Chapter 20

Città Invisibili of Teatro Potlach: A Journey to Rediscover Our Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Città Invisibili is a multidisciplinary art project made by the Italian company Teatro Potlach. Compared to the canonical theatrical performances, Città Invisibili, being in its essence a site-specific performance, interacts with the place where it grows. With the project, the Italian group builds next to the existing space of the place (physical space and memory space) other two spaces, the space of the staging and the space of the performer, using different materials, in particular cloths and video projections. Moreover Teatro Potlach conducts a historical, anthropological and social research trying to bring out the latent memory of places. All these interventions bring out from the place a city never seen before, invisible to the eyes of its inhabitants, but present and buried in the meanderings of their memory. The objective is to bring out this memory so that the inhabitants preserve and hand down it to new generations.

INTRODUCTION

In 1991 Teatro Potlach, directed by Pino Di Buduo, launches a particular project, “Città Invisibili” that has been crossing all the world since then, renewing itself in each new staging. Inspired by “Le città invisibili” by Italo Calvino, the performance of Teatro Potlach looks like a big art project that has the theme of the city at its base. A project that is theatrical but that is spread over an interdisciplinary and multimedia plan, involving in addition to the arts of performance also anthropology, history and especially the architecture and the work on the space. Like the other famous site-specific projects, for example “Trilogia” by Roberto Bacci, “Nights in This City” by Forced Entertainment or “Speed of Light” by NVA organisation,¹ the object of “Città Invisibili” is to focus the attention on places, to discover the hidden things, what everyday life buries under the sand, the latent memory, to bring it to a new light and return it to the people in a renewed way. The inhabitants become witnesses of their immense tangible and intangible cultural tradition to pass on to future generations.

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This chapter will question about the project “Città Invisibili”, trying to reconstruct its history and its mode of action, to understand how this intervention can alter and transform urban spaces, giving them a new life and how it attempts to activate the processes of re-appropriation of dormant memory. This reconstruction will follow different stages. First it will rebuild a brief history of Teatro Potlach to understand what is the vision that drives the work of the group, how it arrived to conceive a project like Città Invisibili, and what are the relationships between the project and Calvino’s novel. Later it will go to analyze what are in principle the stages of construction of the project, from the concept to the final performance. From here it will enter the detail of the staging to explore some aspects which the researcher deems relevant. Città Invisibili falls within the site-specific performance. It therefore works with the space. What space or spaces does it probe and what does it create? And how does the work with the space intertwine with the memory of the place and of its inhabitants? Later it will analyze the materials and technologies used to alter the space (cloths, video projections), to study the ephemeral metamorphosis of the architectural space and the emergence of memories and identities of those places.

To conduct this analysis, the researcher moved using a variety of materials and some texts often not published. His research led him to Fara Sabina, at the headquarters of Teatro Potlach, to explore its archives. Here he tracked down, in addition to the press releases and texts written by the director Pino Di Buduo, that found space in some publications, some manuscripts and typescripts of the artistic and organizational team that over the years and in virtue of the uniqueness of the project was constantly questioned about own work. Finally the main source for the writing of this chapter is the researcher’s firsthand experience in some of these projects, where he lived all the stages, from the conception to the performance.

THE ORIGINS OF TEATRO POTLACH AND CITTÀ INVISIBILI

In 1975 Pino Di Buduo, the founder of Teatro Potlach, attends to a performance of the Odin Teatret, Min Fars Hus (My father’s house) and he is entranced. He meets Eugenio Barba and talks him about his research and his passion for cultural anthropology and folklore. Barba intrigued by the enthusiasm of that young man invited him to Denmark to attend to an international seminar of theatrical practices, called International Brigade. The young Di Buduo leaves for Denmark with Daniela Regnoli. Here they face a strange situation. The practices that were performed during the seminar had not apparently nothing to do with the theatre: physical exercises such as jumping, racing and somersaults, what today is called physical training and that is the basis for the actor. After this experience, in 1976, Pino Di Buduo and Daniela Regnoli founded Teatro Potlach in Fara Sabina, near Rome.

In cultural anthropology the word potlatch is particularly important. It is a term that belongs to the Indian tribes of the northern Canada and it means gift, exchange, barter, wastefulness. During the great winter festivals the tribe used to solemnize the celebrations with songs, dances, banquets that ended with the distribution of gifts. Those who had received these gifts replied with other gifts. Teatro Potlach refers to this logic, placing it at the basis of its training, its education, its own poetry and the creation of theatrical events.

The decision to conduct a work of research and cultural exchange prompted Teatro Potlach to base its headquarters in the “periphery”, far from the canonical theatrical scene, therefore to do a theatre that was outside of the circuits both traditional and of avant-garde, inventing a form of coexistence and community life as a premise and condition of the theatre. Working with the technical essence of theatre, with