



DESERT ROSE

TO-EN's performances resemble uneasy dreams. I have an impression, that I can understand and feel more participating in them, than I am able to describe it afterwards, even just to myself. The same happened during the recent premiere of TO-EN Butoh Company at the Malarnia Stage of the Wybrzeże Theatre on December 2, 2014. *Desert Rose* – apart from recalling a certain species of a plant, the English title is meant to be associated with dessert and glamour. The spectators were gifted with a pink candy rose, wrapped in a cellophane and with a tag full of seductive promises: “the colour is intensely saturated, the gloss highlighted. It smoothly melts into your mouth. It embodies everything you desire...”. I may give it a try one day. I can do it until November 4, when it expires. However, when I crumple the cellophane it brings back the memories of the performance. A pink rectangle of light and a poisonous mouth. How do I know they are poisonous? Because the wetted lips are covered with dark spots, just like on the leaflets. Golden nectar overflowing the mouth resembles a stem of a flower: seductive and saturated with sweetness. It is still a prologue, a stage design. Slowly, I am approaching something intangible and therefore I am not going to depict the dancer using words, but rather images, which I experienced.

Image 1: A wondering bush. It comes from nowhere and aims nowhere. It dwells in a different time flow. It hardly tells “after” from “before”. It knows nothing of birth and death. It glides across the scorched land. It searches for water. Neither patiently, nor persistently – the search is unstoppable. because such is its nature. And having found it, it will pursue the search. On stage, water is represented by light. For a moment it satiates, lives on and fills up with it. And later it tenderly returns to researching the sand.

This trail, from one prompt side to the other could be a journey in time. I am not sure if the first association should be a bush – a hieratic figure in black with a crown on her head, looks, in fact, like a queen of flowers. The crown (resembling horns) has a subtle structure of gorgonian corals. What is crucial, is

that for a moment I was able to live another life, non-human but truthful like a myth. Somewhere deep.

Recently, I returned to the previously asked question: what had a student of Scandinavian Philology found so fascinating in *butoh*, a long time ago. She recalled then Bałtycki Uniwersytet Tańca / The Baltic University of Dance and Imre Thormann who had appeared there. It was the first amazement that leaves you with your mouth wide open. Then she started wandering from one teacher to another trying to solve what makes it.. well. In his brief film uploaded on the web Imre Thormann recalls the image of a dream. Sometimes you wake up in the morning and you realize that your dream was a message of some kind, a piece of information, which you fail to take advantage of just like you are unable to catch sunlight with your hands. But *butoh* provides the right conditions to receive the message and even work with it. (You Tube: Imre Thormann – *Il sogno del Butoh*). It is just one of the possible fragmentary answers, or rather metaphors, because the very answer rests in practice. This was TO-EN's experience, who was lucky enough to receive a scholarship in Sweden and there, during a week-long workshop in Haparanda, she met her future master SU-EN. "From the very first workshop – TO-EN recalls – my whole attitude to dance and life has changed. I knew I had to implement it into my every-day reality. After my graduation the question: "what next?" appeared. I left for Sweden in search for work but I also knew that SU-EN was going to run another workshop. So I thought: "OK, I will ponder a bit, look for work but finally try attend the workshop. And I was so good in pondering, that I managed to stay there for another 6 years" – she laughs and I recall our first meeting after her comeback. I was listening with admiration how she had to erase everything she had learned before, re-construct ("dismantle and reassemble again") her body and finally, the crucial moment when she was given her own name - including an element of her teacher's name - by her master (it took place after her solo performance *WHITE – biały* in 2009) and anointing for her own artistic way. "We learn from one body onto another" –TO-EN explains – "by looking at a teacher and numerous exercises. The latter are accompanied by certain words describing matter: the way things change, grow and germinate, such things like wind, a tree, paper ball. Words are live images. In my work I am always directed by a certain image. In *butoh* there are no steps, but "matters", instead. A certain story is being created and it conveys what happens inside and outside of a body. Let's take a tree for example: with its

“matter” we enter a level of tree’s comprehension, providing it is possible, of course. Then we have onomatopoeias, which prompt the movement and a mental image. They precisely represent the texture, quality and the speed of the movement. It is enough to hear: *bari, bari, bari...* or *siu, siu, siu*. Finally, what stays in the head after the diligent dismantling of everything are these onomatopoeias. And the sound. And finally you reach the moment when within the body and outside of it, the only essence is matter and the process of being transformed into it. The body and the surrounding air is changing. There is a tree, it keeps growing whipped by the wind...”

Image 2: Diva. A woman posed like a model or a celebrity. She is approaching - conquering and threatening. Suddenly, she starts dancing in the streams of light, as if the light and the dancer were nourishing each other. She is shooting thunders. She is shooting at me. I am swinging within her dance, silver swords are cutting the air. Irresistible, cold madness. It culminates with a crisis. Empty, after the shooting, burnt like a glow lamp it dissolves in front of the watching audience. Her open mouth reveal abyss. If you looked deep enough, you would notice abandoned cemeteries. Abyss of death. Nothing else could be so black. But this death is not good. It is ultimate. Abyss of damnation. Absolute void.

The scene does not finish yet, but for me this is the climax. Hardly ever am I so scared. The reaction of the body (my own body!), which followed yielded to the inner frolic and the shooting. I have read about the neurons but this was more than that. TO-EN’s words might do for a consolation: “It is extremely difficult to watch a butoh performance because it is very demanding. Via my body the audience is supposed to see something, that will return to them as reversing energy”. She describes the figure of the scene as a feminine body performing snake-like movements: “butoh dancers observe precisely the matter surrounding them (like a snake, for example) and the rules by which it exists. All this “is trying to happen” inside my body. I assume, that an outside viewer associates it with something alluring because such lines, according to our culture codes, are perceived as sensual. But why, after this dramatic (her own description) decomposition and decay of the body, she approaches the audience so near, almost walks into the first rows? “The abyss is inside – says TO-EN – but I need to come so close to let them feel this breath and how close this all is.”

Image 3,4 and 5 – Glamour. The dance of lights. They glimmer like sequins at the concert. Suddenly, a deer appears. An ungulate anyway; pink and with antlers so probably a deer. Such probability is enhanced by the fact that the whole piece focuses on kitsch. The animal is gentle and natural, maybe a bit too pretty for a deer; it shakes its head and wiggles its hindquarters, sometimes lies down as if sitting for the picture (having read this passage TO EN explained to me that it was in fact another animal – of similar dignity and crowned but I am free to stay with my association). Then the big lips reappear on the screen. Initially seductive like those of Merlin Monroe’s, with glamorous lipstick on, slightly open. Flirtatiously chewed and trembling they start filling up with sticky nectar, which soon overflows from blackened, rotten mouth. The trickle of venomous sweetness glisters with gold. Glut, glut and glut again. But still appealing.

It has taken two years for the performance to take its final shape – from the first images, notes, inspirations and the birth of that urge to “do something including glamour and kitsch at the same time” – to quote the artist. One of the strong incentives was the exhibition by David LaChapelle *Burning Beauty* showcased in Stockholm: “I was impressed by all that gloss. Religious motifs, celebrities, a huge hamburger smashing a model like a bolt from the blue in the street” – TO-EN looks back. So she started her flirt with the all that seduces us, with the repletion of the visual. There is a trace of fascination on the one hand, and objection, on the other. She says: “The images that surround me, the whole spectrum of media, advertising and diverse products – it seizes us. I cannot avoid the impression of being permanently raped by images proliferating in the city. I am aware of the oversimplification but it overlaps with the gloss I have mentioned, LaChapelle’s thought, the ideal of beauty and everything that is experienced by our eyes. To enter this flirt meant a vast training field for me. I could not anticipate the final result at all. In butoh dance you can never be certain, but, like a soldier, you need to strive to rebuild everything and reach the goal”.

Image 6 – Rose. Since my childhood I keep in my mind an image of TV pictures (probably created in the time-lapse technique) of roses blooming. In contemporary computer animation everything is smooth and harmonious, so the plants do not really move. The petals of the withering flower shiver, blossom and shrink in their own pace. I can feel their lines, vibrations and gentle helplessness. The red tongue of the pistil seems to be collecting pollen tenderly.

At this point I do not realize yet, that soon it will be the only thing to remain. Vertically erected, striving upwards, it invalidates the rest of the body, suddenly white in the spotlight and ovoid like a stone. Like a sacred obelisk. The peak of the cosmic mountain. The world's navel. Omphalos.

The light explodes and dazzles. "It is supposed to dazzle"- says TO-EN. It is there like concert lights, to introduce pop ambience. And the music must be really loud, deafening. So it dazzles and deafens but it is incomparable with the impression left by the TO-EN's dance. I remember her saying once during a radio interview: "... butoh dance is a state, not a form". A permanent state – we should add. It is not stored in a wardrobe to be clad onstage. It means the life choice. "All I do – says the artist – is ruled by the same principles. The line of gravity, the way I move in space, my co-existence with the surroundings, the relationship between the body and the world, the way I go past people in the street, my attitude to the political ideas – these are inseparable values creating the whole. All this is obvious in the cultures of Asia, at least in their traditional approach to a body. I mean a certain economy of energy and how I am able to influence another, neighboring body. It is us, who shape the environs. Why are we witnessing such omnipresent disintegration? People have had themselves in focus and thus, the omnipresent ego has overflowed. We have missed to keep to some minimum restraint. And the performance itself? "It is never an illusion for me. Of course it is a kind of an imaginary picture, but the process that my body and the space are undergoing onstage during the display is real and true. A moment of the dancer's bowing also denies illusion. During the bow we maintain in matter, which replenishes a body, or, in other words, in an "erased body" or "empty body" – a transparent one. It emphasizes the relationship between me and the audience and the surrounding world. It is not about me, but about the fact that it flows somewhere and is real. If I have interrupted this momentum and related to the audience in a usual way, that would be the biggest illusion and the uttermost fraud.

Iwona Borawska

Desert Rose, TO-EN Butoh Company, December 2-3, 2014. Malarnia Stage of the Wybrzeże Theatre; concept, choreography and dance: TO-EN; light design: Przemysław Kalemba; costume: Ella studio and Maciej Głowacki; video: Agencja Wizualna, sound: Krzysztof Pajka, Taavi Tulev (Estonia) and Timo Viialainen (Finland).