

Ginsberg and the Blues: Diary of a Spectator

Alessandro Cassin* (November 13, 2010)



Last spring, the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, an experimental theater group based in Pontedera, Italy, took New York by storm with original theatrical work based on the poems of Allen Ginsberg. Now they are back with performances at the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe on Nov. 16th and at St. Johns Lutheran Church on Nov. 18th, 20th, and 21st. Here are some notes taken at the time of my first contact with the shows that have now returned to New York

An itinerant work of theater can display the characteristics of a live, throbbing organism: it inhales, it exhales, expands and contracts with the shifting of its context. An emblematic example is the New York presence of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards.

Led by Mario Biagini, the Workcenter presented a series of works originating from their Open Program, focused on Allen Ginsberg's poems. Calling it a tour would not be accurate, neither is it a promotional series or a showcase. It truly felt like a visit with the flavor of a genuine cultural exchange. Mario Biagini and Thomas Richards covered a lot of ground in New York. They led



workshops, showed movies and discussed their activities in Pontedera, but above all they presented two new works in several public and private spaces: I Am America and Electric Party.

The deep sense of this undertaking – auspiciously anticipating future activities on this shore of the Atlantic – is the confrontation between their work on the specific role of poetry within society and the city itself, the places and language in which Ginsberg has developed his poetic voice. Clearly this is not a revisiting of Ginsberg’s poetic universe in the vein of a 60’s sensibility. It is more of an incessant questioning of our contemporary world: a group of young people explores their own present, outlines possible initiation journeys, searches for answers, all starting from the words of Allen Ginsberg, poet/prophet.

I followed closely their work in New York and often wondered about the source of its sweeping and immersive emotional impact.

Without venturing any definitive answers, I would suggest at least three elements that seem essential. The starting point strikes one as a form of irrepressible “desire”. This desire, or in this case “desiring together in a group” appears as the source of the eruption of energy, the vitality, the political take and the shameless frankness of the eleven performers: Itahisa Borges Méndez, Lloyd Bricken, Cinzia Cigna, Davide Curzio, Marina Gregory, Timothy Hopfner, Agnieszka Kazimierska, Felicità Marcelli, Alejandro Tomás Rodríguez, Chrystèle Saint-Louis Augustin, Julia Ulehla.

The second element is the way the members of this group have of “being together”. The intensity with which they listen to one another, the intensity with which they move together brings to mind a concept of classical anarchist ideology, what Kropotkin called Mutual Aid. The result is a particular group vitality, a way of being alive in their bodies, their voices, in their search for meaning. United and in solidarity in their switches from reckless enthusiasm to the melancholy introspection which originates from the blues.

The third element is contained in their idiosyncratic use of the poetic text. It is not a “theater of poetry”, but a hypothesis of poetry as oral tradition, generating dramatic, political and soul-searching actions. Therefore it is a use of literary material closer to Greek theater than to contemporary dramaturgy.

Electric Party

After half an hour’s wait in the street, I am among the last of the 130 people admitted into the [Bowery Poetry Club](#) [2], a small club on the Lower East Side. The public is standing around the stage, where the performers, dressed in sixties garb, are taking turns at the mikes with songs and guitars. As the music starts it becomes apparent that this is not a concert, but a “musical offering”, a festive/ritual presentation of musical material. Songs composed by the performers from Ginsberg’s poems alternate with blues. Depending on the piece, the configuration on the stage keeps changing: at times a vocalist with back-up, more often a “voice leader” who builds on the others’ harmonies. The vocal quality, the communicative intensity soon envelops the public crowding closer and closer to absorb at skin level the sense of urgency of the songs. It is a musical cocktail, where various genres from rock, folk, blues, operetta, cabaret and spirituals alternate, each emerging with their distinct impact.

Electric Party is not simply a succession of pieces of music, but a musical voyage that draws the public into a type of contemporary pagan rite. There is a crescendo of intensity when the performers leave the stage and start singing and walking procession-like amongst the audience. The evocative power of Southern blues sweeps the public into a state of abandon. This reaches its peak during a sung “action” by Alejandro Tomás Rodríguez, who ends up on the floor in the middle of the public, shirtless, in a series of contortions and tremors that seem both the origin and consequence of his singing. The evening feels like a party, in its joyful, informal and intimate spirit. But the moment when the performers, scattered among the public, start intoning an Ohm, like in the beginning of a



yoga class, then sing a cappella, the fusion of performer/spectator seems complete. The crowd inside the Bowery Poetry Club appears to unite with the songs and music.

I Am America

I Am America is structured as a show whose connective tissue consists in a series of songs. The event starts with the members of the public being led individually inside the space by the performers and invited to settle in various “isles” of seats lining the perimeter of the room. Between those of us coming in and them, who are expecting us, a tension materializes, made of piercing gazes and physicality. The welcome is simple, made of small gestures and their intense presence: a smile, the shifting of weight from one foot to another. My attention is drawn to a performer (Cinzia Cigna), who, with the grace and materiality of a Velasquez portrait, simply waits. Her whole body is tense within this action and this makes it credible and convincing; she is not acting, she is present.

By the time the spectators have found their places, the show has already started, gradually, imperceptibly, like a scent spreading. The room itself is quickly becoming an “environment” which the performers inhabit with the public, without any psychological or architectural barriers. In just a few minutes we sense that something powerful is happening: we are witnessing the creation of a community and we are becoming immediately, necessarily part of it. Eleven performers, eleven distinct individualities, bring forth something that has nothing to do with the performance itself, but more with activating here and now a variety of stimuli and intuitions. We are immersed into a sequence of songs, actions, dramatic structures and choreographed movements that make up the show. The one single prop on the stage is a large American flag.

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Mario Biagini, listening with every fiber in his body, follows the performance standing, in the middle of the audience, with the intense participation of a father. Ginsberg’s texts, alternating with heart-rending traditional blues provide the building blocks and the substance of the show, which crystallizes gradually around a score of distinct musical and dramatic moments. Ginsberg’s voice, his radical and prophetic vision seems to resonate as topical as ever through these young performers. Together with his capacity to interweave political analysis and élan vital with Buddhism, as well as Jeremiah-like lamentations.

There is a direct connection between the way in which the performers’ bodies breathe life into the choral movements and the way in which Ginsberg’s words come alive in the songs and monologues. His texts, sometimes sung, sometimes spoken, take shape in the dialogue between America (Marina Gregory) and her sons/citizens. While America proffers her visions of hope, failing and foreboding, with overtones of a biblical prophet, in hallucinatory monologues, her sons/citizens embody the manifold impulses, political instances and contradictions that make up her social body. “It occurs to me that I am America”. This dialogue comes out in fact as a series of questions, constantly reformulated until they reach the conclusion that “we are “ all America, that America is ultimately the sum total of all these impulses.

Marina Gregory’s expressive range peaks in monologues that unfold according to an inner rhythm in counterpoint to both Ginsberg’s texts and the harmonies sung by the others. Some verses from Kaddish and America are recognizable as such in the songs, but it is mainly the spirit of the poet that transpires, still taunting. Thirteen years after the poet’s death, his discourse seems more topical than ever; his verses have the rhythm and cadence of spoken language, a live wire connection between poetry and real life.

Absorbing Ginsberg, the performers of the Workcenter appropriate the failings of American democracy, the centrality of the erotic impulses, and the necessity of genuine spirituality in daily life.



A striking characteristic of the show is the peculiar quality of attention that takes hold of the whole room. It is difficult to explain it, it surely has to do with the way the actors are listening to each other, in a state of tension that involves the totality of body and gaze. This has a contagious effect on the public which becomes one with the performers. This happens through long gazes they focus in turn on various members of the public, creating intense individual connections. As the show draws to its close, one has the feeling of being transported into a dimension where theater reclaims its archaic ability to create a communion between participants.

I Am America is a show with an apparently frail structure, which turns out to be a solid and flexible one. Watching it on different nights, in different venues was enlightening. The New York premiere was at the Barishnikov Arts Center, in a room of mirrors, windows and cement, perhaps appropriate for dancing, but poorly prepared to receive a show where voices and acoustic guitars bet everything on harmony and the beauty of sound. The group adapted rapidly to the surroundings, and drawing power from the structure of their actions, managed to inhabit this acoustically unwelcoming space, filling it with sound and warmth. A few nights later the show was performed in a private loft, under different conditions. With the public packed together right up to the performers, the physical space for the choreographed actions was reduced. Again, the group adapted and took possession of its environment: if the running around and ampleness of movements was abbreviated, the close vicinity to the audience allowed for increased intimacy. It became truly chamber-theater, and this time the music benefited from much warmer acoustics. The third time the show was performed at Saint Mark Church, in the East Village, a historical locale where Ginsberg was a regular. Word of mouth had produced a large crowd outside; a mostly young public was patiently waiting in a line going around the corner. The ample nave of the church with its high ceiling was finally a space able to exalt the acoustic qualities of the show. For this spectator, the emotion started flowing from the first songs, by now familiar.

The show proceeded impetuously, like a succession of gusts of wind. I realized yet again how much the performers sustained one another vocally in songs, as well as in the spoken parts. For instance, here more than in the preceding venues, when Agnieszka Kazimierska launched into her monologue, the vocalizing of the others became both its support structure and frame, heightening it. The verse "sincerity is the key to eternity", sung during the first part of the show, seemed to embody the group's overall mental approach. The striking thing was that even in the precision of the collective rhythm, of the melody and the physical action, each individual had their own idiosyncratic approach to the work. The common search was palpable, as well as the preservation of individuality, which excluded the temptation to imitate. Their bodies, their faces, their voices open to the point that at the end of an hour's performance we felt that we knew them intimately and were ready to give them our trust.

The music and actions featured them in groups of two (gripping intensity in the moments between Alejandro Tomas Rodriguez and Davide Curzio), three, five and all eleven, exploring various combinatory possibilities. Marina Gregory's perfect diction was set off against the suggestive cacophony of the other performers' accents, as if in a cross-section of a multi-ethnic New York. The blues introduced melancholy and a traditional element. Anticipating or concluding dramatic arcs, the blues often provide moments of epiphany, like "This a way, That a way" (led by Felicita Marcelli). Ginsberg's dazzling visions, his social criticism, his courage in being exposed and self-examining, echo anew within the songs and monologues that fill the church.

*Alessandro Cassin covers culture and the arts for [L'Espresso](#) [3] (Italy) and is a regular contributor to [The Brooklyn Rail](#) [4], [Lacanian Ink](#) ([5]USA) e [Arquine](#) [6](Mexico). He is also Publishing Director at [Centro Primo Levi](#) [7]

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