

***Dies Irae*. The Why and The How**

A conversation with Thomas Richards and Mario Biagini

Thomas Richards: Several motivations urged us towards the work on *Dies Irae*. The first is related to Project *The Bridge*, an investigation which we have been developing at the Workcenter since 1998 on the nature of the theatrical event. Of course, also the other branch of our work – we can say the original field of our research – known as art as vehicle, is based on performative elements. Nevertheless, in art as vehicle the objective is not the creation of theatre performances *stricto sensu*, but something different: here we have a form of art in which the stress lays on the impact which certain traditional performative elements, inside structured opuses created around these elements, might have on the *doer* himself. Another fact leading us towards the creation of *Dies Irae* has to do with Mario Biagini, associate director of the Workcenter. Mario has been at the Workcenter since 1986. In the first period of our research, for quite some time the people working here were divided into different groups: one led by myself (also Mario was in that group, which was later called “Downstairs group”, since we were working in the lower floor of our building), another led by James Slowiak, and then another, led by Maud Robart, which was called “Upstairs group. At that time, however, Mario was also developing a structure of his own, called “Macro-version”, supervised by Grotowski and directed towards the creation of a narrative structure based on an ancient text from the western tradition. It was called “Macro-version” because it included about ten actors belonging to either “Upstairs” or “Downstairs” groups, while at the same time there were two other works on the same text, one with a much smaller group, developing what we were calling “Micro-version”, directed by myself, and a larger one, called “Ritual version”, led by Maud. In the “Macro-version” Mario was at the same time the main actor and the director. So, there were different islands of activity for Mario at that time, even though our attention was mainly focused on what became later the *Downstairs Action*. I think that the work on the “Macro-version” was an important step for his personal and professional development: the “Macro-version” was for Mario the occasion to start to work directly with Grotowski, individually; but also he had there a precious possibility of creative growth and learning in relation to the craft of directing. And even if that possibility was put aside for some years for the work on *Downstairs Action* and *Action*, the desire to find another field of development for his potential in this domain has always been present over the years in our minds.

Later, in 1998, we accepted into the Workcenter four Chinese actors from Singapore, who had been working together as group and were asking to join individually our team. After seeing them in a selection session we decided to invite these four actors to the Workcenter and, in order to help them develop their craft, have them work as a group on a theatre piece under our guidance. Grotowski was still alive in 1998 and he approved of this tendency, though he did not take direct part in it because of his declining health conditions. The presence of this group of four actors gave us the opportunity to re-open a road which we started to tread at the time of the “Macro-version”, and to follow it fully. Mario worked with the four actors on the creation of what eventually became *One breath left*. He did so in the function of director. Grotowski and I understood that it was important for these actors to focus their work on the development of their theatre craft and we entrusted this responsibility to Mario. I was following the work from a distance, supervising it and working individually with Gey Pin Ang (the actress who had the leading role in *One breath left*), exploring with her the possibilities that could appear working with her on songs from her tradition. Part of this material was then inserted in the final structure of *One breath left*, but the responsibility of first director for this piece was since its beginning entrusted to Mario. This work has brought us

today to *Dies Iræ*.

So, a primary motivation was the development of a direction which could give Mario Biagini the possibility of practicing and confronting himself with directing. When needed I was the second director, especially from the moment when the other members of the Workcenter team and Mario himself entered into *One breath left* as performers.

Another reason was constituted by the need of improving the craft of the younger participants at the Workcenter. An actor needs a place in order to develop, he needs a *continuity* of work, a *territory* that gives him a responsibility which he has to carry forward day after day, and a *challenge*. At first with *One breath left*, and later with *Dies Iræ*, we have put the young members of the team face to the basic, demanding elements of theatre craft: physical actions, tempo-rhythm, montage, the capacity of keeping a score day after day and the fight so that it's all alive (and not just alive but going forward). For us it is crucial to be able to go towards a deeper and deeper knowledge of theatre craft. Project *The Bridge* provided us with a territory for concentrated confrontation on the foundations of theatre craft between us and these young actors, as Grotowski did with Mario and me.

This is something that even those who have read a lot about the Workcenter usually don't know: Mario and I worked under Grotowski's supervision on many acting pieces, performative structures, texts; we created actions from texts, actions with songs, compositions and structures which nobody ever saw; all in relation to physical actions, and always taking into consideration the perception of "the one who watches". Those were important moments in our learning process, though not visible from the outside. For example, someone who sees Mario and me now in *Action*, which is based on ancient vibratory songs and structured on the basis of complex physical actions and lines of contacts - all supporting what in *The Edge-Point of Performance* I have called the "inner action" - does not necessarily understand that we have been well trained on the fundamentals of theatre craft: it is from this basic knowledge that it is possible to take off and fly; otherwise nothing can be done. Therefore, Project *The Bridge* is one of the means to help the new members of the team progress in their craft, so that they can then explore this new "know-how", if we can say, in our field of research on art as vehicle. Other desires too have driven us towards the creation of *Dies Iræ*. There is something which has to do with being useful. I will try to explain: what we are doing can be seen as having different levels of utility: the *Actions*, and in general what we call art as vehicle have an utility for the doers, it can work as a yoga - a creative *opus* which coincides with a personal practice; it can have a deep significance for the doer. But Grotowski himself at a certain point posed to us the question of another kind of utility, taking an example from *I Ching* (The Book of Changes) which tells about a well filled with pure water: if nobody comes to drink from the well, the water stagnates and it rots, the fish appear. With this example he was explaining to us that we had the need of opening the Workcenter's doors. Around that time we began inviting witnesses to see *Downstairs Action*. There was a precious thought behind that affirmation, and I immediately discovered its efficacy in our work.

In that period we lived and worked in a great isolation. Almost no one except Grotowski had seen the *Downstairs Action*. In myself, and maybe in the rest of the group, at a certain moment there began to appear the feeling of a kind of dryness, as if our isolation was on one hand a force, but on the other hand a trap. We had to solve the problem of those fish. How do they appear? What do they mean in terms of the human relations inside a group, in relation to the way people "fight" among themselves? Surely something potentially dark had in part woven its way into our relationships; of course, it's a simplification of a complicated process but let's say that a growing dryness was threatening our way of facing one another. Maybe from too much isolation, too long time alone... We thought it was the moment to open the

doors and let an outside influence come in. There came a sort of neutralization, which, among other effects, acted as some kind of cleansing force, or a force of renewal let's say, with regards to the relationships inside the group. We can give the example of a house: you live alone and your house is a bit of a mess; you decide to invite somebody for dinner and suddenly you find that you are cleaning your house, just because you know that somebody will come. I am not saying that the work was in a mess, it was actually on a very high level. I am speaking about the inter-human relations, about that which passes between you and your colleague in the continual, daily fight striving towards an objective quality in work, a situation where the inter-human tensions can become quite strong. At the moment of opening to witnesses, *Downstairs Action* was seen by very few people, five-seven at a time, with a long time between each visit. Then with the passing of years, the total amount of people who saw that work became considerable. Of course, this was only one of the reasons for inviting witnesses. The overall need to open the doors and to break the isolation is still alive, but we are now in a different stage of work: we are looking for the necessary alternation between opening and isolation, because - and that's natural - we still need both isolation, in some moments of creation and research, and opening.

Mario Biagini: How did the process of dramaturgic, directorial and actorial creation unfold in *Dies Irae*? The starting point of *Dies Irae* was the final structure of *One breath left*. We had doubts about its possible development. We had arrived at a point where we realized that, inside the dramaturgy, there was no space where the various persons who had recently arrived could develop. Yes, the score of *One breath left* was on a high level of articulation, and the total composition was extremely refined and complex. However, we wanted the whole team to have the possibility not only to learn how to keep and develop a precise score, but also to find the cracks in which it might really be possible to discover something interesting for the individual, something unknown. Of course, to learn how to repeat a score of actions is needed, is an unavoidable technical necessity. But the point here is that we don't want to *pretend* to do something, we want to *do* it, looking not to hide, at the same time without falling into a narcissism which happily contemplates itself. It seems to me that for an actor this is a crucial point: it relates to how one can possibly make one's work richer and humanly full. So the starting point was a dramaturgic choice: the decision to leave aside the story of *One breath left*, the story of a woman who dies, and to keep some elements in order to tell a different story, in a completely different structure that could give the actors involved wider and deeper possibilities for personal development.

In this sense, a fresh horizon has also appeared for me as a performer, mainly with regards to text: I'm approaching the text in a way which is new for me, that is separately from a structure mostly based on a flow of songs. For many years we worked on text with a specific technique. Certainly, we were aware of the dramaturgic function of the text, but the text of a given fragment was usually previously elaborated from the point of view of rhythm and syntax, and subsequently put in relation to a structure of actions. As Grotowski used to say, the flow of actions is the river, and the text is the boat carried by the current. So the text was nourished by all the work on actions, which was structured and elaborated separately. We were curious to see how direct work on text could be a road towards discovery for us. So, we eliminated almost all the old texts from *One breath left*; we chose longer texts for *Dies Irae*, texts that presented us with a new challenge of understanding - texts I wanted to explore since a long time. Then we went ahead very intensively. We began in Vienna in the spring of 2003 arriving immediately to a version that we presented as a preview in Istanbul, in the following August. There, we began to sense what might be the true possible development. It's evident that

dramaturgic development does not simply mean to create a story for the spectator. It also involves discovering how, inside what we are doing, is it possible to pass organically from one register to another, from one quality to another, from a whole associative and personal world to another, without any trick or “mise en scène” effect. Rather, we were trying to find the way in which the dramaturgy provided real and personal reasons for the changes and the developments. We were looking for something that could feed the work from *inside* the one hour and fifteen minutes of the performance. We developed structures of choral actions that were elaborated so that they were individually rich and motivated for each actor, and we also created rhythmical and formal collective compositions, which were made of actions and not simply of forms or composed movements.

In this frame, my work as actor is slightly different from that of my colleagues, because it starts more directly from the *meaning* of the text. For everyone, however, there appeared the problem of discovering how the text, in and of itself, can be a material which proposes and suggests the life we are searching for.

T. R.: In Project *The Bridge*, we are confronting theatre, even though, somehow, we are still standing face to tradition. As I already said, with *The Bridge* we step into the territory of theatre and we directly confront ourselves with certain aspects of the contemporary theatre reality. In *One breath left*, the first experiment, the audience was in a frontal position and the montage was to a great extent done for the spectator, to play with him, to provoke him, to lead and maybe to strike him. The geometry in the space was very precise, all the tempo-rhythms, the forms and their movement were a living painting, a hot shape transforming in front of the audience.

We realized that this technique was working well, but for us it was just a first step. In *Dies Iræ* we wanted to go much further with the investigation on dramaturgy. In *One breath left*, the majority of the actors didn't have that line of intentions which an actor can follow from the beginning to the end of a story. There was a succession of fragments with their energetic and transformational logic, but we didn't feel the need to create this level of dramaturgic logic in which an actor can let his life flow in relation to a character's desires, to what he wants, what he can or cannot achieve. With *Dies Iræ*, even if it does not have a completely linear narrative structure, we are deeply involved in the experimentation of this level of dramaturgy, here articulated for every individual line. Then, there is the new research that Mario was speaking about in relation to text.

M. B.: More about this point: in our research with the songs of tradition, you sing *outside* but the song works *inside*, I mean that you accept it in you and you let it work. So, you are not looking to produce a certain sound effect, or a given resonance. The song is in reality finding its own way inside you, opening its road in between. This process surely has also to do with your thoughts, associations, your body, your memories and aspirations and so on... - with the meaning which that song might have or might create for you and in you. Now in *Dies Iræ* as actor, I work the text in the same way, not just 'spoken outside', but on how to accept it *inside*: what do you have to accept of yourself, or of your partner, without looking to defend yourself. Can the content of a chosen text, its meaning, even on an intellectual level, free life and creativity, and allow possible access to deeper sources?

T. R.: At a certain point there came the question if I should be in the piece or not. Then, the need that I verify the impact of the piece from the outside and watch over its quality prevailed. *Dies Iræ* is composed of a myriad of details, which are also visual. It's like a garden in bloom:

if it works or not depends on the vitality and the precision of an impeccable execution, without hesitations. In *Action* I can know the quality from the inside of the structure, since it's made for the doers, it's based on a logic that enables me to work from inside as a doer. What will happen in the future with *Dies Irae*, what's going to be its further development is another open question. I don't know, we will see. Presently, working on *Dies Irae* sometimes Mario steps out of the piece and we work together with the actors on individual fragments; when he is inside, I work with each of them on their own line. I take many pages of notes, then Mario and I we discuss and work on it the day after. Grotowski, as well, when he was working with us on art as vehicle used to be sitting at his table taking notes. We were told before that he would do so, and we knew that we should not be disturbed and should go ahead fully in any case. Then, usually he told me his observations and I had to decide how to share them with my colleagues. He was going to leave us because of his sickness, and from years he had created the situation in which we had to learn to manage on our own. He was impeccable in behaving as a grandfather of profession, not as a director, but as a *teacher*.

(statements collected by Antonio Attisani on February 7, 2004)