The Reuse of the Classics As Intangible Cultural Heritage:
The "Dead Centre" Case

Andrea Malosio

A Good Place to Talk about Ghosts

"Theater is a good place to talk about ghosts. In theater we meet characters from the past and actors who play other people. But it is necessary for the audience to be present and alive, in communication with the past and the story being told. In this way an imaginative community of the future is built. In theater, time is transformed into a kind of present and eternal alliance."[1] In this quote, Bush Moukarzel, the artistic director of the Dead Centre ensemble, expresses the importance of the connection between past, present, and future and provides a direction for the group's work. He thinks of a theater that connects with something that is no longer there and the concept of absence to build a connection with today's audience and a community for the future. For Moukarzel, theater lives in a kind of timeless limbo. In fact, this Irish theater company has a penchant for reusing classics in their performances. The group has an innovative perspective and uses the most advanced contemporary tools and technologies to create their shows, which are always staged in traditional theater spaces.

The Company and Its poetics: The Reuse of the Classics

The company Dead Centre was founded in Dublin, Ireland in 2012 by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd – who are writers, directors, performers, and artistic directors of the company – and the producer Tilly Taylor (O'Brien 2018). The group has performed fifteen shows to date, touring all over the world: From Ireland to Europe (Austria, Germany, Sweden, France, Estonia, Netherlands, Romania, Italy, United Kingdom) to the United

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[1] Bush Moukarzel in a conversation with Andrea Malosio and Elena Vismara at Piccolo Teatro di Milano, during *Presente Indicativo Festival* in May 2022.

States, Hong Kong, China, and Australia. The company is supported by the Arts Council Ireland, Culture Ireland, and Arts Council England. It is also funded by many other organizations that change from time to time like the Dublin Fringe, Dublin Theatre Festival, Project Arts Centre, Gate Theatre, Abbey Theatre, James Joyce Centre, National Theatre Studio, Battersea Arts Centre, Irish Arts Center, Mayfest, Warwick Arts Centre, Pavilion Theatre, Science Gallery Dublin, The Mac Belfast, and Dublin City Council (Dead Centre, n.d.).

The Dead Centre group builds its plays on the reworking of great classics of literature, theater, and philosophy, combining the thoughts and lives/biographies of authors of the past with the most important contemporary languages and technological tools. Literary classics contribute to the creation of intangible cultural heritage and its definition: They are part of a shared culture in a given territory and founding elements of a community.

Starting from translation studies, the debate on the reuse of the classics is still going on: As translations, adaptations, rewritings, transformations, *tradimenti*, and *travestimenti* – as the Italian poet Edoardo Sanguineti used to say (Sanguineti 2010, 1987, 1978) – simple references, or proposals. In a nutshell, there are many practices and ways of reinterpreting literary classics that all the arts experiment with. Something new intersects with the classic, nourishes it, tailors it to a new time, and gives rise to new imagery. Dead Centre's work fits into this framework of reusing familiar and common material.

Proust, Joyce, Freud, and Wittgenstein: Literature and Philosophy of the Twentieth Century

The first show, *Souvenir* (2012), is "written by Bush Moukarzel after Marcel Proust, with Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, T.S. Eliot, William Shakespeare, Don DeLillo, and Orson Welles" (Dead Centre, n.d.) and is based on Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, colliding with pop music such as Beyoncé and Bruce Springsteen, magic tricks and many other voices. *(S)quark!* (2013) is inspired by Joyce's production and anecdotes from his life. The play asks this ironic question: "Was James Joyce a genius?" (Dead Centre, n.d.) *The Interpretation of Dreams by Sigmund Freud* (2020) draws on the extensive material Freud had collected in his studies for the book that marked the beginning of psychoanalysis. The performance proceeds with a series of patients taking turns sitting on the psychoanalyst's couch, filmed by a live camera projecting a close-up of their faces onto the screen in

the background. Then, through the use of video and technology, we are catapulted into the patient's universe and dreams. *Alles, Was Der Fall Ist (The World Is All That Is the Case). After Ludwig Wittgenstein* (2021) takes its starting point in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Here, too, the actors on stage refer to a live camera that projects the images onto a screen in the background and processes them further.

Ancient Theater and Tragedy

In *Katharsis* (2023), Dead Centre continue their research on theoretical questions and on the rites that have built up the theater and its history. The show reflects on the concept of catharsis, the culmination of maximum purification in Greek theater, in tragedy, and a pivotal point in the history of theater. It is therefore a performance about the meaning of theater itself. They write: "A person stands on a stage. You look at him. That is the moment when theater is created. But what if this person looks back? When he looks at you, what happens then? Is that still theater? This is the story of an actor and his body, about what is in it, about who looks at it, and what should happen to it after he dies." (Dead Centre, n.d.)

At the Opera (with Pasolini)

Dead Centre has experimented with very different productions in a variety of performance contexts, from more informal events such as the Dublin Fringe to collaborations with major theater institutions such as the Schaubühne and the Deutsches Opernhaus in Germany. On June 9, 2023, at Deutsches Oper in Berlin, Dead Centre staged the opera *Il Teorema di Pasolini* by contemporary composer Giorgio Battistelli, composed in 1992. Battistelli's work is an adaptation of Pier Paolo Pasolini's "scandalous" film – and also novel – *Teorema* (1968). Once again, Dead Centre measures itself with a text from the past as a starting point, and then uses the means and tools of the present to conceive their stage productions. On stage, there are live cameras, headphones, monitors, screens, projections, and overlapping images between what is happening in the physicality of the stage and in the video. It becomes evident that film and/or audiovisual technologies and language have permeated and hybridized theatrical language, even in its more conventional and traditional spaces. And this applies not only for Dead Centre, which I cite here as a case study for its extensive experimentation and adherence to the heritage of the classics.

Great Playwrights: Shakespeare, Chekhov, Beckett

The most evident connection to the need to investigate and exploit a collective intangible heritage can be found in a cycle of four performances that relate the biographies of great playwrights to their works. Dead Centre investigates the beginning and the end of the artistic trajectories of two among the greatest playwrights in history: William Shakespeare and Anton Chekhov. In *Chekhov's First Play* (2015), they stage Chekhov's first drama, which remained unpublished until 1921 and was published posthumously without a title (now called *Platonov*). Chekhov did not stage the play because the plot was too complicated and the number of characters too large. The play is set in a very classical scene, almost in the perfect imagery of Chekhov's Russia of the late nineteenth century, with bourgeois drawing rooms in shades of white. However, Dead Centre's production adds elements of alienation to this esthetic: The audience in the auditorium wears headphones, through which they not only hear what is happening on stage amplified, but also additional information about what is not on stage (Bleeker 2023). There are also visible stage machines, headphones for the actors, screens, videos and projections.

Shakespeare's Last Play (2018) is based on *The Tempest* and attempts to deal with the entire immense Shakespearean legacy. The action remains true to Shakespearean comedy. The most interesting aspect of this production is once again the technological setup. Interactive graphics appear on the background screen, showing, for example, the names of the characters or their position in space, with the tools and esthetics of the playful dynamics of an interactive video game. Dead Centre also delves into the lives of authors, as in *Hamnet* (2017) about Shakespeare's relationship with his seriously ill son and the character Hamlet (Semple 2023). On stage, there is only a child interacting with a screen on which he sees himself mirrored, but in different situations and contexts – almost the construction of possible worlds, parallel universes, and premonitions (Hickman 2018).

Beckett's Room (2019) depicts the life of Samuel Beckett during the Second World War. The writer lived in France, where he had joined the Resistance against the German occupation. In this case, there is no reworking of a play by Beckett, but his *opera omnia* remains the subtext of the show. Indeed, *Beckett's Room* is a performance *in absentia*: There are no actors on stage, only objects that seem to move autonomously, while a narrative unfolds in a chronological and almost traditional manner with the help of off-stage voices. When the audience enters the theater, they find a headset on the seat that allows them to follow the narration during the performance. On

stage, the set consists of the open rooms of Beckett's apartment. Objects and shadows enliven the scene and guide the narrative. All the everyday objects in the house are moved by hand through a complex system of wires, like marionettes. A screen can close off the house with projections of historical images of France at the time. We cannot see Beckett, and we are not waiting for him like Godot. His writings remain in the background, because the focus is on the historical character. But it is really possible? The boundaries become blurred. The historical figure becomes the character of this performance and the author's works appear scattered and unrecognizable as hints and references (Maprayil 2020).

Machines and Bodies

To Be a Machine (2020) is a performance conceived for streaming in Covid-times that reflects on the sharing of physical space and on the relationship with machines (Fintan 2021). In contrast, *Good Sex* (2022) focuses on the corporeity and physical union between human beings: Each night, there are two brand new performers on stage, who have never rehearsed together or read the script, who are then guided by an intimacy director to touch themselves and have sex (Yang 2024).

Conclusions

In conclusion, starting from classics as intangible cultural heritage, what is significant about the work of this company is the use of different languages: The intersection between actorly performativity, objects and machines; the use of headphone audio and the resulting immersion of actors and spectators; the role of the constant presence of videos on stage; the investigation of bodies. All of this is thus always connected to and closely linked to another text from the past, in a timeless regeneration of times, thoughts, and spaces. Dead Centre is an important case because it experiments with an interesting rethinking of dramatic practice in relation to the classics: Working on the classics consists of selecting, using, reprocessing, and transforming material that is now part of the intangible heritage of a culture, without renouncing the most innovative languages and questions of the present.

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