“PREPARATIO MORTIS”: A SOLO PERFORMER BY JAN FABRE
“Folta la nuvola bianca delle falene impazzite”

1. INTRODUCTION

This short paper conducts a reading of Jan Fabre’s *Preparatio mortis*, through a brief contextualization of the production within the Flemish artist’s broad and complex oeuvre. It makes no claim to be exhaustive but seeks to trace only the essential lines necessary to understand certain principles that underlie its staging.

The idea underlying Jan Fabre’s *Preparatio mortis* comes from a fifteen-minute solo created for dancer Annabelle Chambon and presented in 2005, still in the form of a study, at the Festival d’Avignon. It was to use death as a lens for looking at life in a different way, constantly aspiring to a post-mortem stage of life itself.

At the centre of this reflection is the body in all its resplendent beauty and unacceptable perishability: the female body, a mysterious vehicle of life that struggles with its surrounding space by writing on stage a *pas de deux*, now gentle, now fast-paced and violent, with an exceptional partner (invisible but present), namely death, scandalously evoked in the metonymic form first of a flowery catafalque and then a glass casket.

A sensibility for everything related to the human body has, moreover, a hallmark of the artistic experience of this painter, sculptor, playwright, director and even entomologist, self-described as a consilience-artist, ever since the seventies, when, as a sixteen year old, he built an Indian tent (called *The Noise*) in his backyard, where he conducted his private performances, experiments with insects and organic fluids. This culminated in the early drawings of *My body, my blood, my landscape* (1978), in which he combined...
a passion for drawing with the exploration of corporeality, coming to use his own blood as a graphic sign.

His interest in the body’s limits, such as the search for the perfect movement, were embodied in the nineties in the director’s approach to dance, the highest example of aesthetic fruition of a physical discipline. His reflections on the body in all its forms (physical, spiritual, erotic, rebellious) thus became the creative core of this phase of his work, in which he created choral, but above all solo, spectacles that highlighted the performing skills of actors and dancers.

In 2002, Jan Fabre returned to performance art with Sanguis/Mantis, and then sealed his fortieth birthday (December 14, 2004) with Virgin-Warrior/Warrior-Virgin, a spectacle in which he performed a four-hour struggle with Marina Abramović, reaffirming the artistic centrality of the concepts of event, non-repetitiveness and randomness, but above all immanence of the performer’s body.

2. LIFE GOES ON STAGE

Starting from these principles, Preparatio mortis was staged in a new version, complete and more highly structured, lasting nearly fifty minutes at its Italian premiere at the Teatro Palladium in Rome in 2010. It was presented as part of the celebrations for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Romaeuropa Festival and for the 2010 edition of Next Festival (Kortrijk, Rijsel). The production was then repeated at the ImpulsTanz Festival in Vienna in July 2011, before returning to Italy in spring 2012, firstly at the Fondazione Pontedera Teatro and then at the Teatro Fabbricone in Prato. In these recent productions

5 The dancers and choreographers of contemporary dance who have collaborated with Jan Fabre’s Troubleyn include Els Deceukelier, Renée Copraj, Wim Vandekeybus and Marc Vanrunxt. Works from these years are Sweet Temptation (1991); Copyright I and 9 (1995); Glowing Icons (1997); The very Seat of Honour (1997); Lichaampje, Lichaampje aan de wand (1997); The Pickwick-man (1997); The fin comes a little bit earlier this sicle (1998); As long as the world needs a warrior’s soul (2000). The last of these was a reflection on the body that rebels, starting from a text by Dario Fo lo, Ulrike, grido!


Annabelle Chambon was replaced by the younger Lisa May, but remained behind the scenes as choreographer.

There is no dramatic text or outline dramaturgy. We have only a performative text, in which there does, however, exist a clear narrative structure, in which the beginning coincides circularly with the end. The dancer emerges from a flower-covered tomb only to fall asleep again in a transparent casket, on which is written the date (January 17, 1975), not of her death, as one might logically suppose, but birth. So if the conclusion forcefully recalls the final burial of a vital force, we could in fact be the spectators (albeit on the fluctuating margins of a deliberate semantic ambiguity) of a reverse path, from tomb to womb.

Hence the performance stages life, understood as a field of positive energy and a driving force for new dreams and desires, as dance cadenced by the breath that underlies movement, the breath of life that sets the pace for the entire show, being incorporated visually in the breathing of the carpet of flowers that sways in the opening, and through the appeal to hearing in the organ, with the blowing of its hydraulic pump accompanying the whole performance. Breath mists the glass of the transparent casket, where, at the end, the dancer swims in a milky light reminiscent of the amniotic fluid in which the fetus stirs before birth.

The guiding image that inspires this creation by the artist – who is significantly also a sculptor – is metamorphosis. He is on record as saying: “My theatre is a ritual of mental hygiene and purification. It causes a process of metamorphosis, not only in the actor but also in the audience”\footnote{J. Fabre, “Sul mio teatro. Guerrieri della bellezza e testi che forzano i registi”, *Il Patalogo*, 28 (2005): 251.}. Here the transformation occurs through the movement of the dancer: the installational work that represents death, the coffin covered with flowers that stands at the centre of the stage when the curtain rises is shaken by a choreography that enfolds and transforms it from within.

The heap of gerberas and lilies swells initially and sways like a giant jelly or spongy toffee that mocks the stillness of death that it is intended to represent. Everything is transformed: the body first and foremost, being matter that explodes to give rise to further matter. And from the tomb emerges a hand, then an arm, then the whole body of a Venus in modern lingerie. With movements at first slow, sweeping and disjointed, it conquers the surrounding space to then dominate it, “rape it”, by an obscene mimicry that seduces with violence.

Life is constantly present in the guise of the flowers, which represent past experiences and cover the whole stage with a multicoloured carpet of almost seven thousand specimens, meticulously selected and arranged by Fabre himself for each performance. There are white lilies and pink gerberas. Blue irises are also sometimes used. Death is in colour, no longer swept under the carpet by our civilization, but displayed for the contemplation of humanity in all its triumphant vitality. Removed from the aseptic monochromatism of hospitals, it becomes a carnival for the eyes, a “festival” once more, “to celebrate the flesh”\footnote{J. Fabre, “Jan Fabre”, interview with F. Astesani, *DROME Magazine*, 2, 8 (2006), http://www.undo.net/it/magazines/1161777534.}.

A veil of darkness descends and the body of the dancer reappears, completely naked, within a transparent glass case, surrounded by gray moths that rest on her, seconding her movements, while the woman, in the whiteness of nudity, swims slowly in her.
own breath, drawing white marks on the glass, perhaps graffiti of a primordial world: animals, phallic symbols, drops of semen that nurture waves of the sea.

We are in the midst of a reflection that involves matter, dear to those Flemish artists whom Fabre takes as a model for his creations. In this poetic of the flesh (with the figuration of Rubens as its frame of reference) the body is a material of metamorphosis, intended to take on new and different forms. Here the performer is transformed into a giant insect, enclosed in a glass case. Each form is temporary and waits to be reborn into another form, like the phoenix from its ashes. Eternity is only possible as fluid movement; only in this way can it emerge from the earth, be nurtured, taking on at times zoomorphic semblances:

I love the symbolic universe evoked by insects; they guide us into another world. Pets teach me a lot. They are the best healers and the brightest philosophers. They are instinctively warriors. They have their senses constantly on the alert and are always ready to fight. They use their sensory potential much more than we humans, they are a bundle of instincts

From the structural point of view, the performance can be divided into three sections. The first is exclusively dedicated to the perceptions of the audience, who are in darkness, surrounded by a sickening, cemeterial smell of rotting flowers and deafened by the notes of a *Toccata* for organ by Bernard Foccroulle.

It is a veritable attack on the audience, a violent provocation that, by presenting images and feelings rejected by humanity, defends it from a process of repression which would ultimately erase its essence:

My theatre returns to the origins of tragedy. Tragedy has its roots in the Dionysian rituals, where ecstasy and desire meet law and reason. Through catharsis, audiences are confronted with the dark chapters of human history. They suffer from extreme anguish and horror. In their confrontation with this suffering they are redeemed.

Hence by recovering the principle of catharsis, the theatre becomes a leap in the dark, “a scaffold from which the bodies are thrown into the abyss”, an art contaminated by death and chance, and the audience is a stranger that holds the reins of this randomness: “The end of a spectacle is like a corpse whose soul is set in motion in the bodies of the spectators”. Aware of this, Fabre plays with theatrical fiction, with the power of the image, deconstructing the mechanisms of fiction to recompose the perceptions of the audience on a new basis, destabilizing and dangerous.

In *Preparatio mortis*, entrance into the theatre is in fact a risk: in addition to the danger of allergy, hovering over the audience is the nausea of the tomb, no longer relegated to the margins of the city and thought, but present and encumbering the stage. We are, in fact, invited to our own funeral. The catafalque, huge in the darkness, acquires many smaller and more reassuring forms as the scene is gradually illuminated. It is then reduced to a mound of broken flowers which the dancer, emerging from a regenerative

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12 The former artistic director of the Théâtre De Munt/de la Monnaie in Brussels and today artistic director of the Festival d’Art Lyrique of Aix-en-Provence.


14 Fabre, “Conversazione con Jan Fabre”: 17.

sleep, moves around and mocks with dance steps and allusive gestures. The woman’s body thus redesigns the space and reorients perception.

In this first part, for brief moments, the situations are made concrete through a metaphorical language: the dancer writhes, spitting out flowers, and moves on the stage in a state of trance, then finally sits down to pluck the petals of a gerbera in the game of “He loves me he loves me not” reminiscent of *Giselle*. Fabre sees education and the power of beauty as lying in tradition, and he holds firmly to tradition (not necessarily just theatrical) to move towards new modes of aesthetic pleasure and new expressive possibilities.\(^{16}\)

The time of the performance dilated in the perception of the viewer (some critics observe that the fifty minutes of the spectacle feel like a hundred) is inflected by the light (or darkness, if you will) in the room: between the first and the second part the curtain does not fall, but darkness. The female body reappears in the glass case and there continues her dance together with the moths, concluding it curled up in the fetal position.

The compositions for organ follow, likewise marking the time of the representation and alternating with moments of silence in which it is the dancer’s breathing that determines the rhythm of movement on the stage. Thus the auditory perception catapults the audience from within a cathedral into a body where heart and lungs pulse. We pass from our funeral to our birth: we are invited to be born again.

3. FROM THE PERFORMER TO THE “WARRIOR”

In terms of method, Fabre claims to use a combination of exercises that focus on the search for a new artist on the stage. If in the traditional theater of the last two centuries, generally actors and dancers had to perform a role, to become someone else, in his theater they instead have to become something else.\(^{17}\) Yet his theatrical creations are not the result of a theoretical system, but rather a process of evolution in which the actors, renamed “Warriors of Beauty”, fight in the search for a truth about themselves and the universe recreated on stage. In fact the Flemish artist believes the word “actor” to be now obsolete, preferring to use the term “performer” to indicate a subject who acts dialectically by interfacing with the Other through speech, movement, and the exposition of physical space:

My “Warriors of Beauty”, like the heroes of the classical tragedies, fight against structures and systems imposed on them. They always seek to move or change the rules of the game. At times they win, at times they lose, but they always display the individual’s power, of becoming symbols of the quest for the potential of freedom.\(^{18}\)

In keeping with these premises, the “Warriors” are like animals, with insects the most favoured among them, capable of making the most of their sensory perceptions and

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\(^{16}\) Annalisa Sacchi, in her recent study of the function of directing on the contemporary stage (*Il posto del re. Estetiche della regia teatrale nel modernismo e nel contemporaneo*, Rome: Bulzoni, 2012), identifies Fabre’s work as a “third way” between “modern” and “survivors” regarding the relationship with tradition in terms of the origin of directing. The Flemish artist, shunning any attempt at closure in the discipline, is described as exerting the practice of directing as a place in which artists of different provenance agree to meet, using the language of the theater equally with others, from the visual arts to performance.

\(^{17}\) See Fabre, “Sul mio teatro”: 251.

\(^{18}\) Fabre, “Conversazione con Jan Fabre”: 283.
instincts. “Society is frightened of instincts. We cannot be animals any more. In fact, instead of using our animal senses, we invent devices to see better, to feel better [...] We study the particular in ever more detail, but we forget about life”19. So Fabre’s work develops in relation to the study of insects and their behaviour, focusing on the use of space and military strategies of survival.

For this reason, the artist terms himself a “defender of mankind”, while his performers act in the service of beauty, which is humanity’s principal sustenance:

Over twenty-five years I have developed a new form of artist on my stage. It’s not just the classical actor or the classical dancer. [...] I teach them to use real action, real time, real suffering, through situations with the body and mind, how to give a form to their presence. I make them aware of how the body is represented in the history of art by looking at classical paintings as well as contemporary art. Using this combination of exercises and research, I create a new kind of artist on stage20.

It takes no less than five years of training and working with the director for the performer to be transformed into a “warrior”. His method relies not so much on the physical actions, as biological ones. At stake is no longer emotivity, but the organs of the body that react. Acting is thus emptied of all psychological introspection.

Fabre’s working method is based on the principle of repetition to demonstrate the intrinsic impossibility and primary force of change: “Accumulation and the end point of imitation coincide with its disappearance. Through repetition the content changes, the text changes, the body changes; it becomes exhausted, the eyes change, the biological states of the body change”21. The only mimesis, therefore, is that of becoming and metamorphosis.

The movements of the dancer in Preparatio mortis are based on motor sequences repeated in fixed modular patterns: hence the perception of the dilation of time and the consequent feeling of tedium some reviewers have recorded. The actions are in fact repeated as uniformly as possible, so that every little variation in the utmost uniformity of execution creates an inevitable breach in the temporal scansion and in this fracture resides the individual time by which is expressed the category of the human in space. As long as there is fracture there is life.

Repetition affects not only the actor but also the audience, weakening its gaze: so there is a constant slippage between signifier and signified that determines the collapse of the whole system of significance that orients thinking and perception. This system acquires the connotation of a broken record, openly revealing its limitations and its flaws. This calls into question the foundations of the reproducibility of the theatrical event, through a hyper-exposure (at times even irksome) of the here and now. The presence of a narrative structure in the performative text serves to bring out its weakness: the meaning – if we still want to speak of meaning – lies in the voids to be filled.

4. THE POETIC OF THE APOCALYPSE

In his spectacles, Fabre does not always use a dramatic text, considering it as only one of the components of spectacle, to be combined with all the others: set design, lighting,

19 Fabre, “Jan Fabre”: 41.
20 Fabre, “Sul mio teatro”: 251.
21 Ibid.
costumes, and the body, mind and individuality of the artist. It is only one parameter of performance and only through the power of direction can the written language explode or implode. When he publishes theatrical writings he usually thinks of the possibility of a staging by another director, who will necessarily have to reclaim the text itself, reinvesting it with new meanings.

The texts draw, in a visionary way, on an urgent autobiography that emerges from the depths with a violence that only thought can mitigate. They “are frozen movements. They can become fuel for the fire [...]. A text is made of words, which can be repeated indefinitely. I want my lyrics to materialize and disappear in accordance with the staging that I do”\textsuperscript{22}

In the case of Preparatio mortis the performative text stems from an autobiographical experience of reversible death, a coma, of which the author has twice been a victim. It is therefore a creation based on his own suffering, experienced in the flesh, presented as a struggle with the illusions of the mind. This is the source of the aggression that is the constant hallmark of his productions.

The reflection on individual death, however, is inscribed within the broader horizon of a collective Apocalypse, yet perceived as a new beginning.

Distrust of a general and universal theatrical pedagogy, the centrality assumed by perception, and the close ties with the arts have been identified as features that relate Fabre to three protagonists of contemporary theater: Romeo Castellucci, Rodrigo García and Francois Tanguy. These artists have been evocatively described as the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”\textsuperscript{23} and seem to have points of contact with the artistic life of Tadeusz Kantor, without ever explicitly stating any direct “affiliation” with the Polish artist. They share certain basic principles, regardless of the explicit declaration of belonging to the same family or community. While the statement by Claudio Meldolesi\textsuperscript{24} that the affinity between directors should be sought along the vertical line of the problems they raise, rather than horizontal line of the time of experiences, it is true that this horizontality can also be extended to the space in which such experiences arise and are developed. Hence, despite coming from different representative contexts and remaining recognizably individual creative individualities, the “four horsemen” seem to announce the end times, while drawing fruitful stimuli for creativity from them.

From a liminal state suspended between life and death, a true épreuve de risqué\textsuperscript{25}, arise spectacles that portray bodies surrounded by stuffed or living animals, insects, objects, residues, placed in a labyrinthine space of frames, paintings, pictures, flowers and machinery. It is a poetry of the “bone”, in Montale’s sense of the term. The art is born out of the gap, the drift of the twentieth century\textsuperscript{26}. There is a clear bond between these artists and the figurative arts: at the centre of the performance is the analysis of the pos-

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} This is a definition that Georges Banu applies to a number of theatrical practices attributable to artists who describe themselves as directors, including Jan Fabre and Romeo Castellucci. See G. Banu, “La nouvelle subjectivité”, Alternatives Théâtrales, 85-86, il semestre (2005): 4-5.
\textsuperscript{26} Sacchi, in his study cited, Il posto del re, also finds points of contact between the poetics of Fabre and Castellucci, and extends the comparison to Ostemeier and Garcia. The young scholar’s thesis is that contemporary stage direction accepts what modernism discarded, working directly on the residue as a form of impairment of the major forms and affirming the value of the formless in the stage work.
sibility of the image, its evocative power. It is cold, objective; it presents itself for what it is, naked, bare, without any significance beyond its own presentation of itself. On the stage appear not objects but objective correlatives, that have to act as visual props for the restoration of symbolic thought, which can start again from iconology.

The creative process of a *Troubleyn* performance is a path that starts from a workshop attended by some fifteen actors and dancers selected after a long series of auditions. The training usually lasts for more than a month. It is psycho-physical and consists of two main parts: one of reflection on the themes of the new production and the other of physical workouts to warm their bodies. The pivotal part of warming up is working on the controlled flow of breath. By inhaling/exhaling it resituates physicality at the centre of the space.

This is fundamental to the conception of the production. It is a medium on which the body paints just as the painter paints on a canvas. Fabre focuses on it by following the principles of the traditional approach, in which each line and form is related to the vanishing point. Hence the gigantic catafalque that stands in the darkness of *Preparatio mortis* extends visually from the foreground to the background, though remaining motionless, through the skilful interplay of lights.

The spacing is based on symmetrical lines that designate an equal distance between the actors, for whom the only reference is provided by the “zero line”, initially imaginary, then actually drawn on the stage. It derives from the mutual position of two or more actors on the stage. In the case of *Preparatio* the zero line defines the proxemic relation between the dancer and her invisible companion, death, defining (at least in the first part) the order of the movements in relation to the central catafalque. During the training a lot of space is allowed to the actors, so as to stimulate the most varied configurations. Here the performer has to relate exclusively to objects or other forms of living beings: the catafalque, the flowers, the moths. Death dances in solitude.

At the end of a series of improvisations arising out of some guiding ideas, Fabre, together with the choreographer, scores the most compelling sequences, which are presented again by the actor (or actors) on the basis of memory they have retained of it. The essence of the rehearsals lies in repetition and variation. The latter is often recycled in a process the artist terms *exformation*. “This is how a creative process goes. First you have to go through the darkest black to see the red arise even brighter”28. And the audience of *Preparatio* follows the same route, travelling from the darkness of the tomb to the amniotic light of the maternal womb.

In a *Troubleyn* production, the creative process is therefore collective, albeit under the watchful eye of the director. With the curiosity of the biologist, he examines the articulations of the body on the stage, analysing the movements even in the smallest fibres. The spectacle is completely revised whenever the venue changes, to allow the performer to carry out the actions in the best possible way with respect to the new stage space. The

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27 The *Troubleyn*, active since 1986, is the company and the production of the Flemish artist, but also the physical location where he created his theatre. It is an old industrial building built of brick where Fabre had two recording studios, a theatre with a stage measuring seventeen meters by twenty, multi-purpose studios, guest quarters for artists, costumiers, rehearsal rooms, massage rooms and a bar overlooking the courtyard that is open every evening to all the inhabitants of Antwerp. Everywhere there are the traces of visits by great artists: in the kitchen, recipes written on the wall in pig’s blood by Marina Abramović; an invention by Bruna Esposito, who covered the door with thousands of bells; a bulletin board covered with animals, insects and shells (a tribute to the presumed entomologist ancestor) by Jan Lauwers, and tributes by many others, from Bob Wilson to Wim Delvoye. It is in fact a macro-installation.

encounter with the audience is then crucial in highlighting weak points during the event. The process of creation, far from being concluded on the opening night, continues until the last performance.

5. “LA PIAGATA PRIMAVERA È PUR FESTA, SE RAGGELA IN MORTE QUESTA MORTE!”

The verse by Eugenio Montale, though intended to convey other meanings, can be aptly applied to Jan Fabre’s journey into life after death. The “plague-stricken” spring of a cemetery in flower turns into a celebration of the body and the flesh, killing the concept of death as stiffness and perennial immobility. The concept of death triumphs as movement and transformation. So much so that this young woman, emerging sleepily from a flowery tomb, immediately brings to mind the iconography of Botticelli’s Primavera advancing as a symbol of rebirth on a carpet of flowers.

The finale then sees her at grips with a swarm of moths, nocturnal insects usually associated with dark forebodings. She shares her imprisonment in a transparent case with them, the victim of a claustrophobic situation which condenses her breath as damp stains on the glass. This visualises the nightmare of being buried alive, of reawakening under the ground in the midst of larvae and insects. But though starting from these disagreeable perceptions, we have to take a step further, because the woman breathes and swims, with slow and sinuous movements, amid living moths. Apparently there is air and the date that appears on the sarcophagus is that of her birth. We are not before a coffin, but a welcoming womb from which to begin life again.

The audience, metaphorically slapped in the face several times during the fifty-minute show, can finally relax, but only after being forced to consider the taboo of death in a different way, having seen in it the implications of salvation. The vehicle of this message is, once again, the female body, the Clizia of our day, the salutary and life-giving being, transformed from a sunflower into a giant insect struggling with the darkness, looking for the light.

But the ritual does not end here. In some theatres the public are offered a blue iris at the exit. In others, the audience pick up the flowers from the stage and take them away. The atmosphere is festive, however, like Palm Sunday, when everyone searches at the end of the church for their own olive branch for the blessing. However, there remains something sinister in this floral offering, a sort of memento mori: death, traditionally relegated offstage, it is outrageously presented onstage, entering our experience, vaccinating us against fear.

And on this “vaccination”, which consists in fact of preparation for death, all of Fabre’s work is concentrated:

Sometimes I have the impression of being in my own way a Greek healer. I know what rituals are for and at the same time I know what these subtle mixtures can cause. The Greek word means φάρμακον [pharmacon] signifies both medicine and poison. In this lies all the ambiguity of my approach to my work and performances. For actors, dancers and audiences, my theatre is an aesthetic of poisoning, which could perhaps even cure.\(^{30}\)

\(^{29}\) Montale, La primavera hitleriana, 83, v. 31.
\(^{30}\) Fabre, “Conversazione con Jan Fabre”: 266.
An aesthetic of poisoning that has deep roots in the catharsis of the Greek world, in tragic condition of confrontation between human being with its own limit; the dimension of the ritual dimension of the performative event is retrieved, albeit in the pulverization of the artistic experience through the convocation of multiple languages, which is not just theatrical in derivation.

In this context, the perception of the audience is at the center of the performance, shaken by the scandalous staging of death, which had been taboo in the Periclean theater. So the multitude of spectators become a guarantor of an event in being, a ancient pact that is renewed, becoming community, not so much at the moment when it occupies the stage, but when it leaves it, with a flower in its hand.

SUMMARY

Using death as a lens to look at life in a different way, or constantly aspiring to a post-mortem stage of life itself. At the centre of this reflection is the female body in all its resplendent beauty and unacceptable perishability. This essay insists on the possible interpretations of the body on stage, reading a solo for dancer or performer by Jan Fabre, visual artist, playwright, contemporary director and even entomologist, who terms himself a consilience artist. Fabre’s work can be considered an exclusively performative event, since it is based on bodily writing unrelated to any written text before or after it. The viewer is engaged in an effort of understanding, imagination, genuine empathy and com-passion.

31 On the recovery of the audience’s role in contemporary directing see Sacchi, Il posto del re.