

WHAT IS PLATONIUM?

Since the first day I tried to share my thoughts on life and theatre I have been unable to explain myself in words. In the process I "scare" away people who interest me and others who may otherwise feel that this is the sort of thing that they are actually looking for. I am now attempting to answer the question "what is Platonium?" in writing. I hope to come as close as possible to what I think it is by outlining the principles which guide it and documenting them as a reference.

Platonium is named after the Greek philosopher Plato. The name was coined in mid-August 1994 while Tanja Beyer was reading *The Republic* by Plato during a news broadcast on German TV which spoke of an illegal transaction of Plutonium. Platonium is the element which fuels my life and my theatrical aspirations. A name is just a handle but this name seems to be ideal, particularly when considered in the context of a Platonic observation by the 20th century French visionary Antonin Artaud from his 1933 essay *No More Masterpieces*: "Beneath the poetry of texts there is poetry pure and simple, without form and without text."

Most people are aware of at least two types of theatre - the institutional theatre and the avant-garde theatre. Platonium belongs to the "Third Theatre".

The Third Theatre is a concept arrived at through negation.

The Third Theatre is not concerned with entertainment, but it can be entertaining.
The Third Theatre is not concerned with art, but it has produced several artistic works.

The Third Theatre is a way of life.

In the Third Theatre the focus is on relationships between those in a particular group and others who share their attitude...be they students, scholars, other groups or an audience.

In the Third Theatre there is no difference between a personal and a professional life because how things are done is more important than what is done.

In the Third Theatre groups develop and are responsible for their own training. At the same time they play an important role in developing the dramaturgy and mise-en-scene of all their productions, they collaborate in designing/building sets and costumes for every one of their performances. They are also involved in public relations to market and advertise their work. The person who has written most about this is Eugenio Barba, director of Odin Teatret as well as founder of the International School of Theatre Anthropology:

The Third Theatre lives on the fringes, often outside or on the outskirts of the centers and capitals of culture. It is a theatre created by people who define themselves as actors, directors, theatre workers, although they have seldom undergone a traditional theatrical education and therefore are not recognized as professionals. But they are not amateurs. Their entire day is filled with theatrical experience, sometimes by what they call training, or by the preparation of performances for which they must fight to find an audience.

(from *Beyond the Floating Islands*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1986, p.193)

Most of my ideas for Platonium were developed in the fall of 1994 while I continued to read my degree in theatre studies at the Virginia Commonwealth University. Being an alien student in a foreign university it took me some time to adjust to the ways and means of what was for me a new environment. Although I eventually surpassed my initial culture shock, I did not forsake my

cultural heritage and my previous academic directions. At first I was beginning to feel that this was going to be an even more difficult task than it should be, but soon I found that in the United States my type of theatre is not entirely restricted to some avant-garde performance art society as I was made to believe in my first weeks in America.

Richard Hornby's excellent book *The End of Acting: A Radical View* (New York: Applause, 1992) became my guiding light in a land deprived of major development in acting theory "for the past sixty years".

All actors are considered to be performers. Somehow I tend to think of "actor" as "s/he who could do", and "performer" as "s/he who does do". This is mainly because of some bitter experiences I've had with actors even before Platonium developed into its present form. One of the first American actors (a 19-year-old VCU student) I tried to share Platonium with felt that it was not in line with her studies. Naturally, she was right, but I still fail to see the reason why this should have stopped her from discovering another way of making theatre. Another actor who initially seemed very excited about the whole thing withdrew from the group because he insisted that performances are more important than the process.

I find it very difficult to recruit new people, especially since I am now threading with greater caution. There is a lesson to be learnt from the Eugenio Barba of 1964 - he chose to work with actors who had been refused by the drama school. Since the end of September 1994, I have realized that the ideal people to share Platonium with should be strugglers...like Tanja Beyer and Christine Argodale. The ideal person is s/he who can use a crisis to build determination which can be transformed into energy for work. The person who has the ideal type of attitude and energy is very focused and very resourceful. Not a would-be actor but what is potentially an excellent theatre-maker.

Working in Platonium is a choice. A choice between taking a nice bowl of fruit salad which is offered to you by the the good-willing people in the *real* world or saying "No, thank you. I would rather find seeds and grow my own fruit trees." A teenage acting student once told me that there is another choice: taking the fruit salad, keeping the seeds you find inside it and growing your own trees with them. Although this is a very valid variation I told him that whoever decides to take the seeds from a fruit salad must make sure that these seeds are still alive and that they can germinate. Anyone making this choice must keep in mind that most fruit salads today come out of a can and may have been processed ages ago and that therefore the seeds my have died a long time ago.

I do not think that Platonium is proposing anything new; several groups have tried this before us. Thankfully we can learn much from their experiences as well as their mistakes. These are some of the theatre-makers past and present who can serve as our guides: Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Vachtangav, Copeau, Artaud, Craig, Brecht, Boal, Grotowski and Barba. It is necessary to get acquainted with the writings of these masters as well as develop a sensitivity for non-western performance forms to get as close as possible to a full understanding of contemporary performance theory. But where do we start? Here is Stanislavski from his autobiography *My Life in Art* (p.569):

Let someone explain to me why the violinist who plays in an orchestra on the tenth violin must daily perform hour long exercises or lose his power to play? Why does the dancer work daily over every muscle in his body? Why do the painter, the sculptor, the writer practice their art each day and count the day lost when they do not work? And why may the dramatic artist do nothing but spend his day in coffee houses and hope for the gift of Apollo in the evening? Enough.

The first important feature in our work is regular encounters during which we warm-up and explore aspects of physical training (including vocal, facial and mental exercises). For our initial phase the training has been based on the writings of Artaud, the work of Grotowski in his Poor Theatre phase, the 30-year research work of Eugenio Barba (with Odin Teatret and the International School of Theatre Anthropology) and primarily on Stanislavski's principles of Relaxation, Relating and Objectives, achieved through the Method of Physical Action and the Creative State of Mind, with an exploration of Given Circumstances and the Magic If. All these elements contribute to our basic foundation of theatre as a way of life.

These writings have helped us finding what we mean by "training" and why we need to train. How we train is the question we are still answering. Our *raison d'être* is the training of performers and theatre makers in an autodidactic manner. The participants in this project have the opportunity to discover their personal potentials and limitations. We believe that it is not a matter of learning new things, but rather of ridding oneself of old habits. In the process we learn new things about ourselves. Grotowski called this the *via negativa* - "not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks". We are focusing on techniques of the body rather than psychological elements as in the Strasbergian training method.

In doing so we are subscribing to Richard Hornby's "unashamed attack on the American acting establishment" and considering "a serious theoretical discussion of acting in the United States," since as he states in his book *The End of Acting: A Radical View* -- "Acting theory in America remains pretty much where it has been for the past sixty years" and although it has its roots in Stanislavski's ideas, "it has been adapted to suit the needs of a highly individualist, capitalist society."

As Artaud maintained, "It is not enough for the spectator to be captivated by the magic of the spectacle, he will not be captivated unless we know where to reach him. We have had enough of a haphazard magic, a poetry that no longer has the support of science." The difficult task is to be able to articulate the process of training, discipline it and convert it into a sign system. We are aware that approaching performance through this research process involves placing oneself on the borders of scientific disciplines such as kinesiology, psychology, neurology, cultural anthropology, semiology, phonology, etc. Artaud insisted that "the point is to do away with this sort of wild-eyed ignorance in which all of contemporary theatre advances as if in darkness...The gifted actor finds in his instinct the wherewithal to catch and project certain forces; but although these forces have their physical pathways within the body and within the organs, he would be completely amazed if someone revealed to him that they exist, for their existence has never occurred to him for a moment."

My hopes are that through our theatrical life we touch the audience and reveal truths concerning the human condition; however, I believe that there is no objective truth...the term is an oxymoron. Without the encounter with an audience our work would be as incomplete as life without death. During his Poor Theatre phase Grotowski wrote: "*I do not put on a play in order to teach others what I already know. It is after the production is completed and not before that I am wiser.*" Platonium is about learning to learn, and learning to understand. Like Grotowski, I am interested in performers because they are human beings. The contact made by meeting with another person makes me surmount my solitude. In the process we attempt to understand ourselves through the behavior of another person.

Toni Sant

Berlin. 7 January 1995

“There is a risk involved, but under the circumstances I feel that the risk is worth taking. I do not believe that we can ever revitalize our present way of life and I do not believe it is even worthwhile holding on to it; but I do propose something to get us out of our stagnation, instead of continuing to groan about it, and about the boredom, inertia, and the stupidity of everything.”

(from *No More Masterpieces* by Antonin Artaud -1933)

THE GAUDIER-BRZESKA PROJECT

Explaining the difference between the performance piece and the process has not been an easy task. The piece we presented on the 16th of December 1994 at the VCU Student Art Space was an assignment obligation for Dr. Kenneth Campbell's graduate directing class. It therefore moved within the guidelines of that course. These guidelines ask the directing students to consider the following "customary and essential elements" in terms of the irreducible common denominators in "any phenomenological description of directing for the stage":

Directing for the stage involves a TEXT (which does not have to be a dramatic text)

The performance is composed of a series of EFFECTS.

These effects induce AFFECTS in the receivers (i.e. audience and performers)

In seeking to bring about these effects, the director applies STRATEGIES.

During the process of directing for the stage, the director manifests patterns of BEHAVIOR

The preparation and presentation of a performance directed by myself and featuring any number of actors. Explaining the difference between the performance piece and the process has not been an easy task. The number of actors will be determined only by circumstances and not by any obligations arising from any written text. The ideal number seems to be two. The maximum should not be more than four. Preparation for this work requires some intensive reading. I believe strongly that through this work we are exploring more than just a theatrical text

The development of an ongoing process of research about performing arts by actors/performers and theatre makers in the context of an eventual presentation of a performance based on the relationship between Henri Gaudier and Sophie Brzeska. This project, which involves participants from Germany and Malta, consists of both theoretical and practical work.

With these concepts and premises in mind I would like to share with you some excerpts from the essay No More Masterpieces written by Antonin Artaud in 1933:

"[Let us] recognize that what has been said need not be said again; that an expression does not work twice, does not live twice; that all words, once uttered, are dead and are effective only at the moment when they are uttered; that a form that has been used has no function but to urge us to look for another; and that the theatre is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made can never be repeated.

We must put an end to the superstition of texts and of written poetry. Written poetry is valuable once, and after that it should be destroyed. Let the dead poets make way for the others. And we should be able to see that it is our veneration for what has already been done, however beautiful and valuable it may be, that petrifies us, that immobilizes us and keeps us from making contact with the underlying force, whether we call it mental energy, the life force, the determinism of exchanges, the lunar menses, or whatever you like. Beneath the poetry of texts there is poetry pure and simple, without form and without text.

I am not one of those who believe that civilization must change so that the theatre can change; but I do believe that the theatre, utilized in the highest and most difficult possible sense, has the power to influence the aspect and formation of things: and the encounter on the stage of two passionate manifestations, two living centers, two nervous magnetisms is something as whole, as true, and as decisive, even as in the life of two epidermises in a momentary lust. [...]

I propose a theatre in which violent physical images pound and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator [who "is in the middle and the spectacle surrounds him"], who is caught in the theatre as if in a whirlwind of higher forces. There is a risk involved, but under the circumstances I feel that the risk is worth taking. I do not believe that we can ever revitalize our present way of life and I do not believe it is even worthwhile holding on to it; but I do propose something to get us out of our stagnation, instead of continuing to groan about it, and about the boredom, inertia, and stupidity of everything.

Our work does not have to be realistic (as in most productions presented by the institutionalized theatres), in the words of Stanislavski it is irrelevant whether "the production and the acting is realistic, conventional, right-wing or left-wing, impressionistic or futuristic so long as it is convincing, that is, truthful and credible..." The way I see it, this is the effect that has the best affect on the receivers.

Dealing with the text

The piece we shall be presenting in 1994 is a glimpse at the possible production/performance which can be built around the lives of Henri Gaudier and Sophie Brzeska - two people who lived a difficult life, and died a cruel death. Together we shall explore their relationship and try to convey the sense of doomed love-life which was evident from the first moment they met. We shall concentrate mainly on their first meeting, but things neither start nor end there.

Since Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was an artist, he is often called "a genius". In his book *Man's Rage For Chaos: Biology Behavior and the Arts*, Morse Peckham defines genius as "a combination of high learning ability and of orientative flexibility". Can this be said of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska? Was the young sculptor a genius?

Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska had a history of mental illness. She died in a mental asylum. Since she lived in a predominantly patriarchal and sexist society, we would not know of her today if it were not for her relationship with Henri. Did she affect Henri's life and work through her unconscious violation of logic, or did he affect her more than she affected him? Should we examine their relationship in terms of paralogism - the non-perception of problems that should and could have been perceived under "normal" (or should we say ordinary) circumstances.

It is only by reading of as much of the material written by and about the Gaudier-Brzeskas that we can try to begin understanding them. Once again, I understand that it is impossible for anyone to read and fully comprehend all the material available in the time assigned to us in the framework of our commitment. We must at least read the book which exposes these two persons best: *Savage Messiah: Gaudier-Brzeska* by E.S. Ede.