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THE PERCEPTION OF ASJA LACIS IN ITALY: IMPACT ON THEATRE, EDUCATION, AND POLITICS

The 1970s was socially and culturally intense period in Italy, but, at the same time, challenging, exciting, and anguished, full of new beginnings and hopes, as well as of intolerance and anxieties. On the one hand, the seeds from mythical 1968 started to mature, introducing a cultural renewal that appeared in a series of social achievements, like the laws on divorce (1970, approved by referendum in 1974), objection of conscience (1972), the new family rights (1975), the legalisation of abortion (1978), besides the increase in wages, the rise of strong feminist movement for equal rights and and grasp of conscience, and increased poticial involvement by youth. However, on the other hand, the same new consciosness on all levels provoked the radical increase of political tensions – generation and class fight, fuelling contestations, divisions, extremes, violence until establishing the well-known “strategy of tension”, that resulted into clashes on streets, and bloody and destabilizing acts of terrorism by both extreme sides, so much that the decade was defined *years of lead* [Montanelli, Cervi 1991].

In the overheated and wishful climate, the break of traditional schemes of society and culture, the victories in the labour field and civil rights were accompanied with and contributed by strong impulses to the liberation of critical and deviant ideas and of individual and collective artistic creativity, tenaciously supported by left-wing intellectuals and artists. The theatre, in particular, as communicative art related to particular civil and educational vocation, felt the inner and external pushes towards renewal, and felt the need to exit from the closed circle and theatrical institutions’ conventions, and distance also from *new avantgarde* of the 60s, in order to conquer significant and leading role in the society and culture, that started to renew itself. From the spontaneous aggregations *of base*, from youth groups and artists dedicated to experimentation New Theater slowly developed [De Marinis 2000]. Within its extremely vivid and varied environment, we can possibly cite the two most known and widespread trends of *theatres of research*, that moved in alternative directions, but with equally destabilizing intentions and that

identified themselves as post-avangardic and *third theater*. The first showed the active aesthetic reflection of contemporaneity, the metropolitan dimension, other artistic languages, technology, scenic writings and performance [Bartolucci 1968; *La scrittura scenica* 1971–1983], while the second developed the principles of group culture based on otherness, the ethical dimension of theatrical work, the centrality of body, the physical training and dramaturgy of actor [Barba 1976]. Besides these more widely recognised tendencies, more humble, but fierce movement was born and developed, created by small constellation of actors, writers and professors who were involved in the school and committed to the theatre's strong expressive and educational value and its subversive potentialities in comparison with traditional, superficial, discriminatory compulsory education methods. In particular, from the meeting between theatre's activists from well prepared progressive educational movement, the Educative Cooperation Movement, E.C.M. (*Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa*) arise the educative-artistic phenomenon, that starts to act as a leading force in the corrosion in the old passive didactics: so called *theatrical animation*, an experimental tool to stimulate the creativity and to promote the *free expression* of each youngster.

Not without initial resistance and opposition, and punishments by scholastic institutions, theatre activists and professors started to introduce in the classes, especially in primary schools, the playful, yet critical towards scholastic content, forms of dramatization, providing them to children and allowing to use freely the simple techniques of theatre: mimic or verbal improvisations, invention of stories, painting and modelling, creation of objects, muppets and simple musical instruments, creation of music and songs, poetry, newspapers, photography, etc. [Casini Ropa 1974]. The leading educative idea of the movement was to offer to child all possible means of expression, including non-verbal, to promote child's creative interaction with materials and analogic critical interaction with reality.

In a school that had always preferred only verbal language, oral and written, thus putting in difficult situation the children with working class, farmer or sub-proletariat background, the possibilities of free expression that would value also non-verbal languages, suggested as a strong act of social integration. It was an educative position that flourished quickly and that based itself on some previous example experiments, like those of French master Celestin Freinet [Freinet 1949], in the 50s and from the priest don Lorenzo Milani with his work/manifest "Letter to teacher" (*Lettera a una professoressa*) in 1967. The theatre with its strong ability to involve and its expressive instruments could offer this movement an ideal educational place, and at the same time to itself – the possibility to re-evaluate itself as something more than theatre (*più-che-teatro*, a concept introduced by Fabrizio Cruciani), or as an ideal experimentation place of new conscience of oneself and

of diverse equality of life for each person. It is worth while to remember that on research and higher education level, exactly in 1970/1971, in Italy at University of Bologna the first bachelor course was created in arts, music and theatre (DAMS), phenomenon that showed departure from tradition or academic studies, founded on the valorisation of artistic, non-verbal expression means, and, in particular, on abandonment of the humanistic idea of theatre as a literature and on the study of theatre's material life and of the cultural and social network of relations that it has with its time.

The overall educational enthusiasm, marked with utopic impulses from beginning of the 70s, produced a great amount of researches and publications, giving birth to young and militant publishing houses dedicated to various left-wing expressions [Scabia, Casini Ropa 1978]. The published writings contributed to great change in mentality regards the school education and promoted a process of allowing new teaching methodologies and social practices of inclusion (like introducing full time activities, often artistic, into the curriculum).

Regarding the theatrical animation, after the first defence movement of refusal of scholastic authorities from mid 70s, the creative *subversion* was slowly institutionalized and led back to the more or less curricular stream of integrative activities, often diminishing the quality by introducing short training courses for imparted animators to young teachers or theatre personnel's novices.

In 1975, exactly when the animation started to retreat to the theatre or institutionalization, and externally the political tensions provoked the irremediable wounds and non-controlable extremism, publishing house Feltrinelli, well-known for its left orientation, decided to publish translation in Italian from German of Asja Lacis *Revolutionär im Beruf*, whose content well related to the contemporary Italian events. I was offered to translate it and to add my own text, the result of studies that I was carrying out that moment on theatre of agitprop in Weimar Republic. Fabrizio Cruciani, innovative historian of theatre and my professor at DAMS, wrote the introduction in which he discussed through the memories of Lacis her approach to fundamental figures in theatre and the culture of 20th century, like Meyerhold, Brecht, Piscator and Benjamin, about the meaning and the function of theatre in society and the concept *political theatre* itself, seen in a reestablished dialectic and contradictory dimension. Structured in this way, the text found more balance between the biography and analytical part and promoted comparative and specular interpretation.

Released in May of 1976 and immediately inserted also among the readings at university, *Professione: rivoluzionaria* [Lacis 1976] was widespread, especially in the educative-theatrical field and also in the political communication, and influenced considerably the receptive fields like theatre, education and cultural politics.

The first reason of efficiency of the work was its ability to offer politically reliable and consonant roots and historical precedents to the recent ideas and practices in our country that still lacked historicizing or cultural validation. In fact, in Lacis' work it was possible to gather multiple useful and qualifying references to diverse and previous manifestations of that social duty was so variably and heatedly widespread.

The theatrical animation movement whose trend was about to reach the end, found in the experience with "besprizorniki" of Orel, the strengthening example of theatrical activity for vulnerable youngsters, that fully confirmed the educational value of their work and pushed it beyond school, in even more difficult and disadvantaged social environments. The critique of unilateral bourgeois education, the value of game and observation in the education process, the diminishing value of result instead of process, even the operational modalities with improvisation tool and final spontaneous procession correspond perfectly to the ideas and practices of animators, and it made them feel like heirs of the revolutionary past.

The "Manifest" by Benjamin, then was a truly exceptional discovery. The text was already translated in Italian in 1969 by Elvio Fachinelli, then a young psychoanalyst, deeply involved in politics, who was dedicated to anti-authoritative education projects, and published in newspaper led by himself, "Quaderni Piacentini" [1979:38]. However, the newspaper was strictly targeted and spread only in limited intellectual circle and Manifest hadn't arrived to wider knowledge. The work of Lacis re-propose it and make it more known, especially in the theatrical and educational field, and provide an influential material for reflection and discussion around the animation problematics and the educational value of theatre. Among the theatre activists, who already were inclined to enter the professional theatre environment, fed the debate in progress on the involvement modalities of students in the theatrical creation, that was expressed in dilemma: theatre *for*, *with* and *by* youngsters? The position of Benjamin/Lacis confirmed the same as the most radical defenders of free expression of youngsters, declaring them as true protagonists of their creations and strengthen in many teachers the conviction that group work in global education environment, like the one created by the possibilities of involvement in theatre, would be an ideal conditions and at least experimental for open and democratic education. The mysterious *secret sign of happening* that closes the Manifest becomes one of the most quoted in many advanced education conferences and discussions. However, one must note that from this intense experimental period and incisive auto-analysis, after the regenerating experience in the school many new artists promoted new fertile theatre for youngsters whose innovation in drama and scenography happily competed with the theatre for adults.

Broadly speaking, the aesthetic-theatrical and socio-political implications of theatre affairs that were in the biography of Lacin escaped from theatre institutions' borders in order to enter dilated territories. Her multiple and interesting experiences within the German culture and theatre in the 1920s in the contact with the biggest and the most controversial artistic personalities of time and with the abnormal reality of proletariat theatre, gave the incentive to breach of the traditional theatre's borders, promoting the instauration of her various visions and encouraging the opening to the single and collective experiences. Instead of *theatre*, it is more talked about *theatres*.

The events of German revolutionary theatre, that – almost unknown in Italy – broadened from the introduction, besides constructing a source of unknown knowledge, constructed an ideal bridge with the existing political debates. In fact, it contributed in the same time to revitalisation of utopic ideas within theatre and society, and to desire to participate directly with help of arts in social and cultural areas. Furthermore, another open and contradictory problem appeared, that put the use of theatre as justification for its existence in its expressive form, that tried to qualify and experiment the theatre first as a form of communication and then as an art. In the same year, the work of Lacin was republished in “The Political Theatre” (*Il teatro politico*) by Erwin Piscator [Piscator 1976] with a new introduction by Massimo Castri, director who was very occupied with redefinition of the theatre's political function through directorial re-interpretation of works. The work of Lacin brought to front the ambiguity of political theatre, that was revealed in the contrast between two concepts: on the one hand, political theatre as a theatre that speaks about politics to non-homogeneous society by being a channel in which it arranges; on the other hand, the political theatre as mirror of *organic relationship* of spectacle and homogeneous audience, in which the theatrical form is subordinated to communication and thus can live both like common utopic moment, and like simple, extremist use of theatre's expressive tools for political fight.

We should not forget the last movement where *Professione: rivoluzionaria* left its impact, the social and political battle of women. The Italian neo-feminism [Meta 2012], that in the 1960s tried particularly, but with bitter delusions within the divided political actions to equality of sexes, in the mid 1970s had already changed the direction, instead claiming the differences and decision autonomy of thought. The female collectives had an important role in the already mentioned social conquests of time. However, the leading figures that the movement used as references were mainly from anglo-saxon environment and their political – cultural basis often was distant from political formation (in many cases, distinct party system) in which Italian feminists were brought up. The biography of Asja Lacin, who lived and worked in the Soviet Union, whose rigid regime was well known;

she was intelligent and creative, appreciated by many personalities of her time, imprisoned for years for her freedom of thought and at the end good manager of poor theatre for the people of *kolchoz*, could really become an exemplary value.

Still today in Ravenna, the feminist association dedicated to Asja Lacis is very active. Founded in 1996 [www.asialacis.it], it occupies with projects in the field of theatrical expression, promote the cultural activities with social, recreational and educational aims and create plays, especially within the interesting project “Theatre and Autobiography”.

After the wave of recognition, created immediately after the appearing of the volume, Asja Lacis was rarely mentioned in Italian texts, only in some later researches on theatrical animation and on German *agitprop* theater [Casini Ropa 1988]. But impressive efficiency of her work in the cultural and political atmosphere of theatre in the 70s is still alive today in the memories of all who have lived it.

Translated by Līva Sniķe, *Mg.pol.sc.*

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Abstract

The 1970s in Italy proved to be the time of both intense cultural renewal and growing political tension, followed by street fights and violent terrorism. The breaking of traditional social and cultural models and high achievements went hand in hand in this stormy environment, facilitated by both the desire of the individual to break free and collective creativity. The latter was sustained by left-wing intellectuals and artists. Also felt was the necessity to secure once again the leading role of theatre in culture and society. In 1976, left-wing editor Feltrinelli published the translation of Asja Lācis's memoirs into Italian, entitled "Professione – rivoluzionaria" (Profession – Revolutionist), with an introductory essay on agitprop theatre in the Weimar Republic by the author of the present paper. Those turbulent years were the fertile soil that ensured the positive perception of the book and its strong impact on theatre and education, as well as the political and cultural domains. The trespassing of officially established theatre boundaries, which developed the ideas of collectivism and overtness of the individual's life, was inspired by Asja's innovative experience – it encouraged numerous theatre artists to rediscover the ethical sense in their routine work.

Keywords: *theatre education, theatre impact on politics, Asja Lācis, Italy.*