The Constant Journey: An Introduction and a Prefatory Note
Monique Wittig, Barbara Godard

Modern Drama, Volume 39, Number 1, Spring 1996, pp. 156-159 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: 10.1353/mdr.1996.0043

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mdr/summary/v039/39.1.wittig.html
All theatre works with the same themes, endlessly repeated. Sophocles rewrote Aeschylus; Shakespeare took his themes from Greek and Roman antiquity, as did Racine; Brecht, continuing this tradition, rewrote Shakespeare. Without necessarily referring to these illustrious examples, we can see the same sort of rewriting everywhere in contemporary French theatre. This way of working informs us about the imaginary and is relevant here only as justification for my venturing to recreate Quixote and Panza once again in the theatre. In this case the project requires a double justification, since the actors playing these roles are women. This is not, as some have charged, simply a matter of transposition. If the spectators of The Constant Journey are convinced when the curtain falls by these new characters Quixote and Panza, it is because they have been present scene by scene at the remaking of heroes of a new sort. Indeed, the success of this play depends on active spectators, capable of recreating a complete fable from nothing. As always, it’s a fable they know by heart because each episode is faithfully repeated from Cervantes, including the scene of the puppet show, and even including Quixote’s rewriting since in the second part of Cervantes’s novel Quixote knows about his own adventures and takes the place of the author.

In The Constant Journey, Sande Zeig is the one who alternates with the author of the text, creating the stage field of action. The dissociation of sound from action in the play may thus be better understood as an internal necessity dictated by a series of imperatives. To begin with, new elements had to be given separately to the spectators to allow them to recreate the plot as it was unfolding: Cervantes’s barber, priest, and housekeeper have been transformed into mother and aunt; instead of a niece, Quixote now has two sisters. Next, the procedure of separating sound from action as in film served not only to

Modern Drama, 39 (1996) 156
reconstitute the heroes step by step, but also to unfix in the theatre gestures which have become too firmly stuck to words and words which often seem only to serve gestures. I wanted to kill two birds with one stone: to rescue the theatre, which for me is this miracle of the physical presence of actors on stage, from its subjection to the text and, simultaneously, to release Sleeping Beauty from her secular sleep and her tired presence in our dreams.

It strikes me as provocative that I have chosen such typically masculine heroes to carry this out, since I am certain that at least half the public in its reading and phantasmic projections recreates itself in the role of hero just as readily as in that of heroine. That is to say, in reading, as in dreams or self-contemplation, one imagines oneself beyond gender. If I mention Sleeping Beauty, it is because, with this single exception, all the heroines in fairy tales have active roles, as they do in Beauty and the Beast and most of the old tales from here or elsewhere.

The text itself is also liberated, in the sense that it acts independently of the action. It is not diminished by this separation: the entire creation of a crowd of secondary characters who will never appear on stage depends on it; in addition, it helps us to conceive abstractly the concrete characters of Quixote and Panza. And finally, the whispering we hear contributes to the fantastic atmosphere necessary for the whole performance to come together.

The project could not have existed without the preliminary work of Sande Zeig, who gave me the idea of taking off from these characters, of emphasizing body language, movement, and comic acrobatics. The visual work is all hers; note how in the stage images he combines venerable clowning techniques with routines from the Peking Opera. She was assisted in this work by John Towsen, director of the New York festival of clowns, and by Syn Guerin, who co-directed the American production of the play. I have spoken of the stage image in order to make a connection with film, which has influenced all my writing and which can be found in my use of sound as well as image. There is one thing, however, which film can never give us – namely, the immediate palpable presence of actors, that physical presence which is the principal source of the effect of theatre as art. This play might be considered, then, a homage to theatre and to actors.

II: A PREFATORY NOTE

The Constant Journey was created in several stages, beginning with improvisational work on the theme of Quixote with the actor and mime Sande Zeig. This was the stage which enabled me to return to the theatre I had abandoned after writing four plays. The work carried out with Sande Zeig focused on the movement and displacements of the body, since in the theatre the physical presence of the actors is central. Now, one of the problems with theatre for me relates to the connection between actors’ words and their movements. In what
Peter Brook calls “Deadly Theatre,” gestures and words are connected on the basis of convention, so that both become moribund and in some way cancel each other out: for example, getting up in order to say something; striking the table with your fist in order to express anger; etc. These gestures are sucked up by words and lose all their meaning. They make sense only as a function of words that have been spoken or are about to be spoken. In this vicious circle, the words themselves have no other purpose or meaning than to support some theatrical gesture.

Everything was ready, then, for the second stage: my realization that, at the present time, a performance could exist only by separating words and gestures in some way, treating them independently as often happens in cinema. This is a way of exploding the convention which orders gestures and dialogue, an endeavour that seems to have motivated the research of Robert Wilson.

The Constant Journey is thus composed of a sound-track and stage action. The sound-track provides the text. Recorded on this are the voices of both the actors who appear on stage and those who don’t; there is also music, like the music in a film. The action on stage is carried out by a mime and a clown, disconnected from the sound. Of course, the action does not consist of miming the sound: it’s autonomous, an action whose necessity does not reside in the actors’ words, in what is spoken. Sometimes the action and the sound-track blend or overlap or repeat each other. One recalls the other, refers to it, becomes its context.

This works as it does in a film where, for example, a man is stuck in a traffic jam behind the wheel of his car. On screen we see the cars, the stream of traffic surrounding him, the lights, the abrupt stops and starts. What is heard, however, has nothing to do with the images seen; what is heard is a voice (or voices) speaking about something else happening somewhere else. This might be the inner voice of the man and what he’s thinking about: his work, his love affairs, the beach – anything except the traffic of which he’s barely aware. Film spectators follow the two series of dissociated events without a murmur because they are accustomed to doing this double work at the cinema; they aren’t even conscious of it. It seems to me that if one demands this kind of attention from spectators in the theatre, if sound-track and action operate separately and autonomously, then both words and gestures will regain power and effectiveness.

What is required of the spectators of The Constant Journey, then, is that they mobilize the kind of attention they generally reserve for the cinema in order to follow two series of events: on the sound-track, Quixote battles against the windmills (the spoken event) while on stage Panza sits on a donkey and eats (the visual event).

Film technique has influenced the form of this play not only at the level of dissociation of sound from action: the entire text is cut into short sequences so as to create a temporal space like that of cinema, while stage action proceeds
independently in comparable rapid sequences. As a result spectators have no
time to settle into a “scene.” And the visual absence of certain characters who
are spoken about and who speak on the sound-track (physical presence
through sound) is yet another of the possibilities currently used in film that is
carried over here to theatre.

Finally, the whole performance must have a rapid rhythm, be comic, and
display both a range of colours and a great variety of gestures and postures.

Translated by Barbara Godard

NOTES

1 The “Introduction” to The Constant Journey was originally printed in the pro-
gramme for the play’s Paris production at Théâtre du Petit Rond-Point, May 1985
(directed by Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig; performed by Zeig and Paule King-
leur; costumed by Lena Vandrey). The production was supported by a grant from
the cultural division of the Ministère des Droits de la Femme (Ministry of
Women’s Rights).
2 The “Prefatory Note” to The Constant Journey was originally published in a sup-
plement to Vlasta, 4 (June 1985), 5–6.