

Towards an Anarchist Theatre

By Matt Cawson

Introduction

This manifesto is impressionistic in both its content and structure by necessity: the inherent paradox in writing and structuring an anarchist manifesto, or trying to pin down anything close to a *paidic* aesthetic, is the precession of failure. I attempt to give a sense of the underlying principles that frame my endeavour and to argue that *paidia* ought to lie behind any anarchist aesthetic. I suggest that the absolute 'presence' required by the *paidic* participant is central to igniting life to the point of radical awareness, which is a political as well as a human and aesthetic act. I frame *paidia* as an aesthetic principle rather than a particular aesthetic form, which must be the product of ongoing experimentation and hence protean.

As a theatrical, rather than a political manifesto, it does not delve into any in-depth explication of the anarcho-syndicalist polemic. It is also assumed that the reader will be familiar enough with anti-capitalist arguments to understand the polemical drive without need for in-depth political analysis. Stylistically, this piece drifts in and out of traditional structure, depending on the nature of the information I wish to convey: the content determines the form.

The spirit of the manifesto and the rehearsal techniques offered are intended as sketches; to be prescriptive would be anathematic. The techniques outlined are in response to, and developed from, a recent performance laboratory entitled *Vacuum* at the Grotowski Institute in collaboration with Norwegian writer/director Robin Riegels. It is a response to my own experience rather than an account of Riegel's specific intent. Moreover, my principal focus here is methodological, *viz*, the pursuit of an approach to performance, of a suitable acting style; the generation or selection of material is not addressed.

Finally, it should be read in the playful spirit it is intended, remembering of course that play can be both light and dark and as serious as it is frivolous.

I fail before I begin.

Proposition

I see a capitalist world that has succumbed to entropy, to perpetual wars against abstract concepts, to famines, economic failures and rising poverty. It is the chaos of a flawed system. Billions of individuals, seduced by individualism, impotently compete within a system designed to subdue, deny, suppress.

We have become infected by an ideology; we have become destructive.

We have forgotten what it means to share. Our theatre has become an expression of this malady.

We have become like flowers in a market stall

artificially arranged

aestheticised unnecessarily (are not flowers more beautiful in their natural setting?)

commodities

exchange values and use values

zombies

cut off from our life source

We must fight to remain firmly planted in the nourishing soil of our own existence, which is the moment, the glorious moment of the present. We must fight to remember the present. But instead we run on fear, which is an overinvestment in an unknowable future, and shame, which is the millstone of an imperfect past. I see a world seduced by artifice. The sheer intensity of the moment is where life exists; but we were seduced by artifice because you cannot sell the moment, only the promise of a better one, one that can never be realised because we are eternally divorced from the present.

Capitalism has plundered our lives, and sells it back to us in an impossible form as though behind a gauze: slightly hazy, slightly muffled, slightly unreal.

Theatre must tear down the gauze.

Against a Vampiric Theatre

The theatre of Dionysus still lives, though seldom in theatres. There, its monstrous offspring beams from neon lights on Broadway strips, blinding us to its true nature. The sanguine parent, still bellowing through the centuries, looms at the fringes, in underground performances made in the shadows of commercialism. '*The blood is the life*' (Stoker 118, 372).

Commercial theatre is more insidious than Peter Brook diagnosed in *The Empty Space*. It is not deadly; it is *vampiric* (see Marx 182).

The West End presents us with a conveyor-belt of still-births: dead and dying banalities that extract money from zombies¹ who pay to see animated corpses. This is narcissism in the extreme, in which both spectator and performer are grotesque mirrors of each other's bloodless death throes:

an illusion within an illusion

a danse macabre

theatre must never be that

theatre must be an awakening

We must seek a theatre of adrenalin, a theatre that reunites us with the moment.

The struggle for existence is as urgent as ever. Our struggle is no longer physical, but spiritual; the comforts and distractions that lure us into inertia feed our death drive, our *Thanatos*. How obediently we sleepwalk down this adumbral path!

Our new tragedy lies not in suffering, but in numbing lack, in somnambulation,
apathy

mass hypnosis

a commodity traded by commodities

a ruffled pool beneath which lies neglect and stagnation

a yearned for and premature inanimacy

a death-in-life in which Eros lies bleeding.

We must call upon the spirits of the greats, ancient and modern: on the choruses of Aeschylus and Sophocles, on the Dionysus of Euripides; on Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski and Julian Beck. We seek an encounter with the ancient gods of the human spirit. We give ourselves as freely to darkness as to light. The darkness we become will

¹ See Harman (esp. 142-60), for a detailed analysis of 'zombie capitalism' which I have freely adapted here to describe those *in* the system (us) rather than the system itself (which is vampiric).

become darker; the lightness we reflect will become brighter. We must eagerly embrace all that is real and freely give all that we are.

Theatre must remember the impetus that stirred it from the torpor of oblivion: the *élan vital*² whose roots are in the fundamental need to create and to share what we create.

To live.

It must reconnect with the primal and creative (not mimetic) impulse. It must remember how to play. In this respect, theatre is by definition a political act.

Towards Creativity

I begin with a very simple premise: *the act of creation is the act of bringing something into existence that did not previously exist*. The implications of this are profound.

Creativity

is discovery

lies at the outer limits of human experience and knowledge

demands the breaking of boundaries and rules

demands the rejection of orthodox truths, conventions, and
methodologies

rejects compromise and demands that we go beyond the known and
beyond the *accepted*, which means we will at times go beyond
the *acceptable*

comes from within ourselves, so must involve an encounter with
unknown (perhaps repressed and/or denied) aspects of ourselves
must reject the safety of the illusory and constructed ego: the ego is a
prison. The ego is the palace of mediocrity.

True creativity is a dangerous game in which one risks annihilation.

We fight then to discover, to experience the truth about ourselves; to tear away the masks behind which we hide daily. We see theatre – especially in its palpable, carnal aspect – as a place of provocation, a challenge the actor sets himself and also, indirectly, other people. Theatre only has a meaning if it

² The *élan vital* can be described as the original common impulse, or ‘vital impetus’, from which all life grew. See Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (53-54; 174-85); cf. Copeau (197).

allows us to transcend our stereotyped vision, our conventional feelings and customs, our standards of judgment – not just for the sake of doing so, but so that we may experience what is real and, having already given up all daily escapes and pretenses, in a state of complete defenselessness unveil, give, discover ourselves. In this way – through shock, through the shudder which causes us to drop our daily masks and mannerisms – we are able, without hiding anything, to entrust ourselves to something we cannot name but in which live Eros and Caritas. (Grotowski 256-67)

The fruits of a successful leap into the unknown, a beautiful encounter with the potentially terrifying Other, cannot be prostituted for fame or glory, for this is the realm of the ego, not of true art (which are opposing principles) (262).

We must reject vampiric theatre.

Theatre is not a commodity, but a gift.

The pure actor is not a celebrity-hungry ego but a semi-divine being whose self-sacrifice is an act of pure love: an unconditional love of humanity and the belief in something better, a belief that humankind is capable of better.

Humankind *is* capable of better.

Imagination is sacred. In order to set it free, we must reject the present ideology, which belongs to a failing economic system whose rules and operations contradict its narrative. We must step outside the narrative of the Western economic success story, which we recognise as a lie. We must find a new narrative, new rules, a new and sacred turf of anarchic play whence to view the world afresh and to escape the nihilism of false discourse. We must find an altogether new reality.

Paidia

Roger Caillois, building on Johan Huizinga's theories (*Homo Ludens*), distinguishes between two forms of play: *paidia* and *ludus*:

[Games] can also be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrollable fantasy that can be designated by the term paidia. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed

or disciplined by a complimentary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature [...] I call this second component ludus. (13)

Importantly, *paidia* is not a thing, a commodity, an ‘object outside of us’ with a ‘use value’ (Marx 1-2) in the way that, say, a computer game is. It is something within us, a reward in itself. It cannot be bought, sold, quantified, or qualified in the way that *ludic* play – the domain of commercial ‘games’ – can. We have managed to commoditise *ludus*, but not *paidia*. *Paidia* needs no commodities, nothing to deflect from the joy of social play, of togetherness, of shared being in which we can ‘lose ourselves’ in a world of mutually created fantasy, a world of active and open imagination instead of directed, passive reception, a world that rejects price tags and brand labels and speaks directly to the shared and the universal. It is impervious to extractive economics.³ It is a world in which an Armani suit is equal to a Primark t-shirt in its meaninglessness.

P a i d i a
is a concept that is not readily committed to the page: that very act is impossible
is creative
is not an aesthetic, but an underlying principle for the perpetual rediscovery of
necessary form
is not the Golden Fleece, but the quest
is the elusive ‘pleasure-dome’⁴ at the outer reaches of the imagination

Paidia drives the aesthetic counterpart to anarchism.

What they have in common is humanity.

This leads to another problem:

a definition of human nature

An adequate definition has eluded the finest minds of history, so mine will not solve the riddle. I offer anarchism, like Noam Chomsky (‘On Anarchism’), as an approach to this riddle based on a utopian faith in human nature as a social, compassionate and creative phenomenon. It stands or falls by that.

Humanity is capable of *better*.

This is not the best of all possible worlds.

³ See Vanderburg (49) for an account of the myth of trickle-down economics that runs exactly counter to its extractive (bottom-up) reality.

⁴ See S. T. Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ (which begins ‘In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure dome decree’) in which (as I read it) the pleasure dome becomes a symbol of freedom, unrestrained creativity and ecstatic imagination. The poem, about a lost poetic vision, was written shortly after Coleridge and Southey’s unfulfilled *Pantisocracy* (rule of all) scheme, which was to set up a proto-anarchist, utopian commune by the Susquehanna River in America (the plan fell apart for various reasons, not least of which was Southey’s absurd wish to take servants).

Mikhail Bakunin said that the post-revolutionaries must create 'not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself' (266). In other words, there is little beyond principles to see the creation of a new world, a society dedicated to the liberty of the individual within the ethical framework of the common good.

Another paradox?

Anarchism is not entropic.

It is not chaos.

It is an ideal awaiting form.

Content precedes form; it must create its own form.

It does not reject order but hierarchy as an ordering principle.

It embodies a faith in ourselves that goes deeper than our faith in a volatile and exploitative economy. Yet we are so reliant on the financial system that the terror of its collapse outweighs the clear desirability of its destruction.

Just as anarchism cannot map out for certain the terrain of an anarcho-syndicalist society, so the exercise of *paidia* in the rehearsal room cannot be directed towards predetermined ends. It can, however, provide the intellectual and creative space and liberty to experiment, to dispel fears of the unknown and to embrace its possibilities, to open the heart to the possibility of alternative ways of experiencing ourselves.

We cannot, despite all temptation, impose a preconceived scheme on the outcomes without damaging the legitimacy of what may emerge, especially considering what we seek to discover is ourselves, and the experience of ourselves.

All we can do is play.

Beyond Fucking Theatre

Julian Beck wrote that an anarchist theatre must be based on 'Spontaneous creation: Improvisation: Freedom' (Wills 118) and that 'theatre principally is the dancing place of the people / and therefore the dancing place of the gods who dance in ecstasy only amid the people' (120). Beck attempted to create an ecstatic theatre based on free love – 'fuck means peace'⁵ – and the democratic principles of anarchism, the place of which is

⁵ 'Fuck for peace' was one of the revolutionary slogans in *Paradise Now* (Innes 272). 'Fuck means peace' was another and one of the 'rites' performed was the 'Rite of Universal Intercourse' (Beck and Malina 138).

in the street: ‘outside of the cultural and economic limitations of institutional theatre’. Its spirit is a ‘theatre of awareness’ (118-19).

A Theatre of Awareness? Awareness of *what*?

Politics?

No. Awareness is rife, yet still we slumber.

An anarchist theatre must be connected to the moment, to *life*. A *living* theatre. Not a *fucking* theatre.

The anarchist performer must be present. She must be connected to the glorious moment of her own life and she must help to reconnect us with our own: ‘If one can experiment in theatre, one can experiment in life’ (Beck, qtd in Downs, Ramsay and Wright 403).

‘Life, revolution and theater are three words for the same thing: an unconditional NO to the present society’ (qtd in Shank 9).

The distinction between performer and spectator must dissolve into the union of an event, a celebration of the mutually created moment with its mutually created aesthetic.

This is an aesthetic and a political principle

It is an escape from the banal

A tear in the map through which we glimpse the ghostly terrain

A taste of the real⁶

Freedom

But but but but but (did Beck forget? In his 1960s preoccupation with sex?)

the joy of play and laughter

the realisation of one’s own absurdity (not genitals)

the realisation that you are ridiculous, and that *it doesn’t matter*

is true liberation

We are each each other’s mirrors

We are each each other’s clowns

This is our most beautiful role

Laughter

⁶ This notion of the ‘real’, as well as the previous map analogy, is taken from the opening page of Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*.

makes life bearable

allows us to peer into the abyss, and prevents the abyss from peering
back into us⁷

prevents us from taking ourselves seriously

is the natural bedfellow of play, the sacred space of
creativity

is our greatest weapon against pomposity

is, along with death, the great leveller

is an anarchic convulsion of the body

reminds us that the body is more than sex.

The realisation of ourselves is the explosion of our faces in laughter.

Brecht claimed: 'Humourless people are ridiculous' (Bradby and McCormick 112). The truth is we are all ridiculous. We are as ridiculous as we are beautiful, frivolous as we are serious, absurd as we are profound. He who does not find himself ridiculous is a deluded man indeed.

We are hopeless shadows of impossible ideals, parodies of our own grotesque egos. We must not fear bursting these bubbles; we must be as happy to roll in mud as to lay in fine satin. The scatology of the commedia dell'arte holds as much truth as the musings of our wisest priests and philosophers.

We are as well to venerate a gilded turd as a crucified messiah.

Ritual and Structure in *Paidic* Practice: Laboratory discoveries

In a recent laboratory at the Grotowski Institute, we discovered that there is an inherent difficulty in achieving the desired level of openness, play and impulse. It was agreed amongst the performers that, perversely, what was needed was a structured, even ritualised approach. Like Arnold Van Gennep's and Victor Turner's writings on ritual, the anarchic, or *paidic* state needed containing if we were to safely enter into a 'liminal' state of 'betwixt and between' (Turner 95-96; cf. Deflem).

Anarchy needed to be framed.

Another paradox?

Perhaps, but only linguistic:

⁷ See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*: 'He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee' (146).

Anarchism is based firmly on a simple but rigid ethical structure. *Paidia* is marked out by its own containing label, by the safe knowledge that it is *play*: it is self-contained; its self-containment is its precondition. Likewise, any exploration of a deeper self normally masked by rules and traditional rationality and/or morality must be protected from chaos, or loss of control. Thus the environment necessitated the safety of a ritualised demarcation in both time and space. These practices included a ritualised cleaning of the space and a period of communal meditation before the explorations began. ‘Structures’, or geometrical shapes, were marked on the floor inside of which experimentation could take place, the stepping in and out of which acquired a deep significance: a certain formalism began to emerge through necessity. The use of blindfolds (which acted on one level like masks) likewise acquired a ceremonial quality to signify the change in ‘rules’ and the entering into, and exiting from, a liminal space. In other words, *paidia* did not just ‘happen’ spontaneously, at least not within the limitations of a single laboratory. If we were to become fully open, we had a need to be protectively encased (a fundamental truth of anarchism).

Paidia began to suggest its own forms.

The next step is to transgress them.

To transgress is to transcend.

A Meditative Receptivity

There is a place for normalcy

if only to disprove its own authenticity

to confirm its banality;

We are sitting in an illusion.

Life has brought us here to learn something

the lessons are sensed

but not yet fully grasped

We have been slashing and burning for too long.

It is time to take distance. Rest. Replenish.

Let the rain come.

Let life grow.

Step out of the shadows and brave the sun

Let go.

Let the moment live, and live the moment.

Look for melting.

In the standing, look for melting.

Do not try harder. *Try less.*

Look for what is –

do not search for fire in the rain

seek water.

Be the river bed

eternally cleansed

by the flow of lived moments.

Be present. Play.

We are finding something here

as yet indistinct

but we sense it

presence takes effort

but effort destroys presence

look instead for melting

it will come

it hovers just beyond our reach

waiting

when we are ready it will know

it is the

anarchy

of

the

pre-

reflective

self

it is myself before I am thought

cogito ergo non sum

but

more than this

it is something
more than this.

A Rehearsal Exercise

I blindfold myself and chant the opening lines to *Kubla Khan*:

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea. (Coleridge n.p.)*

I chant this over and over until the words lose their meaning. I am left with sounds, textures, tastes, rhythms. I let the impulses spread through my body, form shapes, gestures, convulsions. Occasionally, certain words become stuck in my throat, swell, and need to be forced out as though clearing blockages. I play with the sound, which in turn plays with my body; I no longer speak but am spoken by the words. It is trance-like, but I am alive, and more conscious than ever before: each fraction of a moment is felt, intensely present. It is a state of heightened awareness and the experience of reality is transformed.

The shock-waves of the Big Bang articulate meaning	I am without
within my body; my <i>élan vital</i> flows thence beauty	but I am not without
it has its origins in the Origin	I am body
It is energy	I am light

I am almost fourteen billion years old.

I am present. I have become the words. Their meaning defies analysis, but are felt, known, understood. They change shape with each encounter; they articulate themselves differently, playing with me, playing me, simply playing.

I am not the word, but the energy that articulates it
not the dance but the joy that fuels it
not the music but the pulse that drives it.

My sinews become an Aeolian lute played by this tempest of sound.

I remove the blindfold. Another joins me. We are two, both being played, playing with each other, a symphonic negotiation of instincts. Impulse becomes *com*-pulse. We build and break rhythms to prevent automation. The text must be played with, yet resisted; it must not become autonomic. We do not become the mandarins of reason, the puppets of rhythm, nor the toys of thought; we remain active players of the game.

We open ourselves to Dionysos. We become maenads. Our bodies are the temenos of our psyches, the precinct of our souls where Apollo dances with Dionysos: an intricate dance of mutual resistance, delicate but wild. We remain aware. We must always remain aware.

We are alive. We create each other. We take Nishida over Sartre, Tetsurō over Heidegger. We discover not the *meaning* but the *life* of the text in this encounter.

We find not the meaning of life
but the life of meaning.

The space between us sparkles, crackles, fizzes with possibilities. We are heliographs of mutual creativity; we ignite the *basho*⁸ – a luminescent energy of perpetual affirmation and negation:

There I am created anew, moment by moment, in the gaze of another
I cleanse myself of shame by becoming other
and there I discover
the negation of myself is myself.

—

Life is offered a brief permanence in the moment, like a shaft of light offered a fleeting solidity in a smoky wood.

A brief reality.

An encounter.

Like all moments of ecstasy, it too soon disperses.

There is a word for this ecstasy, this freedom, this deindividuated, spontaneous improvisation.

It is *thiasos*:
a divine and ecstatic community

⁸ See Kitarō Nishida's 'Basho'; cf. Robert Carter's 'Watsuji Tetsurō', which defines *basho* as the 'place' (or space) between things, that defines their interrelatedness: 'the dynamic and creative origination of all relationships and all networks of interactions' (Carter).

its condition is *paidia*.

It is an awakening.

The *paidic* space is a *khōra*: a womb in which everything gestates.

It is prior to the *ludic*.

It is Dionysiac mystery.

Paidia dances with the moon whilst *ludus* bows to the sun

It is the impulse, the *élan vital*, the primordial, universal, and creative.

arbitrary.

are exposed as

the rules

It is the precondition of creativity

It is the soul of anarchy

It is the spirit of play

and the lifeblood

of humanity

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