within the dramaturgy. The drawing that emerged was a physical representation of the movement quality and journey of the performer across the stage. In discussions following the first scratch performance we decided the costume needed to be totally covered in coal to increase the dramatic effect inherent in the material. This also led us to question its function as a costume that could draw. It did not feel true in the dramaturgy because it was an action imposed on by it, instead of coming from the costume and its form. In its new iteration we found the weight of the costume became the driving factor in the development of the character. The costume, weighing 20kgs, directed the performer's movement into a slow, steady pace with a determined direction. The weight, both metaphorical as well as physical, created a measured and powerful movement quality, with its own breath and energy. This meant that the costume, instead of drawing onto the space, as originally developed, carved through the space. Trimingham explains how costume in performance can work as a lived experience and the effect on the audience as a 'kinetic empathy' that echoes across from performer to viewer. (Trimingham 2017: 136) The weight and physicality of the costume pushed it into action and pulled the audience with it. Figure 15-17

BODY SCENOGRAPHY AND OTHER DESIGN ASPECTS.

Rachael Hann quotes Pavis on the ability of costume becoming a scenography within itself. Pavis describes the way "Costume often constitutes a kind of travelling scenography, a set

reduced to a human scale that moves with the actor." (Pavis in Hann 2019:48). If costume is examined as a moving scenography, how do the other scenographic elements of light and sound work in conjunction with it? We were interested in keeping the costume and the design as the catalyst for the development of these aspects and therefore our sound and lighting collaborators developed their responses simultaneously as part of the devising process.

Our main question with lighting was in response to the lack of a physical set, how could we incorporate lighting as a space creator with its own logic and use of visual metaphors? We partly addressed this through our dilemma of how to depict the Annunciation. In our research of the Annunciation, a consistent theme in numerous Renaissance paintings, it was either lines or beams of light represented as the voice of god. For example, Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation* (1443) used lines to denote the word of god, whereas Ruben's *Annunciation* (1628) used a beam of light from the heavens. We looked at this moment as a moment of tension with the lines a tangible visceral pull against the performer. In the first examination of this image we used elastic as a representation of the lines in Lippi's *Annunciation*. The performers became visually equal as both the transceiver and receiver, through the stretch in the elastic between performers. We discovered, however, this lacked dramatic tension with the push/pull counter balancing each other in the stretch and left the dramaturgy one-dimensional. Furthermore, the physical requirements on both the costume and the body to set up this tension meant the audience saw the moment before and after, shattering the poetic quality this moment required. Instead we returned to physical light to create the 'text' for this moment, first through a projected beam and then a light from one costume to light the wall in front of another. The transceiver and receiver tension previously explored through elastic became metaphorical as a brief moment depicted by light. Figure 2- 4

Trinity had several performances in various black box theatres where we had developed the lighting to function as an architectural element. With the addition of haze it could create spaces

through physically carving shapes from shadows. Figure 20 Our final performance of the production was site-specific in a derelict chapel in Peckham, London. The building had a strong architectural presence within itself and therefore the need for lighting as a form of architecture became redundant. We decided to collaborate with Darren Johnston, who is primarily known as a choreographer, to create the light in his production of Trinity at this venue as a focus for the choreography. Through this collaboration we found that adding the lighting within the costume enabled us to lead the direction of the performer's focus, at times one performer lighting another, but also directing the movement of the performer. A negativity in this result was that the moment became less explicit for the audience, a moment embedded as an abstracted fleeting moment. Figure 21 – 23

The sound design of the production developed from a joint desire that the abstracted costume forms needed a continual composition which could create a physical place as well as convey an atmosphere. Our sound designer, Demetrio Castellucci, responded to the presence and physicality of each form. He created a score that communicated a liminal space for these other worldly characters to exist in, and played with the uncanny by recording the sounds that the costume made and directly weaving them into the final composition. This was further built upon through the use of low frequencies which were more felt than heard, from the crackles in the Coal Man when it moved across the floor, to the Hag costume and the click-clack of the wooden clogs. The sound was not only used as atmospheric but had a dramaturgical quality, specifically in relationship to the Hag costume. The clogs became an echo of themselves and drove the momentum of the performer moving across the stage, searching for the other invisible performer hinted at through the distance sound of their reflected footsteps. These elements created an additional visceral reading of the costumes by the audience as they heard as they felt, and felt as they heard. Figure 18-19

CONCLUSION

We learned that creating a performance which approached costume as scenography needed a sensorial and experiential approach, founded through embodied play. This could allow the costumes to breathe their own life, similar to how a mask reveals character, and create a truth in the physicality of the movement. For example, the coal man in its final version was entirely directed by the costume and moved away from the initial discovery of it drawing on the space. This allowed the costumes to direct the performer, via a subtle haptic communication and added a believability in their movement. This research into the creation of scenography which centers on and around the performer revealed that the body, as a site for performance and a moving scenography, needed to be constantly evolving visually, to create momentum in the dramaturgy. We found that the visual dramaturgy became the text to communicate through the body, as opposed to the movement being a dance interpreting or responding to a text.

The integration of light and sound as dramaturgical components within *Trinity* enabled them to move beyond a singular illustrative function into essential dramaturgical components. Arguably, this required the audience to embrace a more sensory driven reading of the performance although it did lead to some audiences feeling ambiguous about the narrative. (Hunt 2017, Jennings 2016, Marcus 2017 and Uwanogho 2017,). The advantages of working in this way were that we felt we created a truth in the intention and were able to create this strong emotive response from the audience. The combination of all three elements of light, sound and vision created a 'spell bound' reading. (Patrick 2017)

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