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Inappropriate intimacies: two performances by Silvia Calderoni and Lucia Calamaro

Joëlle Chambon

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I shall begin with some preliminary comments:

First about the title: in French, I would have given the title “Intimités déplacées”. For the word “déplacé” in French has the literal meaning of “which has been moved, dislodged”, and the figurative meaning of “uncalled for, shocking, rude”. I could not find an English word that conveyed both meanings, and I have chosen the word “inappropriate” because the word “propriety” (which refers to social conventions) is close to the word “property” (which means “ownership”), and my paper aims to underline the fact that, in the two performances I shall talk about, a certain kind of unconventional experience is proposed to the audience by disconnecting intimacy from identity (and ownership) – as I hope to explain later.

My second comment is on the topicality of the concept of intimacy, which has become in the last two decades an important issue for philosophy and sociology. What is at stake is the way contemporary life makes us conceive intimacy on the model of economy. After Bernard Stiegler, we can make the names of Zygmunt Bauman with his essay *Liquid Love* in 2003 or Eva Illouz who, in her 2007 book *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, explained the process by which emotional and economic relationships come to define and shape each other – a process she calls “emotional capitalism”. All these reflections go back to the essays of Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, in 1977, and Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, in 1992.

These essays gave me keys for understanding the two performances I shall talk about, and I found particularly illuminating the way Michael Føessel (a French philosopher) defines intimacy on one hand as a relation and therefore a shared experience – as opposed to interiority (which cannot be shared) – and on the other hand as an experience set back from society and thus allowing us to look critically at it – as opposed to privacy, which is the area where individuals reach agreements and enter into contracts (the private referring to property and contract, whereas the intimate refers to ties and recognition).

Third and last preliminary comment: when it comes to performing intimacy, I would say that certainly there is no better example of it than the sweet conversation of Romeo and Juliet

during their rare intimate moments. It could be interesting to analyse why contemporary theatre has become so sparing with love dialogues, why it cannot or doesn't want to make the audience witness two people connecting with each other, creating an intimate relationship by suspending temporarily the social realities, and commenting upon this unique and dazzling experience. In France, since Marguerite Duras, only Wajdi Mouawad has dared to write this kind of dialogue (for example in *Scorched*, *Incendies*) and most playwrights prefer to write about ex-lovers tearing each other to pieces (like Rambert in *Love's end*, *Clôture de l'amour*), or to propose a series of variations on the impossibility of writing love dialogues (like Pommerat in *Reunification of the two Koreas*, *La Réunification des deux Corées*). But this is not my point. I shall only emphasize that this scarcity corroborates my third and last preliminary comment: intimacy is threatened by modernity, and particularly by its obsession with control and measurable things.

I would like to focus on two recent performances which explore intimacy, and deal with emotional relationships without ever talking of love, either out of modesty, or because it is considered impossible : *Tumore* (*Tumor*) is a play written and directed in 2007 by the young Italian playwright Lucia Calamaro, and *MDLSX* is a performance of 2015 by Silvia Calderoni, who wrote it in collaboration with Daniela Nicolo, who directed it with Enrico Casagrande – the three of them belonging to the Italian company Motus.

Each one of the two shows explores intimacy in a specific way, but in both cases in the light of extreme situations: terminal illness for *Tumore* and gender ambiguity for *MDLSX*.

Tumore, subtitled “a desolate show”, tells the last days of a young woman with a tumor, through the monologues and dialogues of her two companions, her Doctor and her Mother. The stage is bare, because, says Calamaro, « *the location must remain undefined: [...] to be born, to die, maybe to love, all these things happen in those mysterious transition areas where matter changes its state* ». The play tells how the two women, though helpless, get to share an intimacy with each other and with the dying one, and it comes as close as possible to the very intimate moment of dying.

It does so in different ways, the first and most striking one being the preparation of a last-chance surgical procedure, then the medical search inside the body and the failure of it. After this failure, there is a mock-religious re-enactment of the moment of death, with Monika-the Doctor, becoming a very clumsy angel who has taken away the wrong person, and Benedetta-the-Mother becoming her dying but very cynical daughter. And finally a third and last re-enactment of death takes place at the end of the play, with the lights being turned off one by one, while the voice of the young woman fades out.

To explore intimacy, *Tumore* relies mainly on the powers of language and on the old magic of character playing: it only needs the complementary energies of two actresses (Monika Mariotti's comic and almost grotesque talent versus the moody poetry of Benedetta Cesqui), and sometimes the disappearance of anything visible in order to make room for the voice only.

By contrast, *MDLSX* is a kind of psychedelic audio-visual DJ set; Silvia Calderoni has created a soundtrack linked to emotional moments in her own life, and her physicality and energy remind us of rock-stars like David Bowie or Iggy Pop. There are simple scenic devices like a DJ table, a triangular rug, a circular screen on which we can see Calderoni's evolution via some of her family's home videos, but also close-ups of her face as she delivers monologues into a small camera. Most of all, her body is the story: she moves it, uncovers it, flaunts it, adorns it with false body-hair, highlights it with laser lights. And the musical quality of all her transformations seems to epitomize the word which defines her: "genderfluid".

These two shows offer very different aesthetics, and two opposite ways of performing intimacy. *Tumore* refuses any of the usual accessories of the contemporary stage such as screens, music, dance, technology, whereas *MDLSX* uses all of them. *Tumore* distrusts the images and favours hearing over seeing; whereas *MDLSX* is obsessed with seeing, and constantly plays with light and dark, cameras, screens, and costume changes, in order to sharpen and then deceive our voyeuristic desire.

And yet, there is a certain likeness in the way both performances explore an intimacy disconnected from identity, and in the way the text is used to this effect.

When Calamaro begins to write *Tumore*, her impulse is autobiographic (it is about the real story of her best friend's death) and the form is monologic: it is a flow of words, a rambling on, half stream of consciousness and half comment on ordinary life. When meeting the actresses, the flow divides itself, words are distributed, characters appear: Calamaro's monologue becomes a play with dialogues. But when directing, Calamaro goes backwards and says to the actresses: "*I want to hear you think, not talk*". Even the roles are unsteady: Benedetta, who plays the Mother, only needs to turn her back to the audience and take down her hair bun to become and/or bring back her dead Daughter. Therefore, even though fiction seems to be maintained, the people onstage finally talk to us not really as characters do, but from a place both closer and less definite: as voices which could become ours, after having been those of Lucia, Monika, Benedetta – unstable embodiments of our intimate feelings and thoughts.

On the other hand, *MDLSX* may look like a performance of Silvia Calderoni, but it was actually (and unusually for the Motus company) written before the rehearsals, being largely based

on the novel *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides (the Greek-American author of *Virgin Suicides*). The novel is supposed to be the autobiography of an hermaphrodite, who is first raised as a girl named Calliope, then decides at the age of 16 to live as a man and becomes Cal. The director Daniela Nicolo says: “we like to define *MDLSX* as ‘post-biographic’. The limit between Silvia’s biography and Calliope’s is vague, confused. The re-writing we made plays exactly on this. The audience wonders how much of it is fiction and how much reality ». Indeed, the power and appeal of the show, which has toured the world, seems to hinge on how the audience is constantly fluctuating between Calliope-Cal and Calderoni, novel and autobiography, story and performance – as between man and woman. We are invited to share an intimacy that we cannot assign to somebody.

But are we invited to share an intimacy? What are we really invited to do? This question brings me to the last point I would like to raise, which is the political meaning of intimacy in the two shows.

We could underline the fact that both shows criticize the medical power; but it is only a superficial way of being political. According to Michael Føessel, intimacy is politically important because it provides the experience of an authentic relation, where one learns the frailty and precariousness that is always involved in the fact of really being with the other; it is a sort of education for democracy, an ethical experience, set back from society but entangled with the history of individuals¹.

At one point in the novel *Middlesex*, the supposed author Calliope-Cal writes: “I feel you out there, reader. This is the only kind of intimacy I’m comfortable with. Just the two of us, here in the dark.” Of course, a show can never establish with its audience the kind of intimacy a novel does with its reader; but the aesthetics of the show can aim at it, or not. And I would like to stress a sort of paradox: with *MDLSX* the Motus company wants to make a political statement about (I quote) “the human necessity to be in movement, (...) to begin new existential adventures (...) in opposition to rigid identity models”; and the show finally appears as a sort of celebration of an exceptional body, a hymn in praise of an exceptional freedom. But it is also a very solitary body, and a very solitary freedom, so that the show is hardly an invitation to share any intimacy with Calliope-Cal-Calderoni. On the other hand, *Tumore* has no overt political ambitions, but it does give the opportunity for the audience to share an intimate experience of human frailty and also of the power of ties. Of course, I shall not decide which of the two shows is the more political, because the connection between politics and aesthetics would require maybe another conference.

¹ In the novel *Middlesex*, the exceptional story of Calliope-Cal is a consequence of the traumatic history of the greek community expelled from Asia Minor at the beginning of the 20th century.

My ambition was simply to show the very different meanings that can be conveyed by the performance of intimacy, through the very different ways texts and bodies are brought together on the contemporary stage.