

The Tragedy of Carmen: A Rehearsal Log by Michel Rostain

Michel Rostain, a young French director who acted as Brook's assistant on Carmen, made a daily record of his impression during the ten-week rehearsal period. The full version of his log was originally published in French in Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale, Vol. XIII.

Tuesday, 1 September 1981

First meeting at the Bouffes du Nord. The whole team is there (except for two singers who will join us in a few days): three English, one Swede, one American, one Israeli and four French. Three actors from Brook's group are also there, as well as design, lighting, and stage management people, and of course our pianist.

Before anything – rehearsal, discussion, performance – a collective warm-up in which everyone participates. An hour devoted to limbering and mobilizing the body: Maurice Bénichou directs this work. Not only a time to warm up: also a time for concentration and initial contact. It's never really gymnastic, more a tuning of an instrument, a training which is never forced: maintenance work. We do it gathered in a *circle*. Then without any break, we move on to games and collective exercises. First, we had to bring the circle to life, to make each individual sensitive and attentive to its existence. The creation of collective rhythms. Everything rests on listening, on the vitality of responses. Gestures are passed from one to another around the circle. A gesture arrives from the left, I transmit it to the right. Then another one. Rhythms, sounds are added: then more and more are circulated in both directions. Sometimes actions telescope. It grinds to a halt. We are rather clumsy at maintaining the life of the circle: openness to what's coming from right and left is not very great. Interruptions. Someone asks questions. A rule is proposed: *do* first, try the exercise, discussion afterwards. The aim is really to find the right rhythm for this circle, not to break contact and the quality of listening while the rhythm is being elaborated.

While we have something to eat together in the theatre, Peter uses the time to give us a few ideas about the *Carmen* we're preparing. Brief glimpses which suggest very little dramaturgical predefinition: more like suggestions for reference points. For example Peter talks about gypsies, Spain. For this performance, we must be quite obviously gypsies, while

avoiding any kind of folkloric romanticism. We will need to work on the Basque peasants of the last century, while remaining very much of today. In this way Brook's *Cherry Orchard* was profoundly Russian without any folkloric impositions, simultaneously dated and contemporary.

From Bizet's opera, Peter continues, we will only retain one aspect: that which concerns the major characters, the essential drama. We will eliminate the conventional comic opera framework which has been superimposed on this essential kernel. So there will be Carmen and Don José, Escamillo and Micaëla. As far as the latter pair are concerned, we will have to uncover their real force. The score does not condemn Micaëla to being limp, nor Escamillo to being a rather second-rate, comic matador. That's merely tradition. We can find other things within them and the music, by paying particular attention to what Carmen can make a lover feel; to the extent to which Micaëla, and Don José, have their roots in the land; to the cultural and social traditions of Basque peasants and gypsies.

The day comes to an end with a reading of Mérimée's novella. Throughout the rehearsals, we will return again and again to Mérimée's text: its concision and rigour are invaluable, free from the muffling insulations of operatic traditions. Each person reads a page or two of the text, in either French or English, before passing it on.

Thursday, 3 September

The designer Chloé Obolensky has brought a mass of photographic material: gypsies, groups of Spanish dancers, peasants. One photo shows a group of flamenco dancers, musicians and spectators. Each of us chooses a character in this photo. After studying it closely, they adopt the pose of the chosen character. Exactly the same gesture, the same attitude. It's much more difficult than it first appears to be. The onlookers correct attitudes without recourse to psychological commentaries on situation or intentions, uniquely concerning themselves with the body itself: altering the position of an arm, finding the tension in a movement, etc. Then we work on the seconds immediately preceding this photograph, and on those that follow. Where does the instantaneous gesture come from? Where does it go? The exercise ultimately recomposes a whole section of the original photo.

In the afternoon, we return to the score. Marius insists that both text and music be taken flat, at face value: initially we can only work from the notes, rhythms and pronunciation, without allowing ourselves to be in any way influenced by traditions of interpretation. None of these traditions are imposed. Marius suggests an experiment: instead of

singing the toreador's aria in the sparkling grand fashion in which it is usually presented onstage, try to find its 'lied' side. A scene is improvised. Escamillo sings something very contained to Carmen, a sensual, tender and full melody. They make love.

Friday, 4 September

When we do exercises in which gestures and sounds are mixed, it is still rare for one not to illustrate the other, as if they were interdependent. As soon as the action slows down, immediately tempi slow, sounds become 'piano', etc. In this way activity is subjected to musical rhythm, sounds are adapted 'psychologically' to the gesture, and so on.

Today's rehearsal culminates in a musical reading of the whole of *The Tragedy of Carmen*, but this time, instead of all being seated on chairs around the piano, the singers take to the playing space. They all sing together, so we have three Carmens, three Don Josés, etc. It has an improvised feel – Peter's only instruction beforehand, 'Don't perform'. The singers need to feel the others, be aware of their presence: no need to do anything. One thing strikes me as I watch: at certain moments, two Don Josés, for example, make the same gesture at the same time, on the same phrase, without conniving or even seeing each other. Two identical gestures, as if the music lured them out. Of course in general, simply two gestures communicated and demanded by lyrical doxa, as if the common language of tradition was suddenly reawakened in their bodies before they had even worked on the role. Superimposed conventional expressions, 'theatre' of the emotion, far from anything true or natural. That's what we will have to tackle head on.

After this run-through, Peter insists there shall be no illustration. At this stage in the rehearsal process, it's not the time for grand gestures. We have to begin with the search for a state, for points of contact: so instead it's towards small gestures we must turn our attentions. During the discussion, some of the singers evoke what has already been taught to them, those grand gestures which would be so necessary on lyrical stages. As if from time to time emphasis must replace truth. Production styles and conditions in the lyrical theatre tradition very rarely allow access to a truth: so compensation is found by adding in these grand gestures.

Wednesday, 9 September

Peter makes a remark on the issue of natural gestures/stereotyped gestures. They can each be as false as the other. The real debate is not between gestural schools; it's located within the actor, at the level of

truth in action. Hélène claims it is possible for her to play Carmen and her emotions without being moved in the slightest. Precisely, replies Peter, there are several Hélénes, the important thing to remember is that there's only one who speaks the truth. Peter pursues the discussion of gesture, giving as an example the conversation at some distance through barbed wire between a political detainee in Chile and one of his friends, who is free: by means of a single arm gesture, tirelessly taken up by one then the other, a simple movement varied in the speed of its execution and in its inner tempo, the two friends were able to establish and sustain a very lengthy contact with each other: a true dialogue, without words or mime, without any 'theatrical performance'. A true communication.

Tuesday, 15 September

A fantastic exercise: a singer turns his/her back on another and tries to recreate the gesture accompanying the other's singing, without having seen it. You hear the sound, you see nothing, and yet something really can be communicated. Sometimes it really works. Magical.

Friday, 18 September

More work on fights: we often come back to this. In the course of these fights, Peter says, there are moments when one feels it is 'right', that a blow has been delivered and parried convincingly. Yet our situation is necessarily artificial: punches don't land, nobody gets hurt. There has to be artificiality in the search for theatrical truth. Peter goes on: 'What is anger? How do you play anger, fear, joy, etc.? Do you draw on an album of images, taking out a cliché for anger, fear or joy? Do you take the "characteristic" sounds of joy from your personal library of recorded sounds? At every moment, in every situation, anger is radically different. Each feeling is absolutely unique and singular. That's what truth is.'

The Escamillo/Carmen duo ('*Si tu m'aimes . . .*'): we work first on the dialogue, spoken in a low voice without any external performance. Then we discuss this scene at length, which is rare. The proximity and similarity of the situations of Carmen and Escamillo are emphasized: both of them close to death, and aware of it. Do they really love each other? Opinions differ. This needs exploration, but on stage, in improvisation. We also talk about Carmen's relationship to destiny: a sense of her destiny which does not prevent her from living, loving, feeling joyous, at the same time an intimate certainty that colours every moment of her life. Peter evokes the destiny of certain races, the Jews and the

gypsies: he also refers us to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, her illuminating or funny observations alongside a sense of tragedy which is omnipresent, like a red line on every page, colouring a whole life.

We approach the final scene: Don José's arrival, his dialogue with Carmen. At this first stage in the work they don't move, they speak to each other without singing. As soon as we move into song, all the inner qualities of the dialogue evaporate, performances become limited to attractions and rejections. It's always as if song paralyses improvisation. One of the improvisations is set up like an over-dub recording: two actors take on the parts of Don José and Carmen, two singers sing while watching them. And immediately all sorts of new openings become apparent: the violence, the sense of abandonment, the corrida which takes place nearby, doubt, the destiny painted by the cards, the certainty of being right, madness, etc. The actors' theatrical experience is much greater than the singers'. Improvising without having to sing undoubtedly helps enormously, but by means of this 'over-dub' technique, areas of truth and naturalness emerge with a strength and clarity unknown until now.

Tuesday, 22 September

After the warm-up this morning, each of us is given a text of a few lines written in some imaginary language: about thirty words, all we have at our disposal to communicate with each other. Some try to set up exchanges, to say something in this language which is unknown but common to all of us. It is not a 'surrealistic' exercise, based on the contrast between what one wants to say and the material one can use; neither is it a question of pretending to speak fluently in some gibberish language. No, it's about really communicating, conveying something to the person you are speaking to. And yet it is not a normal situation. But between these two poles – gratuitous playing and normal language – there is room for something true, which occurs at certain moments. Then it is swept away in a second: end of exchange, return of some kind of 'theatre', stereotyped gestures try to hang on to meaning. Then something else jells, another knot is tied, phrases are circulated, not a gibberish conversation in gibberish. Sonorities convey a certain physicality, a human consistency. Then it all collapses again . . .

Friday, 25 September

A private showing for us in a local cinema of a Turkish film that I see again with intense emotion: Yilmaz Guney's *The Herd*. The idea of showing it came through the character of Micaëla: research into the

corporeal behaviour of a peasant woman moulded by living traditions. After the film, we gather for a picnic in the theatre, in the playing space. The actors discuss their experiences of improvisation, pointing out that they never try to fix themselves on to an emotion: quite the opposite. To give us an example, Peter grabs a knife suddenly and threatens Maurice. Depending on Maurice's response (defensive, aggressive, mocking, etc.), Peter's gesture will need to live in a different way.

The gypsy wedding improvisations remain very blurred and undecided. On the other hand the work on Garcia's arrival develops an interesting twist when, after several messy attempts, the protagonists improvise and communicate with each in their mother tongue, or in an invented language. Eva speaks Czech, Julian English, Alain something else, and suddenly it works, despite the fact that the attempts in French had been dull and lifeless. In particular, the fabric of a truly intimate relationship between Carmen and Garcia is being woven: a gypsy relationship from which Don José is excluded. We decide that when we return to work on this scene again, Garcia and Carmen will speak the gypsy language together if possible.

Monday, 28 September

Beginning of a new phase in the work. Up until now, we have tried to create a freedom for the body, in particular in relation to the voice and music. Imaginations have opened out, gestures are more spontaneous, relationships with others are truer. Peter now insists on a new aspect to the work: inner research into the body and the behaviour of each of the characters. It's no good having a general idea of a character: one must free its life at every moment. Peter throws in an improvisation suggestion for Carmen: each of the three performers have to tell the fortune of someone there in the group. All sorts of problems bearing on the subject of the improvisation come to light (stopping a passer-by, telling him the future, getting him to pay, squeezing as much money as possible from him, etc.): but they also bear on conceptions of the character – her inner freedom, her humour, her vision of destiny etc. Does Carmen believe in divination?

This relentless work on the details of characters and situations makes me reflect on the immutability of opera, its 'fixedness'. Of course this has nothing to do with the degree of movement filling the stage: in truth, it's the nature of performance in that kind of theatre: a sort of wafy vague ballet, an atmosphere set up around a particular piece of music or a situation. Above all it is the absence of inner life in each body, the absence of true relationships between the bodies.

Monday, 5 October

The red earth has almost entirely taken over the stage. A month before performances start, it's there, with no apparent technical impositions or constraints, although it brings with it certain complications: dust, traces of earth almost everywhere in the theatre. But clearly the presence of this earth changes the workspace, feeding it in a new way. It bleeds into every level of performance, becoming a rich element with which to improvise. The pebbles Carmen gathers and toys with, the handful of earth she tosses into Zuniga's eyes, sand on which she traces mysterious words and symbols. We never discussed it, it was simply done. I am struck, sometimes confused, by how little we talk: to be more precise, in fact we do talk a great deal at certain times – but almost never *before* something. As little as possible before an improvisation, an exercise or scene: and it's the same thing on the organizational level of the work. Of course this demands a great deal of concentration at every moment, where we are in the work at this precise instant. Above all, the fact of approaching each scene in this way, with no prior discussion or justification, enables a natural life to emerge as the essential point of reference.

Today we go back to the toreador scene again. Three or four improvisations during which Peter intervenes much more than usual, directly outlining specific elements, feeding individual understanding. (I seem to be contradicting what I wrote a few lines above, but today's an exception proving the rule). The two baritones are asked to alternate in the role of Escamillo. For the moment their ways of living this scene are diametrically opposed, to such an extent that it is impossible to construct the scene around common elements. One of them makes Escamillo a very introverted person: the other presents him as someone overflowing with vitality. Peter makes no attempt to force the two versions to come together, and for the moment we are left with two distinct *mise-en-scène* for the aria.

Saturday, 17 October

To tie the last scene together – the duo followed by Carmen's death – Peter asked the singers to improvise freely, to search, to commit themselves fully: for the moment without referring to the outline scenario we use for all the other scenes. At the end of this run-through, during the discussion Hélène suggests that Carmen starts to yell mournfully at the sight of Escamillo's corpse. Typical response from Peter: 'Perhaps. But that sort of thing cannot be discussed in this way. Try it in the space.' At such moments, I'm flabbergasted, dumb-struck:

the idea seems very cumbersome to me. It doesn't matter to Peter: perhaps he likes the idea, perhaps he hates it, perhaps in reality he refuses to make up his mind aprioristically. He entrusts the task of deciding to the life of a performance when it is put into practice onstage: not to discussed ideas, in a vacuum. Of course I am bound to schematize and idealize. For two years in one way or another this performance has been in preparation, and all sorts of ideas must have fallen by the wayside by this stage. But in rehearsal the enormous confidence placed in the vital invention of bodies is a fundamental building block. All the exercises, the working rhythms, the ways of approaching each step in the work, of improvising, of 'fixing a scene', then of reinventing and reanimating within this framework: every aspect concentrates and crystallizes around the search for invention and life. Placing the actor in a position where he is responsible for bringing, inventing, feeding life at every moment. Are we witnesses to the abolition of the director? First of all there is this fantastic creative demand made on the actors and singers. But behind this demand, there is someone called the 'director': with all that he brings in his own right: a working direction, a research style, theatrical techniques.

Wednesday, 21 October

We have run through the first four or five scenes. Peter's only instruction was to be as free as possible in relation to the *mise-en-scène* fixed to date, provided that true relationships are established at every moment. At times, it fell apart: at others, astonishing material was thrown up: brand new inventions, brought to bear in the course of a scene or a song. And that's something new: the singers in turn are seen to be fully capable of improvising. Immediately after this half run-through, we noted down and fixed the new elements of the improvisations.

Week of 27 to 30 October

Peter seems to be leading the singers in real interpretation classes. How to avoid getting stuck in a mechanical Habanera, how to make the Bohemian song into an authentic song, how to find a true phrasing for Micaëla: all part of the *mise-en-scène* work. For example, in order to find a quality of rejoicing in the Bohemian song, with no other end than the joy of singing (and with no particular attention paid to the words), we all gather around Carmen, calling for her to sing. We clap, whistle, stroke her, dance – until the song finds its own movement, vibrant, leaping into the air and taking flight in the singular joy of singing. The Habanera is very long, some people find it difficult to find a bonding coherent line:

Peter takes each couplet in turn, outlining its shape and thrust, the progression of movement; he calls for different vocal qualities – tenderness, excitement, orgasm, profane earthy love, passion . . . Black magic, sorcery, forces of the earth . . .

A circle exercise. Take the phrase '*Je cherche quelqu'un qui me reconnaisse*'. A single word is given to each person around the circle: the first one says '*je*', the next one '*cherche*', and so on, the aim of the exercise being to pass the words around the circle in sequence as a real phrase delivered quite naturally. Of course the difficulty is in not allowing the utterance to become mechanical: you must respond to impulses and nuances, pass them on. A single phrase is made up of all sorts of subtle inflections: ideally it should be the same for a whole dialogue, even for a scene and indeed the performance in its entirety. Openness to and respect for the linking of words (phrases, gestures, situations, etc.) demands a high degree of attention to the natural life of words and their evolution.

From Thursday, 5 November to Saturday, 7 November

On the Thursday, an extraordinary audience: we come into contact with our neighbours, people we have been bumping into in the local area for the last two months. An audience which laughs freely, has a good time, not at all stuffy. They applaud at the end of every aria. Zuniga causes a stir on each of his appearances.

Before Saturday's public run, we all meet in the dressing-rooms to evaluate where we are. Peter details the coming days' work: it will deal particularly with the performance's dynamic. There's a problem with the through-line of actions: sometimes the impetus is interrupted, or slackens a notch. We must arrive at the point when there is never a diminishment of energy and direction within an aria or between two scenes.

The performance should be approached as a wave that rises and rises, never falling off. The wave comprises both comic and tender moments, it moves forward incessantly. This dynamic focus must be found, as in a symphony. Usually the orchestra leader directs this progress: everyone is responsible for it here.

Peter goes on: 'I don't like ideological messages. There's something useless about them. But we can convey something to the audience. We are a small group of human beings. If our way of living and working is infused with a certain quality, this quality will be perceived by the audience, who will leave the theatre subliminally coloured by the working experience we have lived together. Perhaps that is the small

contribution we can make, the only thing we have to convey to other human beings.'

From Tuesday, 10 November, to Saturday, 14 November

Every evening this week, a preview with a paying audience: during the day, we continue to rehearse. Exercises and meetings enable Peter to clarify further elements. The relationships with the characters: 'One part of you is Don José, another part is Laurence. And this other part must also be mobilized and present.' The relationship between singing and life: 'Our thoughts move much more quickly than what we sing. If you only perform the words that are sung, something false comes into the performance. In the same way, if the body only obeys and responds to the apparent music, the work is false: turn down the sound during an opera broadcast on television, and it becomes grotesque. It leads to an odd sort of ballet, dull and artificial. One must get to the point at which the body lives with its impulses, with our thoughts, at their natural speed.'

Certain things in the production are still changing: sometimes mere details, sometimes more than that. Peter tells me: 'As you see, I am now able to work on a mass of details, we don't get bogged down in them. A month ago, it would have been impossible. Generally, a considerable amount of time is lost in devoting oneself to these details too soon. In the same way, I am able to change many things at the last moment: given the kind of work we have already done, it doesn't pose any substantial problems. In the past I have changed a whole *mise-en-scène* at the last moment. The actors were terrified that they wouldn't remember: but in fact there were no difficulties.'

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