

THE LONG ALPHABET OF ANDRES NEUMANN HOLDS TEN YEARS OF THEATRE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD.

He, too, has sat down on the worn black benches of "The Dead Class", and it is his right to do so, for he has been one of the hidden protagonists of Kantor's unforgettable play : Andres Neumann, who brought Kantor to Italy in 1978 and made him well-known there, in the same way in which he has brought 180 theatre companies to 37 countries throughout the world, with 3,000 artists and technicians involved in 2,000 performances in 250 theatres for an audience of at least one million people.

Neumann ? He is 40 years old, born in South America of a Polish mother and an Austrian father. « Yes, I am a sort of chemical-genetic-linguistic laboratory. » And does this laboratory work ? « I try my best. But of course I may also at times make a terrible mess in the laboratory. »

The roll-call : Albertazzi Giorgio, Barba Eugenio, Beck Julian, Bene Carmelo, De Filippo Eduardo, Fo Dario, Grotowski Jerzy, Perlini Memé, Wajda Andrzej, Wilson Robert called Bob... yes, they are really all there. As in "The Dead Class" the memories of a universal childhood overlap and repeat themselves and follow each other, so, when the roll is called, they all line up, from A to Z : the names, the actors, the theatres, the cities of the world that have made Neumann's life and the history of the theatre during the past ten years. There are hundreds of names in alphabetical order on a precious poster of rice paper. « Here you are », says Andres as he shows it, « this is my identity... »

It all started back in 1972 at the Festival of Nancy, « the only place where a theatre company could have the illusion, or even realize the dream, of seeing its work appear in the most famous show-window of international theatre ». For three years Neumann works with companies of all artistic tendencies and from all countries. In 1974 he starts coming very often to Italy, to pick the groups for the festival.

He falls in love with Florence and settles there. And so it is the city of Florence which during the 1976-1977 season becomes the centre of avant-garde theatre. "For next to nothing" Neumann brings Wilson, Kantor, Meredith Monk to the "Rondò di Bacco", connected with the Teatro Regionale Toscano. « The whole thing became important, and enticing to many », he recalls, « but in the accurate political apportionments which followed I could find no role for myself. Therefore I started a private agency. I have brought Wajda to Italy, Pier'Alli to Poland, Gassman to France and Spain... This, after all, is my job : to discover something and then show it in a place where there is an audience for it. I am a wanderer, both in real life and in the theatre. »

And on what sort of a compass does the wanderer rely ?

« On the one hand he seeks the roots, on the other he tries to expand the horizons of his culture. Show-business is a guarantee of freedom, it aids and ensures the circulation of ideas of renewal. Transgression, as Beniamino Placido says, is the only value with a controlled and guaranteed origin. If someone is active in avant-garde, he is it under that heading. Of course, he must also feel certain that he is guaranteeing the continuity of values. »

But why, after so much avant-garde, will you be bringing, in October, the Comédie Française of all things, with its accompaniment of moths and cobwebs ?

« The answer to this requires a preliminary remark. The '70s were very full of changes in the theatre. But on January 1st, 1970, people like Wajda, Carmelo Bene and all the other theatre innovators had already given their contributions to the renewal of the theatre and had, in one way or another, already presented them to the "connoisseurs" ever since the '60s. The situation nowadays is very different. The avant-garde, be it as a profession or as a "genre", cannot exist. If the criterion on which choice is based is that of renewal, well, then we have not had any renewal in the theatre for ten years. »

So what do we have in the theatre ?

« An excess of ideas and a lack of professionalism. We find now on 32 TV channels the same truth that we used to find in theatre workshops ; but there is a hunger for professionalism, tradition... »

Goodbye to transgression, then ?

« No. Transgression at this point means to perform well. That is why we need Eduardo de Filippo, Gassman, the Comédie Française — which has neither cobwebs nor moths, since it has been entrusted to young people and exceptional actors. »

And as to the future ?

« There is so much material from the past years to be elaborated, that trying to move forward would mean losing something. Theatre artists have to gain new spaces in other fields of show-business, such as the movies, television... New mechanisms have to be sought for the circulation of show-business, that is to say, of ideas. But in the research of language we cannot go any further at present. »

Neumann is silent for a moment, then adds, almost as if to console us : « These are natural cycles : renewal grows old in the comforting arms of classicism. » In his words there is love for the past, but no nostalgia.