Theatre of Exile

Horacio Czertok

ROUTLEDGE

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What is the connection between theatre-making and political action? And how can theatre-makers reignite a vision of a theatre of and for ordinary people? Since his political exile from Argentina in 1977, theatre director and producer Horacio Czertok has devoted his life to reimagining the art of the theatre, taking it out of its comfort zone into places of social conflict such as deprived suburban areas, prisons and mental hospitals, as well as open, public spaces. His company engages directly with audiences in a spirit of abiding, carnivalesque and deeply political theatrical experimentation. Adapting a rigorous Stanislavskian theatrical training to raw, immediate encounters with audiences in marginal and open spaces, Czertok's theatre-making is unique, allowing actors to develop particular skills, and bringing the question of political efficacy to the heart of making theatre.

Providing Czertok's own, highly personal account of his trajectory in the global scene of theatre-making over the past half-century, this is a book about the theatre of exile – a theatre of streets, prisons, hospitals, open to direct and unexpected encounters with audiences and their life-experiences.

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To my parents Alba and Gad.
To my children Natasha and Maximiliano.
To my wife Augusta.
To my granddaughter Sofia.

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The photographs in this book are all by Luca Gavagna, who has been with us since the theatre group was first formed in Ferrara at the end of the 1970s – a frequent travelling companion on Teatro Nucleo's theatrical expeditions and a dear friend. These photographs, of an exuberant foray into theatreless lands of Spain towards the end of the 1980s, both echo and recount what our theatre of open spaces is all about. Most were taken during performances of *Luci*, which is referred to often in the first part of the book. They have been chosen to emphasise the relationship between actors and audience, often with the audience given pride of place, as in the book itself.

Foreword

Czertok's life–art alignments

How might the organic link between theatre-making and political action, faded in the midst of the unremitting rise of managerial culture in the arts, be revitalised? And how might the vivacity of a spontaneous vision of a theatre of and for ordinary people be reignited? Since his political exile from Argentina in 1977, theatre director and producer Horacio Czertok has devoted his life to reimagining the art of the theatre, taking it out of its comfort zone into places of social conflict such as deprived suburban areas, prisons and mental hospitals, as well as open, public spaces, engaging directly with audiences in a spirit of abiding, carnivalesque and deeply political theatrical experimentation. Adapting a rigorous Stanislavskian theatrical training to the exigencies of raw, immediate encounters with audiences in marginal and open spaces, Czertok's theatre-making is unique, not only in the kinds of capacities and skills it allows actors to develop, but also in the way it renders the question of political efficacy immanent to the very process of making theatre.

Theatre of Exile presents Czertok's unique theatrical methodology, developed by the author and his collaborators in their theatrical research with Teatro Nucleo, the notorious group he has led with Cora Herrendorf in Ferrara, Italy, since their arrival there in 1978. As Czertok shows, the ways of theatre-making that he describes are born of the politics of exile as he has experienced them in his creative trajectory from Latin America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then in different parts of Europe in the decades since 1980, including the development of Teatro Nucleo in Italy. Channelling into his theatrical methodology the creative stimuli of the author's closest creative collaborations – including formative encounters with Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, Jorge Luis Borges, Vaclav Havel, Julian Beck and others – the book demonstrates in its very narrative the irreducibly political character of theatrical practice: its capacity not only to reflect upon the world, but fully to partake of it, and, open to it in direct encounters with audiences on the street, to transform it.

In the rest of this Foreword we elaborate briefly on the manner in which theatre, politics and personal biography are imbricated in Czertok's theatrical approach.[1] In particular, we want to suggest that Czertok's signature concern with revitalising theatrical creativity – a concern that for him is as much

political as it is artistic – lies in the particular manner in which his theatrical modus operandi align the relationship between theatre-making and life at large. Central to this abiding concern with art–life alignment, let's call it, is the notion of *exile*, understood as a centrifugal flight that of necessity shifts the coordinates of inside and outside, centre and periphery, comfort and discomfort, art and life, creation and politics. So we present three senses in which the idea of exile operates in Czertok's trajectory of work.

(1) Theatre of exile

'Did we choose to do street theatre?' Czertok asks. 'No. We were emigrants, political exiles deprived of the possibility of living and doing theatre peacefully in our own country by the threat of death at the hands of a military dictatorship. We accepted the invitation to come to Ferrara, where we were able to reinvent our theatre and bring up our children' (see p.43).

In Italy, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was quite easy to be exotic. People in the streets were warm and welcoming, always on the lookout for something new and different. It was a time when street musicians, jugglers and acrobats could make a living by going from town to town performing before large, spontaneously formed, enthusiastic audiences. Czertok and his actor comrades first practised their craft as street performers in that period, when they arrived in Italy as political exiles. They too were welcomed as exotic. Yet, as Czertok points out,

'As soon as we made it known that we had decided to stay and not go back to Argentina, we became – although we didn't actually realise it until many years later – no longer exotic but rivals' (see p.43).

And this is more or less how the story begins of a group of people who were determined to carry on what they were doing in Argentina before they were forced to leave: exploring the full potential of theatre as an experimental art form, as a unique means of communication and as a political and cultural tool in the fight for the things they believed in. They were seen as rivals in Italy because they needed a space to do this in, and nobody in the 'establishment' theatre was prepared to give them one, which was why they turned to the streets, out of necessity.

Their story takes all sorts of unexpected twists and turns. It becomes not just the story of Teatro Nucleo and the way it steered its Stanislavskian, Method-based approach into the previously uncharted waters of streets, prisons and mental hospitals, but a way of looking through theatrical eyes at how Italy, Europe and the world have changed over the last thirty years. Italy is almost unrecognisable now from what it was in the late 1970s. Democrazia Cristiana was still in power and had been ever since the war, the country had the biggest communist party in Western Europe, there was no *mani pulite* corruption scandal, no globalisation, no immigration, no Lega Nord and no *bunga bunga*. In Europe there was still the Iron Curtain and in the world there was no War on Terror, no Internet and no mobile phones. Czertok's account casts a new, streetwise but

theoretically coherent light on this period of drastic change, showing us how theatre, in certain forms, has survived it and how it is likely to keep on doing so.

So this vital, organic relationship between Czertok's theatre-making and the historic conditions of which it was born, and in which it participates, is owed in the first instance to Czertok's own condition of exile. The theatrical paths that are staked out in the pages that follow have not been, at their base, a matter of artistic choice for Czertok and his collaborators in Teatro Nucleo. Theirs is a form of theatre born of the political contingencies to which they had to respond. A form of art dictated by the necessities of life – political exile, struggling to find one's place in a new society, a new political reality and, as Czertok reminds us in the passage cited above, the need to 'reinvent our theatre and bring up our children'. A theatre born of exile.

(2) Theatre in exile

Czertok writes: 'Anybody wanting to take theatre to where it really is needed, to places where it can rediscover its original function and find new lifeblood, has to battle not only with the difficulties inherent in the task itself, but also with the obstinacy and attacks of a theatre system that strenuously defends the so-called market-related reasons and habits of "going to the theatre" in comfortable, reassuring buildings' (see p.24).

So, if Czertok's theatre-making is the result of necessity, then its substance consists largely of an attempt to make a virtue of this. A theatre born of exile gives rise to what is essentially a theatre *in* exile – a constitutively anti-bourgeois way of making theatre, out in the open, in village and town squares, on the streets, inside psychiatric wards and prisons. In fact, one might say that what is most original about Czertok's account in the pages that follow is the manner in which he brings together his concerns with the rigours of the formation of actors with the demands produced by a direct encounter between the actors and their audience – an encounter in exile from the formal structures of 'the theatre', which cannot be taken for granted and therefore has to be produced. Thus the Stanislavskian question of how to nurture actors who can respond truthfully to each other and to a play on the stage spills over into a question Czertok sees in essentially military terms, namely how to take this battle for theatrical truth to publics who have not already come to the theatre asking (and paying) for it. With the help of classic works in military theory by Carl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu and others, Czertok offers an account of theatre-making that must operate as a war machine of sorts, blending the exigencies of theatrical spectacle, creativity and truth with a much rawer set of concerns, couched in the vocabulary of ambush, attack and captivity. If this is a method for streetwise theatre in exile, it also has to use the tools of the streetfighter.

Working within, and innovating upon, the Grotowskian tradition of theatrical research, then, Czertok seeks to align theatrical creativity with what people may ask of it. In doing so he makes the question of how to elicit responses from

people (villagers, passers-by, prisoners, patients) part of the question of how to make theatre, and why. This, however, is not so much an attempt to transpose theatrical techniques for the use – therapeutic, political or other – of the wider public (think of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* for example). Rather it is an attempt to enlist the raw and immediate encounter with the audience in the service of theatrical vitality, to make maximum virtue of a theatre in exile from 'the theatre' by rendering it a sort of conduit for the wild environs in which it is (or has to be) made.

And once again, this kind of realignment of art with life is embedded – and this is of course the point – in the particular exigencies of making theatre in Italy over the past decades. As we find out from Czertok's account, the aforementioned capacity for people in the streets to be warm, welcoming and open has hardly vanished over the last thirty years, though it has changed. Global poverty and migration seem to have replaced the yearning for the exotic with a Fortress Europe mentality; smartphones and the Internet seem to have made people more insular and harder to surprise. And yet, when Czertok describes how *Fahrenheit* – an elaborate theatrical sci-fi hoax involving a whole town – can still captivate and embroil large numbers of onlookers almost twenty-five years after it was first staged, one realises that theatre can be a survivor of all this. And this, as Czertok argues eloquently throughout the book, is because it has the unique quality of being not just about the 'spectacle' but also about relationships, about 'a concrete and living relationship between character and character and characters and audience'. And this, as Czertok sees it, is why it maintains the capacity to adapt to changes and tap into new potential sources of spontaneity.

(3) Theatre as exile

'The Utopias are a reflection of the attention that our theatre, ever since it was formed, has dedicated to a humanity that suffers and is marginalised but is still capable of dreaming, and struggles to organise its life in a way that relates to its greatest aspirations', writes Czertok (see p.37).

This concern with dreams and utopias, or at least with aspirations and how people organise their lives in relation to them, brings us to the final sense in which Czertok's theatre-making turns on the idea of exile. This has to do with Czertok's own attempt to draw out the political consequences of exile as a theatrical condition. His theatre, he says, attends to how people align their lives with their dreams. But as we have suggested, this theatrical attention to what people do with and want from their lives is itself an example of the very process it attends to: Czertok's theatrical signature is a theatre of and in exile that draws its strength, precisely, from the way in which it relates to life beyond itself, through the vital encounter with audiences on their own home ground. The alignment between life, in the form of audiences who are initially outwith (and in that sense marginal to) the theatrical process, and, if not exactly dreams or utopias, at least the ideational or otherwise virtual realm of experience that

the theatre conjures forth, is exactly what is at stake for Czertok's theatre. One might say that the virtue Czertok makes of having to do theatre of and in exile consists in reinventing the process of theatre-making as itself a form of exile. Theatre *as* exile, then, in the sense that this is a form of theatre that consists exactly in its departure from the comfort of the theatre and happens, rather, in the encounter with audiences that lie beyond itself. Theatre as encounter with what lies beyond.

The great opera director Peter Sellars tells the story of how in the wake of the French Revolution, and in response to heated discussions in their respective masonic lodges on what democracy might look like, Haydn and Mozart got busy developing the string quartet as a musical form: four people acting in concert, saying different things but listening to each other, calibrating their actions in relation to those of others, with no maestro calling the shots. Sellars presents this as an example of how art can be political, not just in promoting or commenting on particular political perspectives or ideals, but rather in enacting them in its own modus operandi – a version of what political activists today call the politics of 'figuration'. Czertok's exile theatre, which shifts the coordinates of what lies within the space of the theatre and what lies beyond it, could be seen also as a form of political figuration. If the encounter with other people – simply, how to be with others – is itself a basic political problem, then Czertok's mode of theatre-making consists in the effort to explore solutions to it through their enactment with audiences. Navigating, calibrating, experimenting with and redefining the relationship between theatre and life through the real encounter between actors and the audiences they can muster for themselves is itself a political act. In this way, revitalising a long line of politically driven visions of theatrical creation – from Brecht and Artaud to Barba and the *Living Theatre* – Czertok seeks to articulate a vision of theatre in which political action and the very vitality of living become its immanent and most compelling features.

Writing exile

Finally, a few words on exile and language in the book itself. *Theatre of Exile* was written not in the author's native Spanish but in Italian, the language of the country he was forced to flee to. Thus, the notion of *exile* permeates not only the kind of theatre Czertok describes to us, but also the very language he describes it in. An author writing in another language – and Czertok writes well in Italian, with a refreshing, no-frills kind of directness – is set apart from his work in a particular way and is compelled, rather like a translator, to reflect more on the clarity of everything he writes. It has to work, it has to hit home. Theatre, encompassing as it does virtually every aspect of human individual and collective behaviour, is a difficult thing to write about at the best of times. It can stretch the descriptive powers of a writer to their limits. But Czertok, confronting his readers in the same way a group of actors in the street confronts its 'non-audience/audience', just gets on with the job, using his adopted language