Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Night at the Paramount with Peter Brook's Grand Inquisitor

Taline Voskeritchian · Thursday, April 26th, 2012

On a rainy Boston evening, I skipped with a dear, old friend of many decades and several crossings to the Paramount Theater in Boston, battling the puddles to see Peter Brook's production of *The Grand Inquisitor*. We were full with food and wine and coffee and chatter, but most of all full of that sense of excited wonder of which we are (fortunately) still capable, after all the poundings and bruisings of life, after the long periods of silence and the sudden breakthrough of animated words, after all that has been lost to us, in language and culture and friendship, after all the ups and downs, the parting of the ways and the reconciliations, the departures and returns.

And so it was that the one-hour play began. An actor (Bruce Myers) walked on to the bare stage, took his place behind the podium, and began telling Ivan's parable—his gaze laser-direct, his body rooted, his words sculpted. As the performance began to cast its spell on us, we realized, again, that in the fullness of time, it is always to our first and early loves that we return—to each other, to be sure, but also to the theater; as Brodsky would say, "One's love, too, is greater than oneself." We may change; our ideas may be revised, abandoned or recast in new ways; we may become wiser or more child-like, more accepting or more pissed off; but our first loves always ambush us, sneak up on us when we least expect it—as the evening did for us, and as we admitted to each other while we walked to South Station, she to take her bus to New York City and I to take the Red Line home.

The rain had stopped, and the hint of snow was in the air, the way those first stray petals suddenly catch our attention only to disappear while we wait for the next one to descend. And contrary to our habit of talking and laughing our heads off when we meet like this for a day here, a day there, of getting ourselves all tangled with words in anticipation, we were now unusually parsimonious. The world seemed suspended, inert, waiting. Waiting. We said just enough about Brook's production, just enough and not more, trying to make each word measured, precise–in the spirit of Brook himself and his ideas of theater. (That's a tall order for talkers like us.) Our economy was a kind of tribute to what we had witnessed on the stage an hour earlier: the spoken word which comes into being amidst the silence, comes into being as primal utterance but also as an answer to the void, comes to connect the actor on the stage with the audience. The secret thread that binds us for better and for worse to each other.

And after our farewells and the promises of another such evening of theater, and as I was heading home on the subway, I thought again of our first common love, when we were young and full of promise but also a lot of self-involvement and pretentiousness. I thought of our beginnings. It was in Beirut of the 1960s, in college, reading Brecht and Sartre and Albee and Pinter, doing the rehearsals for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.* (I think I was the stage-something-or-the-other for my friend's student production, or just a hanger-on. I forget, it's been so long). And then the

following year, emboldened by her success I took at stab at Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. The long nights of rehearsal, the poring over each word, the unending problems with lighting and sound and actors falling sick or not showing up. All of that, but most of all the making of something out of words on a page, out of gesture and sound, out of that secret, common thread which is blessing and curse, better and worse.

Our lives at college during those years were sheltered, our college perched on a hill in West Beirut. But Beirut was on fire, most of all in the sphere of theater and the visual arts, the festival before the wake, the hope before the creeping of the civil war, the light foreshadowing the long darkness. Beirut in those years before the breakout of violence in the early 1970s was the ground of experimental theater, everywhere a new production company, everywhere a new theater building, from the working class ghettos where plays were staged in schools and community centers to the more middle class venues like Theatre de Beyrouth which has withstood the years of the civil war and is now threatened with closure, to old Roman ruins improvised into stages where international directors like Grotowski staged their productions.

That was the Beirut of our youth. And as my subway car made its way from the MGH stop to Central Square and on to Harvard Square, not only our student productions but the entire theater scene of Beirut suddenly displayed itself, came to life. There we were, two young, self-absorbed women hurrying, with that same sense of anticipation and bated breath, to see a production in Arabic of Brecht's Mother Courage or another comedy by the great Lebanese comic Chouchou, a new improvisational, insurrectional theater in the ghettos of the city, in the schools and the community centers. Had the civil war not arrived the movement would have next taken to the streets, I am sure.

And here we were this March evening, I thought, after all these years, after our initial work in the theater and then our drifting away from it, here we were today, again, in the presence of a stage, an actor, and a space, our hearts in our hands. We had returned, and, as Neruda says, "He who returns has never left." Here we were again, with our first love, but older, the decades having neither paled nor distorted the allure, the pull of it all. Here we were in the presence of an actor, a wooden plank, and an audience. And in Brook's hands, language made holy; space made archaic; time made the here-and-now; utterance turned to music and incantation.

When we're young, we aim for individuality; when we're old we hunger for the common ground. The ancients knew this to be the power of the theater, and Brook belongs with the ancients.

But what about us? I ask the question without a hint of self-indulgence, I hope. What about us who were scattered and displaced, who began new lives and loved again, who tried to recreate here that which we had lost, or so we thought. What is it about this first love of ours that has endured, that has returned, that has bracketed our disjointed, ruptured lives? Paradoxically, this primal togetherness, tells us again, in case we had forgotten, that we are all several people, several personae battling it out. We are the inquisitor and his other, the silence and the word, the disguise and the core. Our first love, therefore, is many loves.

And because the last words should be yours, my dear friend, let me end by writing them down here and now: We can now hope to wear our contradictions and multiplicity comfortably enough to … use them instead of nurse them, love them instead of containing them, share them instead of submerging them.

Safe travels; colorful sails.

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Image: Bruce Myers in a scene from The Grand Inquisitor.

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