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“The Clouds”

1.

One of the most interesting and important streams of Polish culture of recent years is artistic and scientific exploration on the crossings of Polish and ancient Greek tradition. If we want to describe it using one phrase, I would say that this is the exploration of our home tradition. Home in a double meaning: lineage tradition, local and our but divided with our Home which we have just entered – Europe understood as a project of renewed, discovered family. One characteristic feature of this exploration is its topicality connected with striving for answering historical questions; historical but current and also universal. I suppose that what is specific for this movement is the fact that this “return to Greece”, not the first one in the Polish and European history, is undertaken not to find – as once – universal Mediterranean canons and ideals but to confront with the beginnings, with ancestors discovered in the moment, when they are standing on the threshold, they are making the first step to our present, they are creating the words which we use without consideration, they are ordering the world in the way which we take as natural and also they are reminding us experiences which are effaced or even inaccessible for us. Being more and more lost in the world that we have created, we are trying to come back on this threshold by anew reading out primary meanings of the words, calling from the nonentity shapes and sounds, tracking on transient traces the reality of experiences.

Looking over Greek sources enables to see in another light this what is home and to refreshes by confrontation our understanding of our own identity.

This stream is in some way hidden, its influence and importance may seem problematical for people who usually listen in sounds of noisy polemics and rows, but personally I suppose that in dozens years there will be no doubt about its value and the works like “The Forefathers’ Eve. The Theatre of All Souls’ Day” (“Dziady. Teatr święta zmarłych”) by Leszek Kolankiewicz, “The Reality of Gods” (“Realność bogów”) by Wiesław Juszczak, “Metamorphoses” (“Metamorfozy”) by the Theatrical Practice Centre “Gardzienice” or concerts of “The Ancient Orchestra” (“Orkiestra Antyczna”) will be the reference points and also the turning points on the way of development of this what is important in long term and vital in the Polish culture.

The “Polish and ancient” stream, as every cultural stream, has its *loci communes*, characteristic repertoire of topics, plots and tricks, which nowadays threatens of converting into a set of cultural and interpretational set patterns. Dionysus and his ambivalence, *zoe* and *bios*, the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Labyrinth and its Lady, the triple chorea – everything is used without consideration, as something got without having lifted a finger and thereby may in the moment change into a kind of ancient mumbo-jumbo, esoteric Disneyland which terrifies the ports. Discovers of the masters are repeated by following generations of bewitched disciples and acolytes and thereby start to bore, to cause a reflex of protest and irritation, because every day they seem to be easier and more obvious. However, the value of the dialogue with antiquity (as every authentic dialogue) lays in the effort of exploring on one’s own and necessity of hindering the task not to fall into automatism to make the meeting live.

I am writing about all of this on the introduction of the text sacrificed to the brand-new spectacle “After the Birds” of the Theatrical Association “Chorea” and The Earthfall Dance, because the fact that Tomasz Rodowicz and Maciej Rychły were the ones who have taken the Aristophanes’ comedy seems to me as a prove of consciousness of opportunities and dangers stated above. “Chorea” realises perennial programme situating in the centre of the “Polish and ancient stream”. Making in his project theses and questions considerably describes the basic trend of this stream and the most important needs, so they sounds familiar. The first scenic work of the “Chorea”, “Theseus in the Labyrinth”, consists of almost all basic “axis points” of the actions in the space “Poland-Greece” and, although thanks to the high quality of works and love-like engagement it has not got into secondariness, the fear has been born that following steps in the same direction can threaten of successive returns, that the way would turn into

taxing.

“After the Birds” one can heave a sigh of relief. “Chorea” has left the Labyrinth being stronger and renewed and then it has moved to another connection, the passage between antiquity and present day. As early as on the beginning of his fully individual way Tomasz Rodowicz and his team went away from this what can be seemed to be easy to this what is supposed to be extremely hard – the trial of building a live bridge between the present day and antiquity, the bridge laying not on the “esoteric and mystery” arches but on the centre of burning topicality. To contact the chorea with the front pages of the newspapers, antic theatre and headline news, not getting neither into coarseness of renewing by the flail (Kreon in a general uniform), nor into sociable-like disclosing the secrets of a dark alcove – that is the challenge; breakneck riding on a non-smoothed way.

2.

“After the Birds” is constructed as a multi-layer montage, for which totally different elements were used with full consciousness: words and situations taken from the Aristophanes’ comedy “The Birds” (in the new translation by Janina Ławińska-Tyszkowska), ancient, folk and contemporary melodies and songs, also some composed by Maciej Rychły especially for the spectacle’s needs, techniques of modern dance and move theatre and medial pictures of violence – icons of global madness and anger. Person experience of the creators of the spectacle and connected with them spectators’ expectations have been mixed with the montage in a very deft and perfidious way. I supposed that those who have come to the Modern Theatre in Wrocław, where I have been watching the performance, in a majority know earlier actions of Rodowicz, Rychły and “The Ancient Orchestra”, so they have undoubtedly waited for their recognising sign – ancient songs. As early as on the beginning their expectations have been satisfied – a dynamical fragment of the hymn for Apollo, the known from the “Metamorphoses” of Gardzienice song “Alla Latous...” resounds. It sounds loud and energetic and simultaneously dampen because it comes from a closed door. Rectangular scene, along longer sides of which spectators are sitting on ascending rows, stays in half-darkness, lightened only by the reflection which penetrates through partly glass door, put on the one of shorter sides under the wooden platform. Phosphorescence coming to our sphere of shadow is warm and sunny. It harmonises with the song which sounds happy and youthful. But we, who stays in half-silence and half-darkness have no direct access to none. Only reflection and echo remains with us. And painful nostalgia which reveals in the later part of the performance, when Tomasz Rodowicz, left for the moment on the scene by the chorus of the youth, looks on the closed door and the light which gushes through it.

However, the axis of the performance is not a nostalgia for the Greek “Golden Age” but – key point also for “The Birds” by Aristophanes – a trial to realise the dream revolved by people for millennia – dreams on the New Beginning, the island, the state, the city which will be free of violence and lie. In the Aristophanes it is the polis of the birds, built on Pisthetairos’ advice – the Athenian who had hated the degenerated democracy of his fatherland so much, that he decided to escape from it to explore the new, happier fatherland. Contrast between the world of the people steeping in the darkness and the world of free birds flashing with their wings in clouds is introduced as early as in the first song of the birds’ chorus, which consists the actors of the “Chorea” cunningly and funny combed in bird-like coiffures. They sings, looking on the spectators from the peak of the wooden platform:

Cóż może być lepszego niż posiadać skrzydła?
Gdyby ktoś z was widzowie był jak my skrzydlaty,
To głodu by nie cierpiał słuchając tragedii.
Poleciałby do domu, zjadł sobie kanapkę
I z pełnym brzuchem znowu wrócił na widownię.

Singing out this fragment of the Aristophanes’ parabasis on the beginning of the spectacle puts us, the spectators, in an easy and clear way into his reality. People living without wings and ability to fly in the world beneath the birds – are us ourselves. And our world is the world from which three persons in coats and caps seem to escape, making in the very beginning of the performance strange and funny

tricks with a ladder and creating paradoxical view of climbing higher but on the level (an echo of a travel of two Athenians and Tereus – a hoopoe bird from which the Aristophanes' comedy starts?). If we can tell about initial division which bears and penetrates the dramaturgy of the whole performance, it lays between the birds and us.

But this performance is only some kind of a reflection point and it does not mean that the world of the birds is homogeneous. Quite the reverse: it has its leaders and outsiders. Both functions are joint by the most standing-out from the herd the Haunted [1] (Paweł Korbus), which isolates himself from the chorus of the birds to proclaim with words of the monologue built from fragment of the parabasis and Pisthetairos' propagandist speech the superiority of birds not only above people but also gods. The Haunted feverishly, with a fast whisper tells the spectators his version of the creation of world and its history in which the birds are the oldest and the most powerful beings, thanks to their collineation with winged-as-they Eros. He proclaims a war on gods and people, simultaneously building a vision of a new civilisation, an utopian state for the chosen ones. As every prophet, he also undergoes the phase of the rejection. The chorus of the birds, formed in a military detachment marching in fours in the rhythm of the contempt song, upsets the Haunted on the ground a few times and walks on him. On the end of the performance it lifts him with his arms spreaded out in the act of passion and adoration.

This sequence ends with violent break of rhythm. The chorus (herd) falls down on ground and lays without strength, grotesque in a bit in its weakness. It looks like the trial taken out by the Haunted finishing with defeat and the birds, which few minutes earlier were his foes, are now killed allies, rebels inflicted a capital punishment.

After a moment several members of the bird herd slowly raise up, waken alive by the Nestling (Elina Georgieva Toneva) and the Bride/Skylark (Dorota Porowska-Podleśna). The herd brightens up and again prepares for building an ideal state. We are admonishing about superiority of the birds and our flimsiness but now there is a new topic in the actions of actors – marriage with the wisdom (Aristophanes' Basileia – the dispenser of the knowledge and the authority). It is caused by the dance of the Bride and the Bridegroom (T. Rodowicz). But this accord is soon drowned out by repeating earlier actions, scenes of the birds' rebellion. The Haunted tries again, he propagates his vision even more insanely. Bird commando marches once again. But the rebellion and fight do not have their initial intensity. However, a slow, almost melancholic song sang by two actors accompanies them; the song which will penetrate from this moment almost all scenes of the spectacle and long after it it will be spinning in spectators' ears and heads:

I staję bogów nieśmiertelnych chór
I z boskich ust płynie wspólna pieśń.
Niesie się w dal niebian szczęśliwych wołanie.

The same song is sung in hushed tones by the birds who after the battle are again felt down on the ground. The next trial of the rebellion has been suppressed by someone who seems to have no name. Atmosphere changes, the air is permeated by bitterness, the taste of impossibility and lost dreams. It grows also from a song of Tom Waits sung by Sean Palmer. His hoarse, coming like from inferno voice accompanies the second dance of the Bride and the Bridegroom. This is one of the most beautiful scenes of the spectacle. In the dance of Porowska and Rodowicz there is an amazing harmony and softness altogether, something which I would dare to call a bitter wisdom of knowledge. Trying to describe my impression of this scene I cannot find a better way than to appeal to the Japanese aesthetic category *yūgen*, recognised by Zeami as the one of aims and treasures of the *nō* theatre. *Yūgen* is a delicate beauty born from discovering the heart of the matter and ability to look on the questions of this world from the distance, from outside. The dance of Porowska and Rodowicz does not remind neither Japanese, nor Greek dance at all; it is closer to dancing at the tired night time. Nonetheless, the light of a calm beauty born from the knowledge gives off.

Actions of actors carries gradually to the end of the scene opposite to the wooden platform, where a dark wall is situated, which is a base for a high choir stand on which Maciej Rychły with his instruments

is located. The wall and the choir stand in the semantic space functions as a pole opposite to the platform on which “the divine birds” appear for the first time. Here is the place where the herd build their city and the building (as it was in Aristophanes’ comedy) is crowned by the act of the nuptials. Unlike the comedian wedding of Pisthetairos and Basileia which means the eventual triumph of the clever Athenian and his winged allies, the nuptials in “After the Birds” is an almost ritual act of inflicting suffering. The Bridegroom a few times slowly comes to the black wall, under which the Bride stays, and strongly strikes the wood over her head with his fist. There is no merriment on the nuptials but lament:

Teraz już całość o toczona murem
Bramy zamknięte i straż stoi wkoło
Chodzą... patrole ćwiczy się alarmy
Sprawdzanie straży, sygnały
Na basztach

There will be no New City between heaven and Earth. The new occurs impossible. Instead of it the repetition has been realised – the same story with the same mistakes and the same effect. Instead of an utopian oasis a luxury estate for the chosen ones has been sprung up.

Among its residents will be no the Haunted. The scorned prophet stays inside the wall. The one that remains for him is a rebellion against everyone and everything. In the last scene we can see him standing in the centre of the scene, being decked with rectangular fluorescent tubes like bombs. A suicidal attempt takes place when in the theatre the light is turned on which means an eventual end of the common world of the birds and people.

3.

The relation above is not full nor complete. It cannot be full, for instance because of the fact, that I have seen this performance only once, so surely there are some scenes which I do not remember precisely, maybe there are some which I do not remember at all. In an obvious way it weakens the value of what I have written. On the other side, however, if we agreed that the theatre – an art of present – is also an art of creating memory, my incomplete relation can be read as a notation of this what has been settled in my memory, what has been engraved in it and lives its own life. Beginning writing I had a feeling that there is a lot of things to write, but it was some kind of surprise that I remember so many scenes so good, that I can evoke their almost sensory sensation which I have tried, in an awkward way and I think without success, to convey. Reading what I have written I am concerned to find that in my relation I try to make the whole some kind of linearity, to organise the spectacle as a story. Meanwhile it is rather a song and dance, a choreography built around the topics, rhythms and energy centres. Although there is in “After the Birds” the leading topic (and this one I have tried to emphasize), the special quality and great value of this performance is about the consonance of the main topic with another ones, a characteristic resonance creating the flow of life between Athens of Aristophanes and the London cube in the summer and the Wrocław theatre in the winter, 2005. The spectacle directed by Jessica Cohen, Jim Ennis and Tomasz Rodowicz is far from being an allegory. It does not try to show that people are the same despite the flow of time. It is quite opposite – it discovers rather differences caused by the distance of times that separates us, it says about this what has happened in this centuries-old meantime. But thanks to the fact that one tries to understand today by observing the antiquity lets our ancestors to come closer us. That is right. It sounds strange, but “After the Birds” seems for me to be rather a trial to understand present days from the point of view of the ancient than in other way. As if our forefathers tried to understand the world of their later grandchildren and discovered with terror what had happened.

Aristophanes came to the 21st century and his laugh died on his lips.

[1] Names of the characters came partly from the working scenery of the spectacle and partly were created by myself.