

# Body Sketches for a Universal Stage

TEXT / JENNIFER TEETS

## I. VIRTUAL SPIRALS

Imagine being on a topsy-turvy stage, the warpings of which require a certain amount of time and attention to get accustomed to. This time and attention leads to nothing, and, while you tiptoe around, the body of the stage becomes twisted, its composition transfigured, creating an otherworldly exterior. As you reach out to grasp the stage's wing, its insides burst into imaginary fragments, and soon enough you're falling. As this moment of instability sheds light upon what theatricalities come to life, how can we predict what will happen?

The stage's soft precariousness does not blind you to the fact that it could be artificial, yet behind the simple realization that "I am on this stage," is there not yet another stage? The nuance of exchange between the inside and outside of the stage suggests that ordinary intuition of any simple object is extremely imperfect. Our intellectual feat is bound to the obscure stimuli that we perceive and weave into reality. While modern views suggest that the world of sentience is closed, whereas the physical world is ample and large and of ever-to-be-discovered complexity, could this "other stage" be associated with an increasingly present virtual spiral?

A plummeting stage, an architectural shell, but also a bed of meaning where it is possible to "fall off" and "climb onto" many stages—impromptu stand-up comedy skits gone wrong, unusual forms of ad-libbing, absurdist repetitions of cliché and routine. Frighteningly sophisticated and invasive breeds of bodies surface when running a computer-based search of "virtual stages." Subterranean cells and renders depict whirling holographic tapestries and groups of human replicas in a synchronized dance. Colossal Oscar statuettes align along crystal hallways while 3-D giantesses navigate alien corpses, from inner ear to toe crevice. On the Slip 'n Slide of Internet voyeurism, prerigged and precalibrated, novel beings, full of the unique world in which they live, reveal the secret folly hidden in us all.

## II. USEFUL FAKING

Mental stages, other performances, other exhibitions, defiant objects and bodies—a nest of folds conferring and collapsing onto one another. What force allows a character to change roles? How does one revel in futile masquerade on this morphing stage? Artist Ieva Misevičiūtė described these single idiosyncrasies as "the culmination of movement." It is as if you could "die perfectly. It's kind of like a dance. It is a movement that keeps on changing its intention in order to avoid clear identification. It is a space between what you do and what you think you are doing. The narrowing of this space creates useful faking." Ieva tells me this almost lapsing into one of her characters, the tongue-chewing Slow



INSIDE FRONT COVER: **Bouchra Ouizguen**, *Hal*, 2013, Centre Pompidou, Paris [courtesy of company O] / RIGHT: **Ieva Misevičiūtė**, performance stills from *I Will Rip Your Arms Off*, 2013 [courtesy of the artist and Western Front, Vancouver]



Loris, from her work *I Will Rip Your Arms Off*, a handful of episodes and stage images presented at Western Front in Vancouver in early 2013. The intention: the artist uses intersecting narrative lines, the formal demand of a punch line, and a little stage time as a constraint for making a series of short, self-contained acts. Part parodied contemporary dance, part jarring bodily interactions with sculpturally modified objects and readymades, talk that begins to dance, dancing talk, talking slow-drained gibberish, like phonemes in reverse:

SLOW LORIS: You see beginnings are usually scary, while endings are usually sad, but it's the middle that counts. You have to remember this next time you are at the beginning. But what has happened to you? Where is your middle?

### III. "MY GOD, IT'S A HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS LATER!"

Recently I had the pleasure to revisit Samuel Beckett's television play *Quad* (1981). This mysterious square dance lacks beginnings, middles, and ends, instead reveling in its own idiosyncratic branding of abstraction through repetition. *Quad* is based on geometrical figures and permutations of regular movements. First one, then two, then three, then four figures—dancers or mime artistes cloaked in colored *djellabas* (white, yellow, blue, and red)—appear one after another to scurry along the sides and across the diagonals of a square, shuffling in strict rhythm to a rapid percussion beat. Each figure then departs in the order in which he appeared, leaving another to reintroduce the sequence. The four series of 6 stages each produce a total of 24 stages, suggesting the measurement of time—another stage.

A geometrical, frantic mime begins and ends with the void, an empty quad, where travelers deflect their steps away from time's inner core—Beckett's "O." The achievement of an entirely new means of expression is made possible through the elimination of language. Metaphors of coincidence, or meeting in time and space, perpetuate separations and reunions, like stepping-stones to best approach or avoid the other. When Beckett saw the color production of *Quad* rebroadcast in black and white, he exclaimed, "My God, it's a hundred thousand years later!" and subsequently made an additional act for the play, namely *Quad II*. Time, that vanishing dimension, was suddenly characterized as a "slow dim shuffle," on the heels of "unknowingness, of being merely amidst the process of going on, that cannot finally retard or accelerate."<sup>1</sup>

### IV. METAFICTIONAL CONCEIT

To break up the fourth wall of the stage, characters address the audience, the audience the choreographer; the choreographer in turn choreographs his or her own stage. The performance then hijacks the performer, and the choreographer reveals himself or herself as the creator of that novelty. Darius Mikšys' *La Copia* (*The Copy*) came to mind recently when I thought about metafictional conceit in the context of performance. Demonstrating a sort of pedigreed intelligence of the quirkiest kind, for his participation in Manifesta 8 in 2010 Mikšys purposely set out to pirate Moroccan choreographer Bouchra Ouizguen's esteemed live installation *Madame Plaza*, which, curiously, was screened in the same exhibition hall.

In Ouizguen's original, three *Aïta* cabaret songstresses begin their act gapping at the audience, easing into a delicate contemplative orchestration of the body. The setting seems to refer to a female harem, and these women represent some kind of paradoxical twist on spiritual induction and release. Their

meditative dance draws them to the floor, where they roll and entangle themselves, releasing screeching throaty cries, bordering on fury and elation.

Copies never reproduce exactly; rather, they reveal their uniqueness under duplication. The same goes for this self-sustained, scriptless conceptual structure, like a theater composed by the depths of Mikšys' mind after watching Ouizguen's performance over DVD video. In the work, the cast, including Gintaras Makarevičius, Darius Mikšys, Rytis Saladžius, and Benas Šarka, frames a temporary, improvised, and free-floating communication structure that evolves over the period of 38 minutes without an audience; the act was intended to be seen as Mikšys originally viewed Ouizguen's, on a screen. Each character's acts of provocation lead to the next character's reaction and so on, and clearly the predominant stage eccentric is Benas Šarka, coercing the other actors into a ritualistic entanglement with a tubular hose and a chunk of compressed Styrofoam. Having not shown the original video footage to the actors nor coached the actors in any kind of gestural training that would mimic the original, Mikšys appears to intend to shed light upon the way in which constituent parts are interrelated in a kind of conceptual swap.

#### V. HEAD-BODY-BANGING

Ever experienced an obsession lurking within you in the dark? Inspired by the quatrains of Sufi mystic Rumi, Ouizguen's latest creation, *Ha!* (2013), tackles the subject of spiritual and philosophical frenzy through living ritual. With a tension between formal writing and an unavoidable loss of control, far removed from any kind of exoticism or folklore, Ouizguen and her collaborators drive themselves towards a state of physically induced delirium.

There I am sitting near the front row at the Pompidou Theater, squinting in the darkness. Like phosphenes, fuzzy patches of light take shape before my eyes, growing larger and larger to reveal the plump, corpulent bodies of four female figures visible in the gloom. Somewhat similar to *Madame Plaza*, *Ha!* commences in a painfully visible head trance, where each performer's voice thickens in disarray, and becomes a protagonist in a fit of bodily emancipation and struggle. Ouizguen's performers become a kind of shell for emotional rigor and the burlesque where characters exit the stage of the mind to exit into the real—heighting their levels of consciousness, that immaterial soul that interacts with the body to reveal the other, where imagination and performance prevail. "For if the brain is theater, consciousness is the play"<sup>2</sup>—one of the rarest grades, egressing the terrain of words, to reveal much more abstract expressions of existence beyond analysis and politics, shuffling between the enacted and the perceived.

Jennifer Teets is a curator and writer whose work takes the form of scripted scenarios in which information, technique, theory, and aesthetics transpire in sites of historical and spatial divergence. Her writing explores speculative science, philosophy, ecology, and ficto-criticism, and she contributes regularly to numerous arts publications. She lives and works in Paris.

#### NOTES

1. Steven Connor, "Slow Going." First presented at the Critical Beckett conference organized by the School of French Studies of the University of Birmingham, September 26, 1998.
2. Jay Ingram, *Theatre of the Mind* (New York: Harper, 2010).

