

## **Of course, we know what to expect from Peter Sellars, don't we?**

By Igor Dobricic

The audience is seated, waiting for the performance to start. The houselights are on and while waiting we can see a stage to the right – arranged for the orchestra. An inclined elevated platform on the left gives us a sense of where the action is going to take place. And yet the space remains empty for a long time. Some people start to clap, then talk, and laugh.

The parameters of the event are unclear, and a number of questions occupy me: am I in a theatre, is this a concert, and why is it not starting? My visual focus relaxes and my attention shifts to the anticipation of Bach's music. Forced to wait for it, I *listen* for what is going to happen next.

Abruptly, Peter Sellars himself steps out from the wings and onto the stage, stopping just away from the centre of the proscenium, facing the audience. He starts talking, addressing us directly, without the microphone. Some audience members shout out that they cannot hear him. The fact that the situation does not feel staged, that there is no microphone, that some people are complaining openly, all of this creates a sense of urgency that charges the moment.

Although nobody should be surprised to see Sellars talking to his audience – it is something he has often done in the past – I feel awkward about it this time; I wonder if this a part of the performative structure or if it is 'for real'. As his voice is indeed not loud enough my curiosity heightens to a level beyond pure aesthetic expectation. The intensity with which I listen increases further. It feels as if I am being taken out of theatre into an open, not fully regulated, unstable place, like a street corner or a square where the rules of social engagement are volatile and confrontational, where alertness takes priority over the appetite for entertainment.

So, the performance actually starts with Sellars telling us a story about the performance. He speaks with an urgency befitting an announcement, but impeccably, in detail and with the skill of genuine storyteller, enticing the audience to listen with careful attention. After the initial turmoil, silence establishes itself in the auditorium. At first it is a consciously imposed silence triggered by the practical need to hear Sellars. Then it becomes the

attentive silence of an audience enthralled by the story. We discover that the main performer, singer Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, is the reason for the delay: at this very moment she is in pain – suffering and weak – and will only be able to sing one of the two planned Cantatas. The external silence of the rapt audience is transformed into the internal silence of the story itself. The shift is palpable. And into this quiet and solemn space at the intersection of external and internal perception, the orchestra and a singer walk on.

Watching the musicians I have a strong sense that they are not just taking their designated places on stage, but rather in the invisible and much more complex constellation of time and space wired into my mind by Sellars' verbal intervention. I have been prevented from observing external action as a formal artistic representation of something else and in this sense I am not even listening to it 'from the outside'. The event has become observable on a completely different level – inside the knowledge sphere, beyond the senses and in my head – while I am simultaneously fully aware that through my physical presence in the Muziekgebouw I also fully implicated in it externally. Perhaps I should be perplexed by this interference of fiction (subjectivity) and reality (objectivity). But no, everything seems crystal clear.

Lorraine Hunt emerges dressed only in a hospital gown. Dancer Michael Schumacher follows her on stage. The lights are finally going down. She will sing, as Sellars has already explained, about death, 'but not as an enemy, not as panic, not as a farewell and not as the end of something.'

As her voice emerges from the darkness I am grateful for the simple clarity of Peter Sellars' preparatory words. While the musicians were slotting into the invisible diagram of relationships created by his storytelling skill (as if into a virtual set design), the voice of Lorraine Hunt Lieberson now traverses this virtual diagram, connecting visible appearances with invisible circumstances, filling it in all directions to overflowing with emotional intensity. By apparently being so transparent, Sellars has made me listen to the resonance of his words within myself, in silence. And by assimilating the external action of the musicians into this resonance I internalise the emergence of music. Thus, I become implicated in this narrative of death, out of which a work of art establishes itself as pure sound. I look about me, through the darkened hall. Some people are crying. As am I. And I cannot help but wonder, while letting my tears flow, if the implications of my new enthusiasm for Sellars' work should be considered in a positive or a negative light. Have I simply been seduced into complicity by a passive voyeurism that neutralises political and personal relevance by refashioning both of these into public spectacle? Or is there a genuine performative/transformational value to Sellars' presentation that re-claims the emotional reactions of the audience from the domain of middle class sentimentality,

placing it back into the realm of pure intensities? Should I consider Sellars a cheat and opportunist or rather a hero: a demolisher of illusion, the disappearance of which at last makes us cry, again – for real?

In the arena of high art, the overflow of emotion in theatre has not been considered acceptable for two hundred years. But during the staging of the Baroque operas in the eighteenth century it was not unusual for the weak-hearted to succumb to emotional fits of crying, or even fainting. The internal mechanism of rapture prevalent at that time corresponded perfectly with the external mechanisms of stage illusion used to create performances as spectacles.

Paradoxically, to produce a similar effect of emotional catharsis in theatre today it would seem that we have to reverse the direction of this correspondence. Instead of constructing an external illusion in order to invoke its internalised emotional analogue, we should engage in deconstructing the externality of the spectacle to a point where a new diagram of forces is established: one in which subjective inner experiences (illusions) are assembled in advance, a blueprint for the ensuing external reality.

There is no more efficient way of doing this in performance than through the re-invention of 'direct address' (*aparte*, or 'talking aside', as it is coded in the dramaturgy of Baroque opera). Storytelling is a form of directed daydreaming; through the intervention of the narrator, the stage can be set virtually, inside our heads. Only then can the externality of the spectacle appear, naked, stripped of all the visual complexities of style.

The specific nature of this post-scientific brand of storytelling – being essentially corrosive toward externality of illusion – is that it does *not* construct a fiction, but rather elaborates an 'accurate' narrative made of fragments of past circumstances, incidents and anecdotes related to the artistic process leading to the moment of the performance.

The accuracy of this narrative practice is not dependent on any external criterion of historical or biographical truth. It is instead defined as accurate by its ability to submit itself to an audience's perception of what they consider 'real' so that it can infiltrate and re-arrange people's mind frames into an internal stage onto which external appearances can emerge.

Whenever I think back to Bach's Cantatas at Holland Festival, I cannot help but wonder if Sellars story about the sickness of the main protagonist, singer Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, was really true. But in fact its accuracy is irrelevant for the dynamics of the emotional experience. It is much more important that we believe it is. The ethical justification for this manipulation is contained in the experience we shared with her. Because it is far more ethical to be *with* Ms Hunt Lieberson (if she is truly ill) than to diagnostically scrutinise her

state of health from our audience seats. Even if, at the same time, we cannot but acknowledge that she is standing there, singing Bach – barefooted.