

The Theatre of Robert Anton

“A visionary theater of whose scale is inversely proportional to the scope of Robert Wilson’s vast panorama is the puppet theater of Robert Anton. Performing rituals of transformation and rebirth and original alchemical allegories with an Artaudian emphasis are miniature finger-puppet actors, whose heads are no larger than one and a half inches. They enact these silent and mysterious rites on a small black-velvet stage before an audience of no more than eighteen spectators.”

Gloria Feman Orenstein, “The Theater of the Marvelous”, New York University Press, 1975

“15 kilometers from Nancy in an isolated house in the middle of a garden we felt as if we were invited to the meeting of a secret society. In fact, we were in another world. A mesmerizing and surrealist universe born out of the fantasies of a young man refusing any realities and taking refuge in the imaginary. Animated with three fingers, the “actors” have extraordinarily fine and expressive faces and hands about the size of a thumbnail. Their body is a surface of black velvet that blends into the black velvet of the background and of the console acting as a stage. No music. No dialog. But in order to give birth to his puppets, to make them alive and suffer, Robert Anton takes on the gestures of an alchemist. He creates beings that transform through mutation. Each metamorphosis is painful, surgical and magical. Between these characters and their creator strange mute relationships are established. It would be impossible to describe all of their subtleties. Tenderness and cruelty of the almighty master. Submission, revolt, love, moral and physical suffering is what these little beings feel as the horrors of human passions. Its enchanting, almost terrifying. We remained still for an hour, barely daring to breathe for fear to break the charm. When the lights went out, we didn’t dare to applaud and left silently as if shameful to have been entrusted with a secret that did not belong to us.”

Françoise Varenne, “Le monde silencieux de Robert Anton”, *Le Figaro*, 14 May 1975

“Robbie was creating a medieval world—dangerous, dark, endowing transformation...(Jungian)...I felt very drawn to him, and he to me. Moved by the tiniest of his work I asked, ‘How did you come to work in this way?’ He said he’d done puppet shows under his dining room table. ‘I quickly learned’, he told me later, ‘that I didn’t want to control a space any bigger than that dining room

table I grew up with.””

Linda Hunt, “Robert Anton in Retrospect”, *Theater Ex*, 1986

Robert Anton’s play is amongst the most beautiful I have ever seen. ...Dressed in black velvet behind a counter covered in the same fabric, Robert Anton, visible from the waste up, conveys a still and mysterious beauty like in Lorenzo Lotto’s portraits. We understand little by little that Robert Anton is a mystic that came here to demonstrate that ‘all is vanity’.

Guy Dumur, “Nancy: The Festival of Freedom”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 26 May 1975

“He wanted some form of theater that rose to the sky...such as the truth can sometimes reveal itself on stage. The magic delicacy, the joy, the universality of what he did cannot be spoken of. I knew him as the greatest I have seen.

Stella Adler, “Robert Anton in Retrospect”, *Theater Ex*, 1986

“His inventions would look to him for reassurance. That was always very moving...His movements of face were minimal, withholding of himself, a supreme actor...He could express powerful contempt: The pope with an absurd mitra, degraded to cardinal/bishop, gets closed in a jail tower in his finery...then becomes a blind man tapping. Then a horrid puppet with leather gear and a shaved head, a lot like Himmler –pisses on a target on that prison. He’s got one leg, walks with a crutch...diabolical. (Something right out of George Grosz.) Three visual artists were most important to him: Bosch, Redon and Grosz...The puppets he took to the Plaza to show Fellini...He knew Fellini’s movies inside out. The one that meant the most to him was TOBY DAMMIT, also JULIET OF THE SPIRITS...Nino Rota’s music. He unconditionally respected Chaikin and Stella Adler. When she came to his performances she talked throughout to the puppets. ...The play involved a redemption from the world, an overcoming – a metaphysical confrontation.”

Benjamin Taylor, “Robert Anton in Retrospect”, *Theater Ex*, 1986

“Robbie had been waiting at The Plaza. Here was this fellow and these wonderful creatures...one with white face emerging from a black hood. Fellini, instinctively, was delighted and enchanted... definitely intrigued by Robbie. I know Fellini: a kind of spark had happened.”

Peter Goldfarb, “Robert Anton in Retrospect”, *Theater Ex*, 1986

It is a great pleasure and an exceptional honor for us to announce the presentation of Robert Anton’s miniature theatre and its history.

In the decade of performing his extraordinary microcosmic plays, Robert Anton (1949-84), born in Texas to a family of Russian-Jewish decent, has received the deepest admiration for his work and persona one could possibly put on record. And yet Anton’s theater is one of New York’s best-kept secret avant-garde histories. His plays have spellbound and mesmerized an equally exquisite audience in New York and Europe, where Anton was praised as the new magus of the 1970s theatre avant-garde. Anton allowed maximum 18 people to see his plays and he vehemently denied filmic or photographic documentation of the performances. The intimacy of his theatre was to be experienced in person and nothing else. Mediation would have broken the magic circle. He called his puppets ‘actors’, who would often ‘surprise him’ and change the course of events during Anton’s elaborately crafted performances. The ‘actors’ are meticulously sculpted heads, no larger than an inch and a half, with shockingly vivid features. Their faces are mostly old and ‘used up’: They embody to perfection what Rainer Maria Rilke formulated in 1910 as “The non-face that is left when a person has worn out all his faces”.

The faces were inspired by people Anton observed at Verdi Square Park, close to his 44 West 70th Street apartment, populated in the 70s with aged opera singers and junkies. Though they have no names, there are types – the ‘trash lady’, the clowns (inspired by Anton’s hero Fellini in his 1970 movie “*The Clowns*”), the pope degraded to cardinal and then bishop, the rabbi, the glamorous skeleton dancer in the style of Josephine Baker, the George Grosz inspired ‘Nazi’, a character coming straight out of Anton’s admiration for the 1960s play and Bob Fosse’s film adaptation of “*Cabaret*”, the bruised wise man with a bandage hiding his third eye, the haughty chanteuse, the gypsy lady; there are beasts like the horseshoe crab and the bird woman, and the egg head whose shell cracks and unmask a monstrosity, and many more characters, exposed during one play and

throughout a decade to multiple transformations and reincarnations. The heads/actors constantly change character, identity and gender. Just by looking at you from one angle or another they morph in expression from good to evil, from young to old, from female to male. 39 ‘actors’ survived after Anton’s sudden tragic passing in 1984, constituting the core of his theater, as well as some of the equally intriguing miniature props with which Anton staged his ritualistic stories and artistic alchemy, and a suite of exceptional drawings and sketches giving another form of insight into an exceptional artist’s mind set and imagination.

The Journey

Already from the tender age of nine, Anton followed an original childhood impulse to create *en miniature*: He re-built the stage sets of famous Broadway musicals he had seen with his parents in New York and London, reduced to a proscenium of 18” across and 12” high, and yet so breathtaking in detail and elegant precision that Anton was indorsed by journalists in his home town Forth Worth in the mid 1960s as the “ingenuity of a Michelangelo”.

Anton arrived in New York in 1970, after two years of stage and costume design studies at Carnegie-Mellon University. He continued his studies in New York at the Studio and Forum of Stage Design. In 1973, collaborating with the composer Elizabeth Swados, Anton designed the scenery for the Broadway musical “*Elizabeth I*” — his drawings for the queen’s costume survived. In the same year, his collaborations with Ellen Stewart’s La MaMa theatre began where he also staged his own plays. Repeat performances took place in his apartment on West 70th Street. Among the enthused audience and supporters were La MaMa playwright and director Jean-Claude van Itallie, who was inspired by Anton’s ‘actors’ and started introducing puppets to his own plays, writer Susan Sontag and her son David Rieff, famed acting teacher Stella Adler, childhood friend and novelist Benjamin Taylor (Anton features as “the puppeteer” in his autobiographical debut novel “*Tales out of School*”, 1995), actress Linda Hunt who was soon to become a star in Robert Altman and David Lynch’s movies, theatre revolutionary Peter Brook, Broadway tap dancer, singer and choreographer Tommy Tune, Broadway’s director legend Hal Prince, the doyenne of the fashion world Diana Vreeland, Yoko Ono and John Lennon, to name a few.

Between 1974-75 Anton presented his puppet theatre at Robert Wilson’s Byrd Hoffmann Foundation and directed at the National Theater of the Deaf in Waterford, CT. His tour through Europe began, first performing at the Mickery Theater in Amsterdam. In 1975 Anton represented

the United States at the International Theater Festival in Nancy, France, causing an avalanche of enthusiastic reviews in the French press depicting Anton's miniature theatre as one of the most memorable and outstanding acts of the festival. The Nancy engagement introduced Anton to France's flamboyant cultural minister Jacques Lang. In 1976, President Francois Mitterand and Jacques Lang designated the Château de Vincennes outside of Paris for Anton to set up his studio and living quarters and to perform for one year. Anton presented his plays and co-founded a visual/mime theatre program for the deaf-mute at the Chateau. In 1977 he created a new production for the Festival D'Automne in Paris.

Upon his return to New York in 1978, Anton moved to a large loft on 96 Spring Street and presented nightly performances of the "*Paris Spectacle*". In 1981 Robert Anton was appointed as the American representative at the Theater der Welt festival in Cologne. In the same year he performed at the Teatro Argentina in Rome where he met Fellini again.

In the early 1980s Anton's experimentation took him to new stage designs, a move connecting him back to his childhood Broadway musical stages while the 'actors' fade into the background. Anton created glamorous miniature stage sets as "an homage to the 1940s" (Benjamin Taylor), sets like 'Radio City Hall' animated with grand and witty gestures to the tunes of Fred Astaire and Busby Berkeley. From there, Anton further radicalized his concepts. His last work was a play composed purely of light, exploring the psychological impact and metaphysical dimension of color, once more elaborately staged in a miniature proscenium: "A third final spectacle remained unfinished at this death. Totally unpopulated, it would have been an evocative constellation of set, sound and light." (Genii Grassi, "Robert Anton in Retrospect", *Theater Ex*, 1986).

In an endeavor to bring back to a contemporary audience — and to the many of his generation who were not part of the blessed and illustrious able to see his performances — the experience of Robert Anton's theatre, we interviewed on film, and continue to do so, witnesses of his plays and his life, friends and peers who were close to Anton's universe. These dedicated and moving testimonies are an integral part of the exhibition and will constitute the core of a future documentary on The Theatre of Robert Anton.

We would like to express our gratitude to Bette Stoler who brought *The Theatre of Robert Anton* to us and who shared her memories of her friend and his context with us to help realizing the project. We also would like to thank Anton's friends and peers who so generously shared their memories with us in the filmed interviews giving such rich testimony to Anton's history.

Anke Kempkes

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