



*The* THEATRE *of*

ROMEO CASTELLUCCI

*and*

SOCIETAS RAFFAELLO SANZIO

*From Icon to Iconoclasm, From Word to Image, From Symbol to Allegory*

DOROTA SEMENOWICZ



The Theatre of Romeo Castellucci and Societas  
Raffaello Sanzio

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From Icon to Iconoclasm, From Word to Image,  
From Symbol to Allegory

palgrave  
macmillan

Dorota Semenowicz  
Teatr Narodowy  
Warsaw, Poland

Translated by Patrycja Cichoń-Zielińska

Title of the original edition: *To nie jest obraz. Romeo Castellucci i Societas Raffaello Sanzio* by Dorota Semenowicz published by Malta Fundacja, Korporacja Ha! Art, 2013

ISBN 978-1-137-56965-3      ISBN 978-1-137-56390-3 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56390-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016947969

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Cover image: *Sul concetto del volto nel Figlio di Dio*, 2010 © Societas Raffaello Sanzio

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature  
The registered company is Nature America Inc.  
The registered company address is: 1 New York Plaza, New York, NY 10004, U.S.A.

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>2</b>	<b>The Khmer Theatre</b>	13
	<i>Against Tradition</i>	13
	<i>Iconoclasm</i>	27
	<i>Spectator in the Image</i>	36
<b>3</b>	<b>An Open Image</b>	51
	Genesis: From the Museum of Sleep	51
	Purgatorio	66
	Sul concetto di volto nel Figlio di Dio	77
<b>4</b>	<b>From Mysteries to Tragedy</b>	99
	<i>Tragedy and the Mythical Period</i>	99
	<i>Word in the Image</i>	117
	<i>Tragedy Today</i>	130
<b>5</b>	<b>Conversations</b>	155
	<i>'Theatre Is a Counterfeit Coin'</i>	155
	<i>Conversation with Romeo Castellucci</i>	155
	<i>The Need to Watch</i>	164
	<i>Conversation with Claudia Castellucci</i>	164

<i>Everything Becomes Sound</i>	169
<i>Conversation with Chiara Guidi</i>	169
<i>Working for Societas Is Not Easy</i>	172
<i>Conversation with Gilda Biasini</i>	172
<i>Why I Need an Elephant</i>	177
<i>Conversation with Romeo Castellucci</i>	177
<i>The Cry of Lucifer</i>	184
<i>Conversation with Romeo Castellucci About</i> Doctor Faustus	184
<b>6 Epilogue</b>	195
<i>Eurydice from the Clinic in Vlezenbeek</i>	195
<b>Theatrography</b>	205
<i>Productions Made by Romeo Castellucci with Societas</i> <i>Raffaello Sanzio</i>	205
<i>Productions Made by Romeo Castellucci in Other Contexts</i>	218
<b>Bibliography</b>	223
<i>Societas Raffaello Sanzio</i>	223
<i>Others</i>	225
<b>Index</b>	231

## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1	<i>Santa Sofia. Teatro Khmer</i> , 1986 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. In photo: Chiara Guidi as Pol Pot, Claudia Castellucci as Leo III)	20
Fig. 2.2	<i>Santa Sofia. Teatro Khmer</i> , 1986 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. In photo: Romeo Castellucci as a monk)	31
Fig. 3.1	<i>Genesis: From the Museum of Sleep</i> , 1999 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Photo: Luca Del Pia. In photo: children in Act II, <i>Auschwitz</i> )	53
Fig. 3.2	<i>Purgatorio</i> , 2008 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Photo: Luca Del Pia. In photo: Sergio Scarletella as the Third Star, Pier Paolo Zimmermann as the Second Star)	72
Fig. 3.3	<i>Purgatorio</i> , 2008 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Photo: Luca Del Pia. In photo: Pier Paolo Zimmermann as the Second Star)	72
Fig. 3.4	<i>Sul concetto del volto nel Figlio di Dio</i> , 2010 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. In photo: Sergio Scarletella as Son)	80
Fig. 4.1	<i>Oresteia (una commedia organica?)</i> , 1995 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. In photo: Franco Pistoni as Pylades, Fiorella Tommasini as Clytemnestra, Silvano Voltolina as Orestes in Act II, <i>Agamemnon</i> )	102
Fig. 4.2	<i>Giulio Cesare</i> , 1997 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. In photo: Elena Bagaloni as Brutus, Cristiana Bertini as Cassius)	119
Fig. 4.3	<i>Amleto. La veemente esteriorità della morte di un mollusco</i> , 1992 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. In photo: Paolo Tonti as Hamlet)	126
Fig. 4.4	<i>Tragedia Endogonidia, BR.#04</i> (Brussels, 2003) (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Photo: Luca Del Pia. In the photo: mechanical head and seven-month-old baby)	137

- Fig. 5.1 *Genesis: From the museum of sleep*, 1999 (© by Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Photo: Luca Del Pia. In photo: Renzo Mion as Cain in Act III, *Abel and Cain*) 158
- Fig. 5.2 *The Four Seasons Restaurant*, 2013 (© by Malta Fundacja. Photo: Maciej Zakrzewski. In the foreground: Silvia Costa) 169
- Fig. 5.3 *Doctor Faustus*, 2015 (© by Malta Fundacja. Photo: Maciej Zakrzewski) 186

## Introduction

Romeo Castellucci, one of the world's most esteemed theatre directors, honoured with prestigious awards including the Golden Lion in Venice for lifetime achievement, claims that 'theatre just happened to him'.<sup>1</sup> He had been predominantly interested in the world of visual arts, an interest that initially gave rise to performance-art shows, created first in secondary school and then during university, which later turned into theatre. In 1981, with his sister Claudia Castellucci, wife-to-be, Chiara Guidi, and her brother Paolo, the director formed *Societas Raffaello Sanzio*<sup>2</sup>—an association fusing theatre, performance art and visual arts, which was to explore the potential of theatrical expression outside of narration. The company's name refers to the Renaissance painter Raphael and points to the art-related roots of its founders: Castellucci graduated in painting and stage design from the *Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna*, his sister in painting and philosophy, and his wife in literature with elements of art history. Castellucci was responsible for the initial shape of *Societas* performances, their direction, stage design and costumes, Chiara Guidi for voice work, and Claudia Castellucci for stage movement and the productions' intellectual context—she wrote scripts for the company's first performances, theoretical texts, took part in conferences and edited publications printed by the theatre. Since 2006, Romeo, Chiara and Claudia have been creating independent productions within *Societas Raffaello Sanzio*. Before then, productions initiated since the late 1980s by Castellucci were prepared by the company together, though with clearly defined responsibilities. One

can say that Castellucci had the role of artistic director for the projects. The company functioned as a family institution and, despite changes in work organisation in 2006, it still does, which is a rarity in the European theatre world. The children of Romeo and Chiara have taken part in Societas performances. In several performances, the Castellucci siblings' mother has appeared. Their decade-older sister also works for Societas. Despite the fact that, today, Claudia, Chiara and Romeo create independent projects, their work continues to share elements of the vision they originally forged in the 1980s, of theatre as a place to experience infancy, where audiences can be transported into a different world unrelated to day-to-day reality and, thanks to this, offering an opportunity to observe the human being from a distance. According to Societas, theatre is the field of art which has the greatest potential to suspend the laws governing everyday life, and institute a new reality.

In Societas productions directed by Castellucci, the primary instrument of constructing this new world is an image. Performances have a classical composition created within the frame of the stage watched by an audience member sitting opposite it—this spatial setting resembles the position of a viewer in front of a painting. Frequent points of reference for the world thus created are paintings, such as Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and works by Francis Bacon in *Oresteia* (1995), Mark Rothko's works in *The Four Seasons Restaurant* (2012), and Masaccio's fresco *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, with his Eve becoming an inspiration for the figure of Eve in *Genesis: From the Museum of Sleep* (1999). The space, the play of colours and forms, as well as actor scenes, are built in a plastic manner, and actors communicate with the audience at the level of visual meaning. However, for Castellucci, image is not only the instrument of building the stage language, but also the subject of a philosophical reflection, both aesthetic and ethical. The point is not to determine what an image is (in different periods of his work, the director has called it a form, then a symbol or an idea), but to define its roles. That was the nature of the reference Societas made to the notion of iconoclasm (Greek *eikōn*, image, and *klao*, break, which literally means 'breaking an image'), an early Christian movement opposing the cult of icons and religious figures.

Why did theatre with image as its constitutive instrument refer to a movement characterised by the rejection of images? This is the question which lies at the heart of this book. The first edition was published in Poland in 2013 as *To nie jest obraz. Romeo Castellucci i Societas Raffaello Sanzio* [*This Is Not an Image: The Theatre of Romeo Castellucci and Societas Raffaello*

*Sanzio*] by the Malta Foundation and the publisher Ha!Art.<sup>3</sup> It was designed as a critical reconstruction of the Italian director's theatre and the theoretical approaches accompanying it, hence as a meta-analysis aiming to present the theatrical project that has developed over the past 30 years, with its ethical and aesthetic framework designated by reflection on the image. The book is based on contexts suggested by Castellucci (including the notions of iconoclasm, the pre-tragic and infancy), which are analysed in consecutive chapters. An effort is made to confront the creator's discourse with the philosophical and aesthetic discourses on which his project draws: the perspectives of Pavel Florensky, Giorgio Agamben, Jakob Bachofen, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Franz Rosenzweig and Hans Blumenberg. It explores where these discourses meet and where they diverge from one another.

It is thus possible to distinguish the crucial categories in Romeo Castellucci's theatre, to look at them with hindsight, to show how particular concepts functioned in different periods of the director's oeuvre, how they evolved, mutated, and in which forms they recurred, testifying to the uniformity and consistency of his project. These categories find a different way of expression in each of Castellucci's creative periods, but the field of interest has not changed. This theatre is a consistently developed project that continually surpasses itself.

\* \* \*

Four periods can be distinguished in Castellucci's oeuvre. The first is designated by iconoclastic performances from the early 1980s characterised by a rebellion against theatre subjugated to literature and understood as a representation of reality, and by an attempt to redefine the role of art. At that time, Claudia Castellucci was the author of scripts for Societas's productions. They differed significantly from other dramatic works, functioning as an organic part of the performance, and subordinated to the materiality of the stage. The Societas approach has its roots in the tradition of the Italian avant-garde, not only of the 1960s but also of the 1970s and 1980s, or the so-called post-avant-garde to which the works of the company from Cesena are considered to belong. That had been a period of great liveliness for Italian theatre—a time of formal experiments, touching upon subjects until then considered non-theatrical, and building relationships between different fields of art. Societas was part of this movement, grew out of it, drew inspiration from it and defined itself against it.

The first wave of the avant-garde, including Mario Ricci, Carmelo Bene, Carlo Quartucci and Leo de Berardinis, touched upon the subject of the autonomy of theatre, looking for that which makes it different from other fields of art. This question, posed already at the beginning of the twentieth century and developed by the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, recurred at this time with redoubled intensity. What differentiated it then was interdisciplinarity. The avant-garde of the 1960s drew from film, conceptual art, contemporary dance, happening and new trends in music in the vein of John Cage. Performances were shown in galleries, art houses, museums, and at exhibitions including the Biennale in Venice and Documenta in Kassel. Its most significant creators, Carmelo Bene and Carlo Quartucci, were educated at Accademia Silvio D'Amico and Stabile di Genova respectively, but these were only episodes in their artistic biographies, needed only to affirm them in their choice of which artistic path to follow—antagonistic towards conventional theatre. This choice had a political character. In the 1960s, Italy experienced rapid economic growth. Traditional, literature-based theatre symbolised the bourgeois ideology preaching the myth of economic advancement that intellectuals and artists linked with Italy's fascist past. The avant-garde began to deconstruct this myth connected with the bourgeois class, its hierarchy of values and lifestyle. Demythologisation consisted of the destruction of theatrical conventions, confronting the text with the stage through aesthetics rather than a theme or meanings contained in the text of the performance.

This shift in emphasis from the text to that which is happening onstage was precisely the second feature of the Italian avant-garde. The artists either rejected the text completely or embedded it in a composition in which it was but one of many elements. The works of Bene, one of the best-known and most valued Italian directors of that period, creator of controversial adaptations of classic texts including *Pinocchio*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, were of particular importance for the output of Castellucci. Bene has underscored that, once a performance has started, 'everything has already happened' and all we are left with are 'the rests, oral fragments of a scenic palimpsest or a past perfect poetic'.<sup>4</sup> The space and narration of a performance in Bene's theatre were determined by manipulation of the word: screams, whispers, excessive movement close to parody and profanation. The work on voice made it possible to break the language of a classic text, depriving it of its initial meaning. In this way, the text of the play was created anew.

The breakdown of form and work on the physical aspect of theatrical signs that is characteristic of Bene's theatre is also typical of Societàs works from the 1980s and 1990s in which the word acquired plasticity and became a mere sound. What mattered was the voice's very rhythm, pulse, vibration and volume, rather than sense contained in the words uttered.

A significant role in shaping the Societàs approach was played by Federico Tiezzi. A little older than the group members, Tiezzi had started his work in 1972 in Florence by founding the company *Il Carrozone*, which in 1979 changed its name to *Magazzini Criminali*. His works are already considered to belong to the post-avant-garde distinguished by Giuseppe Bartolucci,<sup>5</sup> the legendary Italian theatre critic, from the avant-garde of the 1960s.

The post-avant-garde definitely sped up and developed the practice the avant-garde had opened up to earlier, based on interdisciplinarity and the critique of bourgeois culture.<sup>6</sup> Texts of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault played an important role in its formation. These described the breakdown of the modern paradigm of the world as a whole, underscoring the lack of continuity and heterogeneity in contemporary times and for the individual themselves. Along with Tiezzi's early companies, the 1970s also saw the formation of other companies of significance to Italian theatre: in 1976, in Rome, *Gaia Scienza* (Barberio Corsetti, Marco Solari and Alessandra Vanzi) began its activities; in 1977, in Naples, both *Falso Movimento* (directed by Mario Martone) and *Teatro dei Mutamenti* (Antonio Neiwiller and Renato Carpentieri) were formed; in 1978, *Teatro Studio di Caserta* (with Toni Servillo); and in 1979 the Milan-based *Teatro Out Off* (headed by Antonio Syxty). Then, in 1980, *Il Teatro della Valdoca* was established and a year later Societàs *Raffaello Sanzio*, both in Cesena.

Tiezzi, similarly to Carmelo Bene, focused on breaking the conventional theatrical signs. In contrast to the surplus that characterised the theatre of the director of *Pinocchio*, however, the creator of *Magazzini Criminali* reduced theatre to the minimum of expression. Tiezzi's productions were characterised by the reduction of theatrical means: 'We considered academic recitation tantamount to the chatter stigmatized by Pasolini,' he stated. 'But the point was also to gain some distance to the theatre of screaming, so fashionable at that time, which was spreading in the performances under the trademark of the Living Theatre. Originally, our theatre was the theatre of silence.'<sup>7</sup> His theatre was defined by references to limits (of representation, body, subjectivity) and an opening

towards the image. In such productions as *Presagi del vampiro* (1977), *Vedute di Porto Said* and *Studi per ambiente* (both 1978), and *Punto di rottura* (1979), the conceptual work on theatrical language meets the language of visual arts, and that which is real, an element disturbing theatrical representation, forces its way into a theatrical world that has been reduced to its minimum.

The third point of reference for the Castelluccis was Arte Povera, which emphasised the austerity of ‘poor’ material—rags, newspapers, metal, stone. Their company’s first performances, such as *Popolo zuppo* [*Soaked People*] (1982), referred to the activities of Jannis Kounellis and Joseph Beuys. In *I fuoriclasse della bontà* [*The Master of Goodness*] (1983), there are references not only to Arte Povera but also to Dadaism. However, as Romeo Castellucci notes, these references were not expressed directly:

There are references but never direct quotations. You cannot say: this is Zorio, this is Kounellis, this is Beuys. There is a sensitive connection, a kinship, but nothing more. I find that during a performance one should be able to forget intellectual and cultural references. [...] The fundamental thing in theatre is the emotive weave, the sensitivity shock.<sup>8</sup>

Also today, intellectual references—philosophical, ethical, theological, cultural and iconographic—are often covert in Societas performances. The point is, above all, to involve the audience in the emotional and physical implications of an image, story and idea.

It was precisely their inspiration by Arte Povera and the works of Bene and Tiezzi, which introduced reflection on the physical reality of a performance,<sup>9</sup> that led Societas, in the performance *Santa Sofia. Teatro Khmer* (1986), to formulate the concept of a theatre in an iconoclastic gesture destroying those images which are familiar, solid, well known, a theatre focused on breaking sense, distancing itself from theatre based on the text, on the word understood as the means of conveying sense. That performance was a stage adaptation of the company’s theatrical philosophy at that time, a stage manifesto of sorts that established a new theatrical ritual.

The second period in the oeuvre of Societas, the so-called pre-tragic period, is designated by productions based on myths of ancient Mesopotamia. Myth indicates a world before word-based Greek tragedy which, as the artists thought at that time, was characterised by intellectual distance; a world in which the symbol is the only means of conveying sense, a direct link with that which goes beyond us, which is indepen-

dent from us. According to Societas, this is the time of mystery. Thus the pre-tragic theatre, in their concept, was an intimate theatre, focused on the audience member's individual experience and impacting him or her through the materiality of the bodies onstage.

The pre-tragic would also determine the work of Societas on dramatic texts in the 1990s. The group believed that the core of tragedy can only be reached by a reference to 'pre-tragic thinking'—based on the body and matter. Pre-tragic thinking would also be the foundation of Societas's work on such productions as *Oresteia (una comedia organica?)* [*The Oresteia (an organic comedy?)*], *Giulio Cesare* [*Julius Caesar*] (1997), and *Genesis: From the Museum of Sleep*—a show based on the Book of Genesis yet, in the director's concept, following the principles of Greek tragedy. This period also saw a transition from interest in mystery to fascination with ancient Rome. Both references created the framework for Castellucci's theatre. The director made use of the full wealth of the theatre medium, wanting to surprise and inspire the audience. He created a spectacular theatre, characterised by an abundance of staging effects and devices—a theatre of rhetoric. 'I believe that rhetoric is a strict mother who teaches me the art of theatre,'<sup>10</sup> he has stated; 'Its purpose is to catch you. [...] It is a serious game (as is every game a child plays).'<sup>11</sup> Castellucci uses the potential of the stage to the maximum, but reveals the fiction of theatre by accentuating the materiality of his theatrical means and the physicality of bodies onstage.

The work on tragedy in the 1990s brought Societas in 2002 to undertake the cycle *Tragedia Endogonidia* (2002–4), a reflection on the 'tragedy of the future' and, at the same time, another manifestation of the project aiming to construct a new language and theatrical world (which had begun with *Santa Sofia. Teatro Khmer*). The 11 performances that comprised the cycle show the fascination with the past characteristic of Castellucci<sup>12</sup> and, in parallel, an inclination towards the future, towards experiment, which has its roots in avant-garde experience. It is the last project the founders of Societas Raffaello Sanzio completed together.

Another period in Castellucci's work seems to be outlined by the productions *Purgatorio* [*Purgatory*] (2008), part of the triptych *Divine Comedy*, based on the Dante poem, and *Sul concetto del volto nel Figlio di Dio* [*On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*], created independently by Chiara Guidi and Claudia Castellucci. In both productions, Castellucci shifts audience emotions related to a social or religious image into a different context, disposing of their original meaning but

keeping their authenticity. A similar strategy was applied in *Santa Sofia* and in *Genesis*. However, in *Purgatorio* and *Sul concetto di volto nel Figlio di Dio* this move is accompanied by a different aesthetic—in a realistic vein, built in reference to bourgeois theatre. *Genesis*, on the other hand, had followed the aesthetic of the director's productions from the 1990s. Both *Purgatorio* and *Sul concetto di volto nel Figlio di Dio*, as with *Genesis*, consider the relationship between the creator and his creation, God and his work, the father and the son.

\* \* \*

The chapters of the present book do not correspond to the chronology of Romeo Castellucci's works. The purpose of the publication is to present the theatrical project of Societas, but also to attempt to interpret it, analysing successive forms of different philosophical concepts which Castellucci converts into images. The book, therefore, although divided into five chapters arranged non-chronologically, is not only a story of sorts. Its core (The Khmer Theatre, An open Image, From Mysteries to Tragedy) is a story which has a beginning, middle and end.

The chapter entitled The Khmer Theatre refers to two productions which were stage adaptations of the company's theatrical philosophy: *Kaputt Necropolis* (1984) and *Santa Sofia. Teatro Khmer*. Analysing them makes it possible to introduce basic notions defining the theatre of Castellucci, placing the director's thought between the theology of image and montage as conceived by Sergei Eisenstein and Aby Warburg, showing that Castellucci is not interested in simple oppositions of iconoclasm and icon, idea and matter, rationalism and irrationalism, word and image, past and future, but in tensions which these juxtapositions bring about in the viewer. Those early productions already show that Castellucci's theatre is based on the principle of asymmetry, an insurmountable conflict. The goal of the image created by the director is not to erase or minimise, get rid of or cross boundaries, but to accentuate them as strongly as possible by means of montage, work on physical presence, the 'visibility' of the word.

In that chapter, the methodological tool is introduced which will then be used to analyse Castellucci's subsequent works: Georges Didi-Huberman's theory of image (often called the psychoanalysis of image). According to the French philosopher, the object, that is, the work of art, cannot be separated from the subject looking at it. Castellucci likewise claims that if an image poses a question, thus focusing the viewer's attention, this question does not belong with the image, but with the viewer.

In Didi-Huberman's analyses, he tries to reach the phantasm hidden behind images, and for this reason the tools he proposes seem particularly useful for analysing performances and works of art based on collective or individual trauma. Castellucci's productions analysed in the third chapter are such performances. Thus, the present work fails to refer to other contexts linked with the philosophy of images, and Didi-Huberman remains the main frame of reference outside the system of references mentioned by Castellucci himself. The category of image is to be found in various fields of the humanities, at the crossroads of many theoretical languages. Reference to other contexts would have entangled me in deliberations on problems related to the notion of image as such. The objective of the present work was, rather, to analyse Romeo Castellucci's theatre.

Selection criteria for the productions in the *An Open Image* chapter were the artistic strategies characterising them. The analysis explores what precisely the negotiations between image and viewer are about in the director's theatre. What do iconoclastic assumptions mean in practice? What images does Castellucci destroy? The productions *Genesis*, *Purgatorio* and *Sul concetto di volto nel Figlio di Dio* are organised around the images of Auschwitz, rape and the image of Christ from Antonello da Messina's painting *Salvatore Mundi*, respectively. By making reference to individual and collective phantasms, the productions embed the audience in the performance in the same way a subject is embedded in the visual images of his or her dreams. What is more, they do not provide answers but, on the contrary, give rise to doubts, creating many truths and thus not creating a single truth, which would have a stabilising power.

The chapter *From Mysteries to Tragedy* focuses on adaptations of dramatic texts: Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and the project *Tragedia Endogonidia*. Tragedy allowed Societas to fully initiate an anthropological argument through stage activities and the materiality of the performance, becoming for Castellucci the fundamental structure of thinking about theatre. In the fourth chapter, that which remained in the background of the reflection in the previous chapters—the relationship between word and image, the past, present and future, mystery and rhetoric—is described, named and analysed. Such a structure makes it possible to show the evolution in the intellectual foundations of Castellucci's theatre, the metamorphosis of some of the concepts and, simultaneously, their continuity.

The English-language version of this book has been updated and supplemented in comparison with the original publication in Polish. One addition is a review that became here an epilogue analysing the director's staging in 2014 of the Gluck opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* in two versions: as part of Wiener

Festwochen and at the Théâtre de La Monnaie in Brussels. The opera production is characterised by a strategy similar to the theatre productions analysed in the third chapter. Thanks to this, it is also possible to take up the subject of pathos, a frequently recurring category in Castellucci's works.

In addition to interviews I conducted in 2013 with Romeo and Claudia Castellucci and Chiara Guidi—the founders of Societas Raffaello Sanzio—and with Gilda Biasini, the company's producer since 1988, who describes the organisation of the company's work, the book's English version also includes two subsequent interviews. The first was commissioned by the Polish theatre journal *Didaskalia* and concerns the presence of animals in Castellucci's productions. The second was published in 2015 in the magazine of Malta Festival Poznań and concerns the director's installation-concert *Doctor Faustus*, commissioned by the festival.

The present book also includes an updated list of productions made by Castellucci through 2015 with Societas Raffaello Sanzio and in other contexts, and an extended bibliography. It inserts the references on Romeo Castellucci's theatre that were published after the publication of the Polish version.

In conclusion, I would like once again to thank Grzegorz Niziołek, the supervisor of my PhD dissertation, which is the basis for the present book, as well as Katarzyna Tórz and Jakub Snochowski for their support and Joe Kelleher for his help in preparing the English-language version of the book.

## NOTES

1. Romeo Castellucci, *Romeo Castellucci o sobie*, interview by Dorota Semenowicz [online], <http://2013.malta-festival.pl/pl/festival/multimedia/romeo-castelluccio-sobiew-rozmowie-z-dorota-semenowicz> [accessed: 20 April 2013].
2. Initially, the company functioned under the name Società Raffaello Sanzio. In 1990, it altered the word *società* ('society' in Italian) to *societas* ('community, association, political league, alliance' in Latin), which is used in the name to date. The Latin word accentuates the character of a fellowship, an alliance entered into to achieve particular objectives (commercial or political objectives, as well as in order to commit a crime).
3. In 2013, Castellucci was curator of the programme 'Oh Man, Oh Machine' at Malta Festival Poznań, the largest festival of performing arts in Poland.

4. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, *Staging the Post-Avant-Garde: Italian Experimental Performance After 1970*, Peter Lang AG, Bern 2002, p. 20. The present description of the Italian avant-garde is predominantly based on this book. On the Italian avant-garde and post-avant-garde, see also: Valentina Valentini, *New Theater Made in Italy*, Performance Research Books, to be published in 2016.
5. Giuseppe Bartolucci (1923–96), journalist, curator, director of theatre institutions, played the lead role in creating the avant-garde identity for over 30 years. He supported new companies and stimulated young artists to search. He was an involved critic, fighting for the right to take risks in art, and the symbol of the rebellious, belligerent spirit of the 1970s and 1980s in Italy.
6. The first showcase of the new experimental theatre was organised by Giuseppe Bartolucci in 1981 in Rome in the frame of the festival ‘Paesaggio Metropolitano’.
7. Sandro Lombardi, *Gli anni felici*, Garzanti, Milano 2004, p. 93.
8. Romeo Castellucci, as cited in: Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, *Staging the Post-Avant-Garde*, op. cit., p. 138.
9. This is not an exhaustive set of the inspirations that influenced the formation of Castellucci’s theatrical project, but it makes it possible to place his theatre in the context of transformations in Italian theatre of the period. A list of artists who left a particularly strong mark on Castellucci’s thought should include Robert Wilson (the breakdown of narration, montage) and Jerzy Grotowski (materiality, the category of authenticity). As Castellucci says of Grotowski: ‘I remember the impression his text *Towards a Poor Theatre* made on me, and particularly, the photographs. These tensed, arched bodies, as if they were being tortured, their eyeballs rolled [...] There are issues which I have in common with Grotowski. Some kind of radicalism, taking things terribly seriously. But in other aspects I am very far from him. The issue of truth, salvation, therapy... I haven’t seen his performances, but as you probably know, Grotowski lived in Italy and at that time he turned to us, our group Societas Raffaello Sanzio, to let him use our theatre for two “actions”, as he called them. Of course we said yes. I saw these actions and I was deeply impressed by the quality of their gesture.’ Romeo Castellucci, *Teatr to pole bitwy*, interview with Dorota Semenowicz (recorded meet-

ing with audience), [Dwutygodnik.com](http://Dwutygodnik.com), 2014, no. 10, <[www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/5483-teatr-to-pole-bitwy.html](http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/5483-teatr-to-pole-bitwy.html)> See also: Interview with Claudia Castellucci in the present book. In this context it is important to notice the name of the movement Arte Povera was taken from Grotowski's text *Towards a Poor Theatre*.

10. Claudia and Romeo Castellucci, *Les Pèlerins de la matière*, Les Solitaires Intempestifs, Besançon 2001, p. 82.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
12. Castellucci often speaks about 'a specific interest [in] ancient arts, ancient books, ancient buildings, ancient paintings and also ancient sculptures'. Romeo Castellucci, as cited in: Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, *Staging the Post-Avant-Garde*, op. cit., p. 138.

## The Khmer Theatre

### AGAINST TRADITION

You shall not enter the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople having no experience of revolution. Walk away if you are used to theatre, there are no images for you here. There is nothing that could be commented on from an aesthetic perspective. Look at the world and walk away, we don't tell traditional biographies here. Come if you want to overcome the fact that you were born, that you are here and that you use the instruments of this world. This is a theatre that refuses representation (when there is no representation, real performances appear – this isn't my opinion).<sup>1</sup>

This is the beginning of a manifesto that Societàs Raffaello Sanzio handed out to audiences before performances of *Santa Sofia. Teatro Khmer*, which the company premiered in 1986.

The production was a stage adaptation of the company's theatrical philosophy at that time. It expressed the company's objection to theatrical convention in Italian institutional theatre of that period but, above all, it formulated their own vision of theatre. It was a radical concept which involved severing the relationship between theatre and the surrounding reality with its sacred, institutionalised boundaries that structured public space and our thinking. The choice of Pol Pot for the play's protagonist—leader of the Khmer Rouge and dictator of Cambodia in the late 1970s,

whose reformative political aspirations were based on the destruction of all things connected with the Western world—corroborates the radical character of this severance. As Pol Pot says in the performance:

I hate tradition. Tradition is reality. I hate it. It isn't a burden to me, not at all. That which is real is tradition. I speak because everyone speaks. What hideous surroundings. [...] Everything leads to the terrifying predestination. The year of birth is horrible. It introduces us into an epoch. Imposes on us the style of the century. Believe me, something lives in your stead: it's tradition. Fetters of the real. Fetters of evil. Fetters of political forces. You are nothing, believe me, you are a metaphor of tradition. They force me to be real, they force me to answer. Force me to accept music, literature, medicine as given. Physics is presented to me as the result of ages of searching which I have to submit myself to. I didn't contribute to its development, and yet I have to yield to it. I hate physics. Its age doesn't frighten me. A few centuries is less than nothing. [...] Everything is foreseen. Absolutely everything. Everything is stable, because everything is foreseeable. Let's be honest: all reality is foreseeable.<sup>2</sup>

Tradition appears in *Santa Sofia. Teatro Khmer* in the form of a child whose toys are being burnt in the first scenes of the performance. As Pol Pot will say: 'Tradition was disguised as a child to arouse my pity.'<sup>3</sup> The child is also a reference to historical events in Cambodia. Aiming to destroy tradition, to break with the Western-related past, the dictator gave power to children who function outside history.

Thus, Castellucci's thoughts on image have their roots in a hatred of reality. What is the point of presenting images of the world which we participate in everyday, anyway? Reality is connected here with the visible and familiar world and with tradition, which in *Santa Sofia* became synonymous with culture. Customs, behaviours, rules governing reality that we confront every day are legitimised by history. It is the guarantor of that which has been tamed, and so is reliable and safe. Since our birth, we exist within a specific order; we are embedded in systems that control our functioning in the world. Breaking with them is practicable only by spending time in an alternative reality, which theatre can create. 'Theatre presents a reality which isn't an everyday reality, but a potential reality.'<sup>4</sup> However, what is left for us there, if the empirical world determined by tradition is denied? What other language is possible? How to build, and what should the foundations of this different reality be?

In order to better understand Castellucci's strategy, let us go back to the production *Kaputt Necropolis*, made two years before *Santa Sofia*. It is also a stage adaptation of the theatrical philosophy of Societas, although less explicit than the one which followed.

In *Kaputt Necropolis*,<sup>5</sup> severance with determinants imposed by reality came about through reflection on language. According to Societas, tradition predetermines how and what we say. Language is imposed on us and we learn from the day we are born how to function within it. Our relationship with language is one of submission, dominance and dependence. Language in the production becomes the symbol of existential shackles. Not only do we have no control over it, it also expresses the finitude of the human condition. To show the word's finite character and, at the same time, emphasise the theatrical ritual, Societas decided to perform an experiment: they created their own language, Generalissima, 'able to express any thought'. This constructed language was the outcome of studies on Creole languages<sup>6</sup> and the writings of Ramon Llull, a thirteenth-century scholastic, poet and theologian who created a mechanical device in his *Ars generalis ultima*. This was a logic machine which consisted of concentric rings with symbols of theological concepts and basic natural structures. Rotation of the rings produced different combinations that gave either true or false sentences. Thus, theological statements proved themselves, corroborating the tenets of Christianity.

Constructing Generalissima, Claudia Castellucci arranged words in four concentric rings inscribed in one another, which made up four levels: the outside ring consisted of 400 selected Italian words, their combinations revealed another ring comprising 80 words, while combinations of these 80 words gave another 16, with the final four, *agone*, *apotema*, *meteora*, *blok*, emerging out of the 16. The outside ring gathered the names of objects, concrete and abstract activities and adverbs (in groups of five). For example, in this outside ring there appeared words such as 'no', 'grammar', 'to steal', 'consciousness', 'always', 'obvious', 'mountain', 'full' and 'monotony'; and then in the next ring words such as 'bed', 'north', 'school', 'law', 'society', 'to think', 'to want' and 'weakness'. These were then categorised in more and more general 'drawers' in the inside, or abstract, rings. The four words from the central ring were to express all others, encompass all intermediary words, which only 'stain the purity of the first [central ring] because they describe what should have already been understood'.<sup>7</sup> Therefore the words in the outside ring are 'the weakest of all. These are the words for beginners. You need to be

patient,<sup>8</sup> as one of the characters in the performance said while teaching the new language. Actors in the performance moved from one ring to another. When they were left with the four final words, they communicated almost telepathically.

The performance used scholastic rituals, philosophical tests and inventions whose purpose was to describe the universality of the world in rational and mathematical terms; it drew on the utopian attempts to capture and thus comprehend, gain control over and preserve the essence of reality. A point of reference for the group's search was also Giordano Bruno, who created a mnemonic machine based on Lull's mechanism.<sup>9</sup> The philosopher placed basic images from the classical art of memory on concentric rings divided into 30 segments, each of which was then divided into five more parts, creating diverse combinations when rotated. The mnemonic rings gathered knowledge and organised it, and were an attempt to explain the laws governing the world, including its spiritual domain. The efforts of Bruno and Lull were, in fact, no different from subsequent attempts of the Encyclopedists. They were intellectual undertakings which aimed to create a compendium of knowledge in the realms of science, religion, art and craft. They showed that religion is not a precondition for human inquiries and expanding knowledge, and that the world's phenomena can be accounted for outside of it.

Generalissima categorised reality, organised it and reduced it to the four most general categories. The production, however, did not reveal the organising mechanism behind it. In a similar manner to Bruno and Lull, who tried to free themselves from religious determinants shaping the outlook on the world in their times, Societas wanted predominantly in *Kaputt Necropolis* to free themselves from tradition, symbolised by language appropriated by the ideology of the media and reduced to conveying a message. Still, in 2011, Castellucci underlined that, repeating Guy Debord: 'spectacle, media, communication turned into an ideology that obscures all other domains of language. We are all the time immersed in communication! Communication always entails message, meaning and discourse that are repeated forever.'<sup>10</sup> The Societas invention did not serve to ridicule language or the kind of theatre based on language. Generalissima was a language that presented its own limits. Four words, which could not be reduced further and were able to express everything, remained out of 400 words. It was a language that was reaching the limits of expression, revealing from the inside its finite, limited character. Its nature was to remind the spectator about his or her condition of a being doomed to