

Fragile fictions: Shakespeare and Musset in concentrationary theatre

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Abstract: This article explores the use of the play-within-the-play device in two dramatic works belonging to the concentrationary theatre – Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo’s *Les Hommes* (1977) and Communist Gulag survivor András Visky’s *Juliet* (2002) – in denouncing trauma related to imprisonment in totalitarian political systems. It sets up to address the role of the play within in the fictive actresses’ endeavor to tell their stories, as well as the modalities in which they appropriate two classical texts (Alfred de Musset’s *Un Caprice* and respectively Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*) in order to voice their love and pain for their muted husbands, lovers or brothers.

Keywords: concentrationary theatre, play-within-the-play, trauma, memory, Delbo, Visky

Charlotte Delbo, *Les Hommes*¹: on stage, the actresses are performing an all-female cast of Alfred de Musset’s *Un Caprice* for their fellow inmates in the Romainville fortress, but none of them is uttering a single word: the on-stage spectators are too immersed into their own sorrows to be able to pay attention to the fictional events. For the off-stage audience, the muted performance is ghosted by Madeleine, Reine and Françoise, the inmate spectators who remember, in long and plaintive speeches, how they bid their last farewell to the men they love, and who were executed by the Nazi.

András Visky, *Juliet*²: confined in a mud hut in a concentrationary village in Southern Romania, Juliet has no stage partners with whom

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¹ The play, which remained unpublished until 2013, was first performed in November 2015, by the Théâtre de l’Épée de Bois, la Cartoucherie. The performance was directed by Jeanne Signé and Florence Cabaret.

² The play was first performed in 2002 at the Teatrul Thália, Budapesta și Teatrul Maghiar de Stat Cluj, New York, Washington D.C. (dir. Gábor Tompa). Further

she could perform Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and no on-stage audience she could address. She thus casts her ring fingers (on which she has placed her wedding ring as well as that of her husband) as Shakespeare's heroes and, as a master puppeteer, interprets the parts of both characters, in an effort to remember her husband, a Hungarian Protestant priest sentenced to 22 years of prison by the Communist authorities.

In both plays, the women use theatrical play as a means to distance themselves from the oppressive prison reality and at the same time to recall their absent husbands, lovers or brothers, and their theatre making takes the form of inset productions. I argue that in both *The Men* and *Juliet* the performance within is disrupted, fragilized and ghosted by the framing prison reality, and that the prisoners alter the fictional stories in order to make them convey their own stories of love and loss.

Delbo and Visky are survivors of the Nazi and respectively Communist concentration camps and they both root their plays into their personal stories of imprisonment, in order to question the ability of theatre to comfort prisoners and address key issues of the detention world. Charlotte Delbo, who worked as an assistant to director Louis Jouvet from 1937 to 1941, and became a member of the French Resistance, was imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Raisko and Ravensbrück (Trezise 2002, 857), where she either recited classical plays or staged them (often reconstructing the text from memory) with/for her comrades. References to theatre, both as dramatic literature and as playmaking, are recurrent in the testimonial fiction that she wrote after returning from the concentration camps.

In a long, unfinished letter to Jouvet, entitled *Spectres, mes compagnons* [*Phantoms, my Companions*], Delbo questions the place of theatre within the extermination camp: "The hell from which I returned was no place for dreaming. What connection could there be then with theatre? And yet." (Delbo 1971, 10). Theatre-making appears to the fictional persona of the author – Charlotte – as essentially the ability to create possible worlds ("recomposing a world of the imaginary"). For days and nights, Charlotte strives to recreate, to give shape to different fictional characters, shy phantoms that will finally inhabit her cell: the prisoner is in turn visited by Julien Sorel,

productions took place in 2007 at the Tamási Áron Theatre of Sf. Gheorghe (dir. László Bocsárdi) and 2010, at the Royal George Theatre (dir. Karin Conrood).

Alceste, Electra or Ondine, who bring her comfort and hope, although she is not able to recreate the story they come from. Encountering friendly theatrical ghosts is precisely what attempt the protagonists of *The Men*³ – French prisoners confined in the Romainville fortress – who set up a production of Musset’s *Un Caprice*, in an effort to step back from the carceral present: they know that their lovers, husbands and brothers, imprisoned in the same fortress, are about to be deported or executed. In this play, written in 1978, yet unpublished until 2013, Delbo dramatizes an episode of her own detention in Romainville, prior to being deported to Auschwitz.

Visky András, a Romanian playwright of Hungarian descent, was imposed a forced domicile in 1958, aged two, in a concentrationary village of the Romanian gulag, together with his mother and siblings (Visky in Komporalý 2017, 19). He is now dramaturg to the Hungarian theatre of Cluj and the author of several original plays, among which *Disciples* (2001) and *Juliet* (2002). His theatre, that he theorizes as “barrack dramaturgy”, is born from his early experience of imprisonment, and aims at questioning the capacity of “this heritage [prison experience] that weighs upon us all” to “return to theatre its prevailing desire to be a culture moulding agent” (Visky in Komporalý 2017, 20). Barrack dramaturgy sees theatre as a place of voluntary imprisonment for performers and spectators alike, where the theatrical event is created through the intimate proximity of all the participants.

The two authors, who base their dramatic works on their own experience of imprisonment, have in common the search for an aesthetic form able to convey trauma without being limited to a strictly testimonial, documentary quality. Delbo, who did not publish any of her works for two decades after having been liberated, claimed that she “wanted to reach a higher, more outdated information, [...] more durable, one that would make people feel the truth of the tragedy by restoring its emotion and horror” (Delbo qtd in Prévost 1965, 41). Visky, who started writing his plays at the turn of the millennium, has a more diffuse memory of his years of detention as a child and an

³ Charlotte Delbo wrote two plays about theatre-making in the camps, *Qui rapportera ces paroles?* [*Who Will Carry the Word?*] published in 1974, which shows no actual inset performance, but Françoise is shown reciting/telling plays to the others, and *Les Hommes*. A narrative version of this episode is to be found in an episode entitled “The Men” in the second volume, *Une connaissance inutile* [*Useless Knowledge*] of her *Auschwitz et après* [*Auschwitz and after*] trilogy.

indirect, bodily knowledge of his father's prison experience (Visky in Komporaly 2017, 25). His theatre aims at exploring the ways in which theatre can make us reflect on our common, if not directly experienced totalitarian heritage.

In both plays, the fictional performers opt for a classical text, a text they are familiar with from their pre-concentrationary life: Visky's Juliet recalls a school performance of Shakespeare's play, and it is this script that she seems to be recreating from memory, while Françoise, Delbo's protagonist, suggests to her comrades Musset's elegant comedy, because of its sharp contrast with the prisoners' situation. Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Caprice* are love stories, where the female protagonist is afraid that she might lose the man she loves, mirroring thus, in an ironic way, the prisoners' situation. The first aim of the framed productions seems to be taking a step back from the concentrationary world, escaping into the world of imagination, where the performers can dream about the absent men.

THE SILENCED FICTION

With Delbo, the framed production is prepared and expected by both on-stage performers and spectators throughout the framing play: until the very last scenes, the prisoners are seen choosing the text, casting, selecting and adapting props and costumes. The women's dialogues are extremely discontinuous, as the talks about the preparations keep triggering recollections of their life before imprisonment or hopes and worries about their fate and that of the men they love.

However, just as they will never get a grasp of the men who give the title of the play, the readers/off-stage audience will never actually get to watch Musset's comedy:

The actresses act without uttering a word. They mime *Caprice* without making a sound. No one is listening to them. They are all withdrawn into themselves. But there is applause when Gina and Yvonne enter, the only interruptions to the monologues. (Delbo qtd in Schumacher 1998, 222; modified translation)

The silenced voices of the actresses turn the production into a shadow of itself, making the off-stage spectator experience an uncanny, unsettling feeling, which confirms Delbo's claim of the impossibility of theatrical fiction within the death camps: "Where men die, he [the theatre character] does in turn, after fading away into an image growing still paler that vanishes like a reflection in the memory of the dying." (Delbo, *Spectres*, translation qtd. in Comfort 2019, 127).

Indeed, during the “performance”, the off-stage spectator will listen to three long soliloquies, three stories of love and absence, voiced by the fictional spectators: Madeleine remembers how she bid farewell to her little brother, and imagines herself encouraging her mother, as she receives the news of her son’s execution; Reine tells the audience her love story with Louis, her husband, whom she has just seen for the last time; Françoise, who has been a widow for a longer time than the others, is the last one to speak: she cries not only her husband’s death, but also the buried lives of the other women, the children they will never have, the memories they will have to live with, while she also remembers that she has promised to Paul that she will survive: “I will grow old alone” (Delbo 2013, 572).

Although each of the women speaks by herself, the lyrical quality of the speeches provides them with a choral dimension, turning this moment into a sort of music, into a collective funeral complaint for the men that will never be buried. The soliloquies, uttered by the on-stage spectators and addressed at the off-stage audience, voice, at the same time, the silent cries of the inmate actresses, whose husbands and brothers are carried away to be executed at the very moment they are performing Musset’s comedy, and whose stories will never be heard. According to Michael Rothberg, “Delbo’s multiperspectival, fragmented narratives provide a formal correlative to the unintegrated details that haunt her testimony” (Rothberg 2000, 144-5) signaling thus the impossibility of delivering “a seamless account of the events that made up the Nazi genocide”.

By superposing the on-stage spectators’ soliloquies on the silenced production, the playwright creates a hybrid fictional layer, a composite image, where the women’s voices merge as if to comment both the fiction and the concentrationary world. This troubled image confirms “the simultaneous merging of voices and loss of voice” (Davis 2018, 24), which characterizes, according to Colin Davis, the intimate texture of Charlotte Delbo’s writing, the need to speak and the impossibility to do so. Madeleine and Reine know (although they never say it) that the lovers of both Mounette and Reine (the actresses) are sentenced to death, and *Caprice* is mimed because this is how they perceive it. The real spectator sees through their eyes. The mimed production is thus both a reflection of the performers’ lost voices when learning the men’s death and an assertion of the need of social play.

Delbo’s spectators will never really watch *Caprice*, nor will they listen to the testimonies of the men, but the silent gestures of the

actresses performing for the men they love, which merge with the voices of the on-stage spectators, do speak, if in a very imperfect way, for those who cannot tell their own stories and voice their determination not to give up, to play their part until the end. With Charlotte Delbo, the spectator is placed in the position of a secondary witness, as the traumatic event is filtered through the strange visual and acoustic mediating device she imagines. The difficulty of telling these stories is conveyed through the spectators' experience of the "obstruction of gaze", which exposes the ethical barrier that the Holocaust creates between victims and spectators (Lucet 2012, 61).

TOY THEATRE

The dramatic character, contends Charlotte Delbo, is of a more "universal" nature than the novel one, as it is created through the common effort of playwright and practitioners. This explains its capacity to live beyond the fiction to which it belongs. If in *The Men* dramatic fiction was hardly able to console, to assist the mourners, in Visky's play the protagonist is visited by Shakespeare's eponymous character, as she attempts to unfold her story. "We cannot tell our own stories because we have no words, no language for it" (Visky in Komporaly 2017, 28), claims the author, and Juliet constantly seeks for help in Shakespeare's story. The play is constructed as a long soliloquy (in fact a dialogue with God and with Death) which joins together, in a broken manner, fragmentary recollections of different moments of Juliet's life before and during imprisonment; however, Shakespeare's dramatic situations seem to superscript the events in Juliet's life, as she repeatedly casts herself as Juliet and the others as Romeo or Nurse.

Visky's play starts with the protagonist reciting lines of both Romeo and Juliet in the 'balcony scene', as if attempting to recreate the Shakespearean moment. However, the 'borrowed' story also unfolds with difficulty, it is constantly interrupted, as the woman creates parallels between fictional elements and aspects of her life or transfers fictional elements into her own world: Shakespeare's lines "What man are you, that, thus bescreen's in night/So stumblest on my counsel?" (II. 1. 93-94), addressed by Juliet to Romeo, come to refer to the angel Visky's Juliet is talking to.

Later on, the woman provides an inset performance of the 'balcony scene', a miniature performance, as only some bits and pieces of the original script are preserved. It is as if a small, fragile, unsettling world took shape under the eyes of a little girl, who uses her ring fingers (on

which she has placed the wedding rings⁴) in order to represent Shakespeare's protagonists "as if performing puppet theatre" (Visky 2017, 89). The gesture is touchingly tragic in its very playfulness, as in the camp context the wedding rings can be seen as traces of the lovers. Juliet's puppet performance casts a new light on Shakespeare's famous scene, as it places the story of the "star-crossed lovers" in the perspective of mature, accomplished, responsible love, even if just as exposed to the dangers of the outside world as that of Shakespeare's young heroes.

The protagonist, who plays both Romeo and Juliet, slips from one character to the other, avoids identification, assuming an overinformed position – as a master puppeteer, she contemplates the production from above, and takes pleasure in endorsing fictional roles, only to discard them afterwards. The way in which she plays with the original script mirrors the ways she plays with her own hopes and fears, in an attempt to put off reality through theatrical fiction. The prisoner does not hesitate to operate small amendments in Shakespeare's script, instilling her own thoughts into the lines she remembers only imperfectly: for instance, "I take thee at thy word", uttered by Romeo to Juliet, becomes "keep thy word" (at least in the Romanian translation of the play) suggesting the idea of responsibility.

Visky's protagonist also assumes the part of a (moody) director and critic, as she interrupts the performance in order to decide which lines should be left out or introduced into the playtext. Thus, Juliet's warning to Romeo as to the unsafety of the orchard ("and the place death, considering who thou art..." II. 1. 105) sounds frightening in the context of the detention camp, so she decides that the "place death" line should be cut out. Little by little, she sets free from Shakespeare's script, as additions unrelated to what has been said before impose themselves to her moody memory.

Ironically enough, the first moment when the protagonist seems to identify with the fictional, Shakespearean role, or at least when she explicitly claims it, is the one when she slips out of it: "your turn now Juliet/it's Juliet's monologue/My turn"(Visky, 2017: 89) she explains, but goes on to deliver some lines of the Song of Solomon: "A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my

⁴ Juliet's husband left her his wedding ring at the trial, when he was sentenced to prison.

breasts/ My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-gedi/ Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes. As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. [He brought me to the banqueting house, and] His banner over me was love.” (Visky 2017, 89-90). Here again, the image of the roe “showing himself through the lattice” is ambivalent, as it refers both to the lover looking for his beloved one and to the political prisoner: “My beloved is like a roe or a young hart [behold, he standeth behind our wall] He looketh forth at the windows, showing himself through the lattice. He looketh forth at the windows, showing himself through the lattice” (Visky 2017, 90).

Juliet consciously substitutes the Biblical intertext to the Shakespearean one, finding the former more appropriate to express her feelings, and slowly turns the declaration of love into a prayer, as her hands come closer, “then clasp each other as if in a prayer”. Once again, she steps out of fiction, to comment upon her “performance”: “I cheated/I didn't cheat” she hesitates, as if playful alteration of the script could have any real-life effects. From now on, she will no longer perform the characters, but assume the position of a third-person narrator, telling the audience this strange story of a Romeo and Juliet visiting the biblical scenario: “Romeo and Juliet spot the burning bush/Juliet on one side of the bush/Romeo on the other/standing opposite one another” (Visky 2017, 90).

According to Cary Mazer, in framed plays or productions “the actor-characters of the play without use the act of playing the characters of the play within as the vehicles of their own journeys” (Mazer 2015, 143) and the acting experience enables them to learn something about themselves. In both *The Men* and *Juliet*, the inmate actresses use theatre making as a means of coping with and transgressing prison reality. Theatrical illusion enables them to partially transpose themselves into idealized versions of the framed plays: an elegant, feminine world, where Mathilde's sorrows appear as futile and respectively a never-ending ‘balcony scene’.

However, endorsing one's fictional role and creating theatrical illusion seems to be problematic: theatre in the camp is extremely fragile, always on the verge of falling into pieces; it is a card castle, as proven by Juliet's toy theatre, built with the simplest theatrical means, or by the hushed, palimpsestuous performance in *The Men*. The actresses and the on-stage spectators constantly break frame, further estranging the fiction, and directly address the off-stage spectators,

thus placed into the role of witnesses. These blurred, frustrated fictions become the site where fictional performers/spectators can inscribe their worries and pain, just as their love for the absent men, the medium through which their feelings can be conveyed.

With both András Visky and Charlotte Delbo theatre does not provide an escape from the real, or it does so in an imperfect way; instead, it empowers the performers to filter their concentrationary experience and thus be able to cope with it.

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