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THEATRE AND RITUAL: GRISELDA GAMBARO'S *INFORMATION FOR FOREIGNERS*

Researching Griselda Gambaro's play *Information for Foreigners* proved to be an arduous task. As most of the literature available on the subject is in Spanish, researching it without the ability to understand the language is quite demanding. However, encountering difficulties along the way is a vital part of the research process; once I had made a firm decision that I was going to look at the ritual aspects of the play specifically, the need to research ritual in itself before linking it to *Information for Foreigners* became clear.

The available literature is varied. However, a great deal of it is devoted to the ritual in theatre or Gambaro's work but nothing on the ritual in Gambaro's work could be found; this immediately opened up a space to fill in the field. There are many pieces of literature available on Gambaro but as previously mentioned none that deal with the ritual in her theatre, therefore I concentrated on the following anthropologists and theatre theorists in order to give weight to my research: Victor Turner, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Richard Schechner and Diana Taylor among others.

For the purposes of this literature review I will be concentrating on Turner, Fischer-Lichte and Taylor (but it is important to mention the rest of the used literature, which will be done briefly throughout the review). Firstly, I find it imperative to give a brief overview of the play itself. According to Taylor, *Information for Foreigners* is "one of her [Gambaro's] most complex pieces, [it] is a chronicle in twenty scenes set in a house that presents various forms of violence – from theatrical representations [...] to

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scientific experiments carried out on human bodies; from scenes of torture and abductions to seemingly 'spontaneous' terrorist attacks." (Taylor, 1997: 126) The audience is led through the various rooms by a Guide and they are warned before they enter: "no one under eighteen will be admitted. Or under thirty-five or over thirty-six. Everyone else can attend with no problem [...] I ask that you stay together and remain silent. Careful on the stairs" (Gambaro, 1992: 71).

In order to put the term 'ritual' in context I researched Victor Turner who talks of 'liminality' and 'communitas', terms which explain the 'ritual' of performance. *Liminality* is a state in which we leave our current rank or status, the moment when we are about to become something else, changing our status in society, a moment in and out of time as he explains it. One could argue that only once we enter this state of 'liminality' are we able to experience 'communitas': a state where we are all brought together by our mutual feelings and surroundings.

Turner says that "in liminality, profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down" (Turner, 1982: 27). Perhaps this is why the audience is able to experience 'communitas' in *Information for Foreigners*, because Gambaro intentionally puts the audience into groups and puts them in a situation where they do not know what to expect, they are in a 'liminal' space where "no one is safe" (Taylor, 1990: 170) and where "this [...] is an unnatural universe; the lights go on and off throughout the play. Light becomes dark, the visible becomes invisible" (Taylor, 1990: 175); this is something which I hope to explore in my research.

Turner himself says that "Liminality may be the scene of disease, despair, death, suicide, the breakdown without compensatory replacement of normative, well-defined social ties and bonds" (Turner, 1982: 46). This idea that the space Gambaro creates is a liminal space in which anything is possible awakens one's interest to explore how she uses this space to create a sense of 'communitas' in the audience.

Turner's work is vastly interesting and it is the main body of work to which I will refer most of my hypotheses about Gambaro's work. I have also been looking at his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* in order to learn more about his theories on 'status reversal' in ritual. In order not to have a one-sided view it would be necessary to look at other anthropologists. It can be found that Turner is a very predominant figure in the field and his theories are highly regarded; therefore I rest my theories on his work.

In her article "Theatre and Terrorism: Griselda Gambaro's *Information for Foreigners*" Diana Taylor states that "theatre is an unstable vehicle for expression, as capable of obscuring problems as it is of clarifying them, as instrumental in mythifying

victimization as in working to end it” (Taylor, 1990: 168). She goes on to say that Gambaro plays with this idea and demonstrates how the theatre can be manipulated to “control not only *what* people see and *how* they see it, but how they can deny the reality of what they see and know to be true” (Taylor, 1990: 168).

Taylor talks about the theatre as a podium for control of an audience and discusses Gambaro’s play in detail, citing the violence in it as something worth looking into. In her opinion the question one should ask oneself is whether we, the audience, can “stop just watching and end it?” (Taylor, 1990: 182). The audience is involved in this play whether they like it or not, they have paid for their tickets and are in the middle of the violence and torture and I find the play begs the question that Taylor asks. Taylor writes that by “juxtaposing the catacombs with traditionally theatrical scenes, with torture [...] Gambaro forces us to relinquish our comforting assumptions about violence [...] and instead urges us to understand what prompts it and how we participate, either as voyeurs, as investors, as bystanders, or as victims” (Taylor, 1990: 181). Again, this is something that can interestingly correlate to Turner’s ideas about ‘communitas’ and the relationship between the two can be developed.

Taylor’s writings help us put Gambaro’s work in a wider context of Latin American women playwrights: in her article “Transculturating Transculturation” she writes that as early as Gambaro’s first play “it is clear she [Gambaro] sees art as inexorably linked to the criminalized society she lived in” (Taylor, 1991: 99). Putting Gambaro’s work in the social, political and cultural context she was writing in can be helpful in foregrounding this research. Another book that can contribute to becoming familiar with Gambaro’s background is Myriam Yvonne Jehenson’s *Latin-American Women Writers: Class, Race and Gender*, which I unfortunately have little space in which to elaborate on.

The acclaimed theatre historian Erika Fischer-Lichte explores theatre and ritual in her work. I agree with her statement that “the performance calls for a social community, since it is rooted in one and [...] since in its course it brings forth a social community that unites actors and spectators. Theatre, thus, appears to be an important community-building experience” (Fischer-Lichte, 2005: 23). Fischer-Lichte talks about the role of the actor and the spectator saying that when boundaries are moved in theatre the actors and spectators change their state of being: “this new state means living in-between different worlds – in a state of liminality [...] which allows for many other kinds of transgression and, accordingly, for new, sometimes shocking, confusing, horrible, in short, unbearable experiences” (Fischer-Lichte, 2005: 38). This idea of pushing boundaries is something I wish to explore in Gambaro’s play, focusing on how the changing of boundaries affects the ‘state’ of the spectators, as Fischer-Lichte discusses.

What I found promising about Fischer-Lichte's work is that she often gives varying ideas and possibilities from contrasting sources. However, the work also applies to my research in that it uses Turner as a main figure in explaining the ideas she is grappling with, which is something that could be interesting for further research; Turner's ideas have reached many a theorist and therefore deserve immense respect.

Fischer-Lichte says that "by transferring the spectator to an in-between situation, to a state of liminality, the performance destabilizes his perception of himself, the others and reality. In this sense, the crisis induced by the performance can be understood as a crisis of identity as it is experienced in rites of passage" (Fischer-Lichte, 2005: 219). I believe that this is precisely what Gambaro's play achieves and Fischer-Lichte's work can be used as a starting point for further studies.

My research so far has helped bring weighty evidence about ritual in theatre, some of the literature provides background about the playwright and the socio-political problems and regime under which she wrote the play. There is much literature available about ritual in theatre itself and I am hoping to use this to back up my own theories and ideas about ritual in Gambaro's play *Information for Foreigners*. As previously stated, I found that the only problem I faced was the lack of variety of material on Gambaro herself and the play in the English language; however, this is a problem that could easily be overcome with a Spanish speaking correspondent. In conclusion, the literature I have come into contact with is very promising for future research into the ritual of Gambaro's play.

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