THEATRE BERKOFF READING

Berkoff Workshop: Please read for the Berkoff workshop.

Berkoff and Mime

In his quest for vitality, Berkoff creates and breaks theatrical conventions, resulting in a style composed of contradictions. These contradictions are rooted in his determination "to see how I could bring mime together with the spoken word as its opposite partner, creating the form and structure of the piece" (53). This characteristic can be traced to his training *Free Association* with Le Coq, whom Thomas Leabhart, author of *And Post-Modern Mime* (1989), acknowledges as *Modern* teaching "mime to talk" (101). To fuse opposites, Berkoff relies on mime, a traditionally silent form, yet he cherishes the spoken word; his productions are over-the-top in energy level yet depend on great subtlety; the actor must never appear self-conscious yet his presentational style is very self-conscious; and Berkoff meticulously choreographs movement yet he encourages improvisation. Berkoff outlined his philosophy thoroughly in "Three Theatre Manifestos" (1978) which, according to him, has not changed significantly through the years (Personal interview); he summarized his theories by stating: "In the end there is only the actor, his body, mind and voice." He continues, "The actor exists without the play . . . he can improvise, be silent, mime, make sounds and be a witness" .*Gambit*
The aural environment of the plays, an outgrowth of the performer, should be created vocally and physically. Berkoff explains:

> The atmosphere is in the sound which should come from the throats of the
> actors. Therefore their sound can control and amplify their situation, since
> people make sounds as well as moving and speaking. This is total and
> human, and in this way you return to the actor his mimetic gifts and his oral
> expressiveness. At the same time one is seeing the situation in human
> terms, as a story told to us by players. (*Gambit* 17)

By asking the actors to create sounds, Berkoff breaks with traditional mime convention. Like many of Le Coq's students, Berkoff freely bastardizes the pure form of mime to create an individualized style: the Berkovian.

Metamorphosis

Berkoff wanted his own Gregor to remain completely on-stage through the entire performance, so he expanded the Oxford idea to encompass his entire body. Berkoff explains how he developed his concept for performing Gregor:

  I extended the idea of the bug so that he had six parts: these were his front legs [indicating his
  crossed forearms], and that the idea would be that the bug would be absolutely immobile,
  frozen. And that he would only move the way bugs do: suddenly. And I had the knees become
  the second section and the toes become the sixth leg. (I didn't have the antennae but you can
  imagine that.) So we tried to create this by moving very, very slowly. (quoted on *The South*

Bank Show)

The actors in the subsequent productions of *Metamorphosis* have not altered Berkoff's original physical interpretation. This is a very different image than an actor on "all fours"; when the Gregor beetle moves, the actor uses his fingertips, forearms, elbows, knees, shins, and feet in order to stay as close to the ground as possible. Through this technique, the smallest movement assumes significance, because the physical interpretation is all inclusive. The actor abstracts Gregor's voice, using echo effects and grotesque sounds when he is speaking to his family. The speech is easier to interpret when he speaks interior monologues. Gregor will hiss, yell, and whisper -- taking full advantage of his vocal range as he must of his physical arsenal. Everything is suggestive, never literal.

> Since Gregor's beetle metamorphosis is an attitude deliberately taken to expressively show his inner-state, his naked dehumanized personality, a struggling insect, I chose to adapt/direct the play as formally as possible, suggesting the family's joy/anguish very often in fixed attitudes -- choreographed reactions -- Victorian gestures, frozen movement reminiscent of old prints. The movement becomes an analogue to the hard, bright, mechanical insect movement of Gregor -- they might be separate unit of the Beetle themselves. This style, rather than diminishing the impact of the story by reducing naturalistic stage activity, did for many have an even more powerful effect, as if the memory of events and of people is retained in the mind's eye almost as stills -- sometimes highly blurred and out of focus. (77)

Berkoff continuously echoed this form in the acting, set, movement, and lighting. [This form encompassed the content.

photo by Roger Morton from Theatre of Steven Berkoff

Having established the bug's movements, Berkoff helped design a practical, and symbolic, set that permitted the actor playing Gregor mobility to move around the space as a bug might move around a room. Berkoff especially remembers hanging upside down from the top of the jungle-gym structure to watch the action unfold downstage, willingly surrendering his own safety to communicate through his art. This helped quench personal demons by "hanging just by my ankles, afraid nightly of being killed, but willing it, in my fanatic desire to outdo everyone else, my own self and my fears" (72); it created the possibility of a virtuoso performance through such a daring portrayal.

The environment was also reinforced by him remaining on-stage throughout the entire production, projecting a looming presence, as if peering through the bars of the cage. This presence was emphasized by extensive use of light and shadow. Berkoff integrated the other actors into the mise-en-scène by, at times, creating "animated marionettes that moved, reflecting the insect's movements, so that they as a group, more than Gregor, were the dung beetle in reality" (72).

Berkoff decided that mime, stylized movement, and tableau were the most effective means to create living marionettes and created a rhythmic motion for the family. At times, the actors spoke in stylized speech patterns, accompanied by a metronome, and, at others, spoke with natural voices; this created a striking juxtaposition between what is mechanical and natural. Berkoff's choices became distracting, and, even irritating to some critics. In his 1989 review of *Metamorphosis* for *The Washington Post*, David Richards complains that Berkoff directed the play in
an outsized, caricatural manner. Indeed, at times they all carry on like the animated figures that pop out, hourly, from a cuckoo clock. But they are just as apt to indulge in the histrionic flourishes of the 19th century tear-jerker. Nearly every gesture, line and pose, grandiose or otherwise, is accompanied by a sound effect or a lighting effect. Sometimes by both.

Visual Elements

The visual elements of a Berkovian production are strikingly stark. Classical Greek theatre, Japanese Kabuki, German expressionism, and Vsevelod Meyerhold's constructivism, are particularly influential on Berkoff's visual aesthetic. By juxtaposing minimal sets with very theatrical costumes, masks, and lighting, the visual focus is on the actor. Though the costumes draw attention to themselves, they serve to emphasize the performer and help to create the environment and the characterization. Because it is so extreme, his visual aesthetic may appear indulgent, often emphasizing Berkoff's concept more so than the verbal script itself.
In a 1990 interview on Japanese television, Berkoff explains his thoughts on the visual elements in his productions:

> I believe that you don't need anything more than just utter simplicity and
> that everything in my art must be created from the body onwards. The body
> and the voice. Everything else is an imposition and is an interference with
> the art of the actor: if it's too many lights, too many props. So the simplicity
> with me is that I return the art of the actor to the actor; not give it to the
> sets or give it to the props or give it to the costumes or give it to the lights.
> But give it to the performer. (Interview, Japanese Television; *Salomé*
> videotape, British Theatre Museum)

Berkoff believes that alleviating his productions from cumbersome sets will help free the audience's imagination. He believes that a representational visual aesthetic is a tranquilizer to the creative imagination of the audience, while his living environment is a stimulant.