

Silence, Writing, Translation, Stupidity:

The Schoolbooks of Goat Island and Societàs Raffaello Sanzio

The U.S. Chicago-based performance group Goat Island was founded in 1987 and became internationally recognized in the 1990's. The company Societàs Raffaello Sanzio, from Cesena, Italy, was founded in 1981 and also rose to prominence in the 90s. Contemporaneous, the two groups are nonetheless quite different in style and substance.

Goat Island performs small, intimate collages of found and composed texts, appropriated images and gestures, and Judson Dance-influenced pedestrian movements. At first glance, their works seem inscrutable, but slowly they reveal hidden structures and associations as they evolve. One might say that in terms of temperament, Goat Island's work is driven by an impulse to find miracles in ordinary things.

Societàs Raffaello Sanzio, on the other hand, usually stages huge, spectacular proscenium-stage works. They invoke the largest of Western myths on the largest of scales, and they do so with a calm temperament that nonetheless has more than a bit of Artaud's keen-eyed cruelty about it.

Despite the two companies' differences, they share an iconoclastic, rule-breaking attitude about theatre; both usually work in theatre spaces, and they do so at the border of that hard-to-define, interarts, non-identificatory, non-plot-based medium now customarily referred to as "performance." Moreover, as this essay discusses, both groups share an interest in teaching performance, as well as staging it.

Since the mid-1990's Goat Island has led a series of performance workshops which, importantly, teach collective-creation methods which resemble the ones they use

to create their own performances. Some of the exercises from these workshops have been documented in two publications, the 1996 *Schoolbook* and the 2000 *Schoolbook*₂.

Although the auteur-like sensibility of SRS is less associated with collective creation, this "open theatre family in the Italian tradition" (47), to use critic Luca Scarlini's description, has an interesting episode in its history, an episode with some bearing on notions of collective creation: in the winter of 1995 and spring of 1997, SRS member Chiara Guidi initiated and led what was called the *Scuola Sperimentale di Teatro Infantile*, the Children's Theatre Experimental School. Guidi also documented the progress of each workshop in a *Diario della Scuola*, or School Journal.

This talk concentrates on the schoolbooks created by Goat Island and SRS. Since the methods detailed in these schoolbooks may be relatively unfamiliar, I spend a fair amount of time describing the processes of the companies' workshops. However, at the conclusion, I hope to offer some generalizations that can bridge notions of theory and practice in the two companies' work and that relate the groups to their historical antecedents in collective creation.

Goat Island's workshops teach methods for creating material collaboratively; they also attempt to teach an ethics about collaboration.¹ For the sake of succinctness, I am going to treat the different processes discussed in the company's two schoolbooks as though they were a single, ideal critical object. The first exercise in both books is

¹ "I have come to the conclusion that what the school teaches, above all, is modes of collaboration" (Bottoms "How to Move a Piano" in *Schoolbook2*: 75).

actually the same: the "Impossible Task Exercise." In this exercise, a student is asked to write an impossible task on a piece of paper (for instance, "Chew water," "Dissolve my body," "Fly" S2: 13) and then, while receiving an impossible task from someone else, the student hands his or her own task to a third person who will physicalize it and, later potentially, vocalize it.

From this minimal initial structure of the Impossible Task exercise, a number of principles and consequences can already be inferred about the nature of Goat Island's work. Beginning with the impossible immediately wrests the creation of material away from psychological realism, even as it may involve personal inspiration in deep ways. Moreover, since students are asked to "create an action" (S2 12) from the impossible task, they move quickly to a physical rather than verbal way of relating to material. Forms of dance and action-based performance frame the learning experience more than drama-based models of theatre. Additionally, material does not arise from an *a priori* theme or idea. Instead, a metaphorical physical action, ripe for multivalent interpretations, becomes a kind of Rorschach test through which people discover *a posteriori* what may be important for them to make meaning about.

The transition from writing to action and back, from a meditative private space to a performed public space and back, is also one of the basic structures for Goat Island's methods. Collective creation functions in their work not so much to find a meaning in common across people as to find a methodology to gather people together even as they are allowed to hold different meanings separately. Polysemy is initiated immediately through the metaphorical nature of performing an impossible task, and then polysemy is

held onto by structures which allow for differences between individuals within common forms.

After students have created a small fragment of material, Goat Island then prompts them through a further series of exercises to add to and transform that material "grain upon grain," until finally from an impossible task there is an "impossible heap." For instance, the action of an impossible task may be treated as an isolated movement pattern, able to be folded on itself or otherwise transformed as movement. Or the choreographic pattern of the movement may be translated quite differently, into a diagram for how to walk around a neighborhood.

The initial collaboration of writer and performer often gives way to a new form of collaboration: Two physicalized, impossible tasks can be put together to form a duet. Since the partners need to figure out how to perform their movements together, the new whole is necessarily different than although not necessarily more than the sum of its parts. Additionally, the Goats provide no specific, instrumentally-oriented guidelines about how to assemble duets. Part of the students' task is to discover a collaborative methodology on their own, although the Goats do provide some general meta-prescriptions about the ethics of collaboration: say yes, more than no; share time in terms of who acts as director of the collaboration; and if something seems wrong in a given artistic choice, concentrate on discerning whether there is still something meaningful in the choice and whether what is supposedly "wrong" entails a personal reaction rather than a supposedly agreed-upon aesthetic principle.

Having worked on actions for a time, the Goats often return to private moments of writing to produce what they call "creative," rather than "critical" responses. For

example, when groups first perform a duet, they are asked to closely watch another duet. Afterwards, instead of offering critiques about where rhythm didn't work or what use of space could have been heightened or some other instrumental observation, students focus on writing about a passage in the observed group's duet where they felt engaged by the action, where they felt there was a "miraculous moment." This moment then provides students with the stimulus to write for five to ten minutes about why the moment was miraculous. Then, in yet another step of translation, students write about a different moment which this initial moment reminds them of. And then, yet again, in a third writing exercise, students write about the associative link which led them from the miraculous moment to the remembered moment.

By this point, students have already created a fair amount of material, written and performed. To break this material's logic of associations and translations, Goat Island then introduces what they call an "outside intervention." Students may be asked to go for a silent, hour-long research walk where they look for details that could inspire an additional fragment of performance. Or a fax may be sent to the workshop from someone not in the workshop. Students then have to incorporate that period of observation/instruction/meditation/interruption into the corpus of materials already gathered.

In a final stage, the members of the two duets who observed each other join to form a quartet. With few guidelines about how to create in a mutually supportive way, the groups must take what is now an almost overly abundant pile of created and found materials – writings, tasks, movement patterns, outside interventions, observed details and patterns, internalized thoughts, agreed-upon methodologies – and they must create

out of this impossible heap a performance. Usually, the process actually works. In the words of Adrian Heathfield, the resulting performances are often "logically discordant," but also mysteriously and deeply engaging in the way they unconsciously track the complex processes of their own creation, revealing "Something *in* the relation *about* the relation" ("A Response" in S2: 64).

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The two years of work done at SRS's Experimental Children's School do not as easily yield an ideal model. However, in both years the same 30 boys and girls, between the ages of 8 and 10 and divided into two groups of fifteen, met for seven consecutive sessions, usually at one- to two-week intervals. The school was free.

A first principle of organization for the school consisted in the architectural and scenic design of the learning spaces themselves. As Guidi writes in her Foreword to the first year's *Diary*, "From the very first moment, I wanted to find a place where it was possible to compress the air breathed. [. . .] 'School' was meant as a physical area rather [than as an idea of] well-known application" (6). Through the careful design of space, SRS staged allegorical journeys for the children, processions that traveled through physical and imaginary space. In general, one might characterize SRS's school as a labyrinth where children were initiated into Orphic mysteries.

In the first year, after the rite of passing through an iron gate into the school, the children encountered the first of three successive school spaces. In the first space, Chiara Guidi and Claudia Castellucci greeted the children, and they prepared for their journey.

The children donned loose white clothes and put on make-up, thereby immediately acquiring a "false" double of the self that would nonetheless allow each child to accept the otherness of the theatre and to transform its hypocrisy into something "true." When greeting the children in this first space, Guidi did not ask them for their names. Indeed, she acknowledges that she can barely remember the names of the children who participated (2: 4). Interestingly, Goat Island also begins their workshops without any formal introductions. By doing so, they open a space of unknowing where participants do not need to re-perform their social roles for each other, where the perceived authority or lack thereof of a specific individual cannot foreclose unexpected possibilities within the group as a whole.

The second space of the school was dedicated to what Guidi calls "agreements." Here children were told a story about the experience to come; or they learned some words to recite, as well as rhythms and gestures to enact in order to bring out a sense of the words. Guidi acknowledges that the pedagogy of doing recitations could hardly be more old-fashioned, but multiple objectives were accomplished through recitation. By repeating and rhythmically mastering a set of words, the children acquired a form of theatrical discipline, a discipline designed to foster a physical sense of words as much as, if not more than, a cognitive signification about words.

In terms of treating words in relation to sense rather than signification, Guidi gives an interesting example in her journal from the second year: While reading a line from Homer and learning its scansion, the children passed a fish from person to person in time with the meter. Guidi writes, "All the children experience the weight of the word spoken in the theatre, which, here, coincides with the same weight of the fish: 8 kilos" (2:

20). Moreover, the repetitive act of recitation oddly empties out words' signification at the same time as it creates a sense of vocal fullness to prepare the way for something else: the pause of silence. Over and over in both years' journals, Guidi returns obsessively to the necessity for silence: "each action can only be generated by the silence of the theatre" (18); "I make the [children] notice how much more important [it] is to know the nature of silence in the theatre than . . . the use of the voice" (2: 17); and finally, in summary, "by submitting themselves to the pauses, the silences and the changes in rhythm, proper [to] the theatre action, the [individual] child makes relationships and creates exchanges within a stiff and structural composition, which is only capable of giving . . . energy back to where the same energy has been supplied" (1: 8).

The school's third and final space was a space of agon. It was the theatrical space of "no stopping" (1: 8), where one enters the space as an actor, an agent, and where one can only retreat behind the curtain of the second space or go on. In the first six sessions of the first year, the children faced in the third space a foe that they had to defeat. They had to win a fight variously through the power of their voices, through physical combat, through a self-invented, make-believe weapon, or even through an act of empathy. The foes included such personae as a man with a whip dressed in a leather coat, his face covered by a horned goat head; an iron-breasted, metal-buskined creature with a gun; a man with a working flame-thrower; an ill, moaning man; and so on. Having conquered the adversary, the children could return to the second space, warm down through further exercises, and then clean up before leaving, always punctually at the end of an hour and a half.

The allegorical journeys of the first year were also structurally organized across sessions through an allegory of the body. The first session was devoted to exercises with the head and, implicitly, the voice; the second to the hands; the third to the arms; and so on, until the sixth session on the feet and the seventh on the body as a whole. It is perhaps worth noting that this allegorical journey went down through the body, rather than up.

In the second year, Guidi notes that she attempted to treat the children less as one group body and more as different "meteors orbiting" (62). In addition, Guidi tried to create more of a physical space of observation and distance for the children, so they could hold onto forms and ideas without always being caught up in instinctive gestures and the rush of combat. Spatially, the space of the second year resembled the first in that children had to go through a ritual of entrance, this time mediated by an actor called the Guardian. Once through the gate, however, the space of the school was quite different. The single large space was divided by two sets of parallel, transparent curtains that could be opened and closed to divide the space into three smaller spaces. The inner of these three spaces had a low-lying table in it where the children could gather, discuss, agree, and analyze. Perpendicular to the axis of the first two curtains was another area, a kind of end-stage space, also separated from the larger room by three transparent curtains. In this space, what Guidi calls "Visions" were staged.

Unlike the tri-partite spatial and temporal organization of the first year, the second year was structured as a series of so-called Spheres that would rise to and fall away from a Vision. As part of the action of these Spheres, children performed rhythmic and vocal exercises around well-known texts from the Western tradition. They recited and

athletically enacted the rhythms of the passages until achieving an initial state of exhaustion, where as Guidi observes: "A real discovery [occurred]: the physical fatigue [produced] by the repetition reveals an innate knowledge of the theatre . . . pretence was dominated" (2: 9). Spheres were also linked to each other by loose chains of association. For instance, in the fourth session, a game about fire led to a story about the burning of Troy, which led to a vision of a dancing white horse, which led to a sphere of analysis reflecting upon the Trojan Horse and Laocoon's unheeded warnings, which led to discussions of unicorns and the Battle of the Centaurs, to actual running in the space, to chasing, to a situation in which Guidi as Pentheus was hunted down by the children portraying the Bacchae, and so on. As with Goat Island, huge formal structures are at work, and yet these "stiff and structured" compositions remain remarkably unrestricting in their own way. Structure here operates like a deep underground river of paradigmatic and syntagmatic associations. Meaning circulates around relatively unfixed; energy whirls around to return any efforts at reading made by the student.

As a final indication of the Orphic nature of SRS's experimental school, I want to describe the Vision from the penultimate day of the school. After reciting some lines from Leopardi, the children lie down and the space becomes dark. When light returns, the children see at the end of the space, separated from them only by two translucent scrim, a one and half ton white bull. Guidi writes:

Its very strong smell of ruminated hay has pervaded the room. It's a "green" smell, almost sweetish, nauseating, and, at the same time, pleasant. Around its mouth, the animal has got dribble due to the continuous movement of its jaws. From time to time it blows and each puff is like a roar. The young actors are literally petrified by the paralysing strength of the bull. This vision has really something . . . numinous, religious. It seems that the movements are made in slow motion, and are huge At a certain moment, the bull splashes a huge jet of shit which hits the floor

and the . . . curtain placed between it and us. The extraordinary fact is that nobody says anything. It is like being in front of a myth with no time . . . a vision which strikes everyone dumb. (49)

Between the Two Companies

Having described some of the two companies' exercises, let me offer four concepts that I see present in both companies' creative methods, concepts which are also internally related to each other: Silence, Writing, Translation, and finally, Stupidity, or maybe better, Stupefaction. And let me start with the last.

The Vision of the Bull, so powerful, full, and communicative, nonetheless has the effect of striking everyone dumb. "Come stare di fronte a un mito senza tempo . . . a una visione che ammutolisce" (46). It was like being before a timeless myth . . . a vision which makes one mute. Like an Italian Baroque opera, part of SRS's aesthetic is to "far stupare," to astonish, to make stupid, to stupefy. As Guidi writes in relation to a different vision, "C'è lo stupore della meraviglia, del meraviglioso" (20); this is the stupefaction, the awe of the miracle, of the marvelous.

As different as Goat Island's intimate aesthetic is from SRS's spectacles, the Goats also share an interest in the "miraculous moment." In their quiet way, the complex structural tracks that the Goats lay through personal writing and through writing's endless associative translation into actions, environments, and stagings, which themselves translate into yet more public and private transformations . . . all these complex paths are a way for the Goats to allow themselves to encounter again what they already know about themselves and the world, but have forgotten in that huge, transcendent stupidity, automatism, and indifference which can encroach on us everyday if we let it. In that

sense, their ethics of collaboration is driven not only by a dream of the importance of collectivity, but by a deep-seeded sense of the limitation of individuality. By acknowledging one's *stultia* (Ronell 20), the madness and stupidity of the limited self, there is, strangely enough, a kind of release within that stupidity. As Bryan Saner writes in the Goats' joint "Letter to a Young Practitioner," a guide to their ethics of collective creation, "Remember other people" (102), "Make small plans" (103), "Work slowly" (104), and "Beware of brilliance" (103). And for both groups, the precursor to recognizing the possibility for the exchanges and relationships of theatre is silence, a pause, an ethos of quietness. The structures of writing and translation emerge in this silence by negating the silence, by initiating movement, and yet the structures of performance often circulate around in order to find one miraculous moment that might struck one dumb once again.

In the context of this conference on collective creation, let me also make some brief points of comparison and contrast between the work of Goat Island and SRS and that of earlier 60's and 70's practitioners of collective creation.

In the preface to Judith Malina and Julian Beck's documentation of *Paradise Now*, they write, "The play is a voyage The plot is The Revolution. The voyage is a vertical ascent to the Revolution" (6). It is, perhaps, too easy with the hindsight of history to deconstruct the rhetoric of the Living Theatre, too easy to observe that with revolutions, what goes around usually comes around and that with the highs of vertical ascent often come some serious lows.

Reflecting on the events in Paris of May '68, Maurice Blanchot has written:

Contrary to 'traditional revolutions,' it was not a question of simply taking power . . . it was not even a question of overthrowing an old world; what mattered most was to let a possibility manifest itself, the possibility – beyond any utilitarian gain – of a *being-together* that gave back to all . . . that elated everyone. . . . Everything was accepted. The impossibility of recognizing an enemy, of taking into account a particular form of adversity, all that was vivifying while hastening the revolution, though there was nothing to be resolved, given that the event had taken place.

The event? And had it taken place? (31).

Thirty-five-odd years later, the carnivalesque rhetoric of impossibility in late 60's utopianism has been internalized and quietly held onto as a legacy of collective creation. Both Goat Island and SRS have the virtue, methodologically and manifestly in performance, of confronting an audience with the unthought, of trying to find radically, impossibly new expression out of the most archaic thoughts, out of the most everyday thoughts, out of the very things that seem old, tired, and devoid of possibility. And yet, there is also an attenuation of expectation in this process. Both groups recognize, fundamentally, that the new can only be relatively and not absolutely new. And as the horizon and scale of the new becomes smaller, both groups also reduce their expectations about the nature and scope of collectivity as well. They seem to recognize, as the title of Blanchot's book suggests, that a pure community, a utopian community, a community radically without power or history or inequality is ultimately "unavowable."

Instead of using a rhetoric that leads students and, by implication, audiences up vertical ascents, 90s companies like Goat Island and Società Raffaello Sanzio use a

different vocabulary. In Goat Island's introduction to their first *Schoolbook*, they write, "We were the facilitators ('teachers' seems too strong a word, when we learned so much)" (5), and in their jointly written "Letter to a Young Practitioner" in *Schoolbook*₂, director Lin Hixson writes, "I cannot teach without you teaching me," and "One does not always want to be thinking in the future, if as sometimes happens, one is living in the present" (109). In her introduction to SRS's first Schoolbook, Claudia Castellucci writes, "The reciprocity of teaching doesn't involve a false symmetry of relationship. The 'roles' of teacher and pupil are always clear . . . [even when an inversion takes place], when the pupil indicates the passage and the teacher is the one who learns" (2). Describing her own role as the teacher in the first year of SRS's Experimental School, dressed up as she was in blue make-up and wearing a blue cape, Chiara Guidi writes,

I wanted to make the children understand that, although I was dressed and made-up in a very strange way and always different, I was [not] joking at all. I was very serious and very false. Very authoritative and very ridiculous, but the whole of the characters in me produced "credibility." (9)

And of the second year, she notes, "I do not look for [an] upward climb [to] the learning" (8).

Goat Island and SRS have not entirely forsaken the radical, carnivalesque, impossible, inverting impulses of groups like the Living Theatre, but they do not accept such impulses uncritically either. When Goat Island encourages its students to say "yes," they are embracing the accepting, non-adversarial ethos of the 60's; yet their emphasis on the constant translation of ideas into other ideas, of forms into other forms treats collective creation more like a multi-dimensional evolutionary algorithm than a unitary

"being-together." SRS stages visions that seem to live in the high air of mountains, yet they also realize the dialectical depths of such strategies. Moreover, the Goats' and SRS's deep respect for form and structure, even to the hypermorphic excess of formlessness, also suggests changing historical attitudes in a different way. Their versions of collectivity are not based on a unitary subject that could clearly be emancipated; they are collectives who acknowledge multiple selves which may or may not be authentic ones; they are collectives who do not try to form collectivity around a single ideological project, around consensus, around unity. And while they realize the reciprocity of the teacher-student relationship, they *also* realize that asymmetry does not simply dissolve when a hierarchy is inverted. They are authoritative and ridiculous. They are categorical rhetoricians and rule-giving structure-makers, and yet they are not interested in legislating what people ought to do so much as providing a structure in which to do it. They want to free up energy, and yet they do so by creating disciplined, tensile structures which bounce back to people whatever energy they put into those structures.

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