Mnemodrama in Action

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An Introduction to the Theatre of Alessandro Fersen

By

John C Green

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For PAOLA, ARIELA, FIRENZA, and TESS

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This section presents a comprehensive selection of Fersen's principle writings on Mnemodrama, translated into English for the first time. These include papers and interviews privately published in 1978 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of his Studio, under the collective title, *The Lost Dimension* ('La Dimensione Perduta') and *The Theatre, After* ('Il Teatro, Dopo'), Fersen's major thesis on ritual, theatre, and the creation of Mnemodrama. The selection is rounded out with a paper from the beginning of his Studio experiments: *The Language of Theatre and the Language of Cinema* ('Il linguaggio teatrale e Il linguaggio cinematografico') which was initially presented by Fersen at the International Theatre Seminar which he hosted in his Studio in 1964, and which he developed from an earlier manifesto, written in 1950, with the provocative title, *Theatre Saved by Cinema.*

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I am deeply grateful to Alessandro Fersen for his generosity in sharing his work with me, and granting me unfettered access to his writings. A truly remarkable man of the theatre, I hope that this volume serves to introduce his work to a wider public and in the process extend his reputation as one of the 20th Century's theatrical innovators. I am extremely grateful to Ariela Fajrajzen for her help and advice and her tireless work in preserving and extending her father's legacy through the Fersen Foundation. I am indebted to Paola Bertolone and Eva Papageorgiou for their insights into the experience of performing Mnemodramas, and to all of Fersen's students who shared their experiences with me, and are identified in the text by their first names. To Maria Casa, Dr. Firenza Guidi, and Lorenza Vendittelli my sincere thanks and admiration for their great skill and patience in providing me with initial English translations of Fersen's writings to work from. To Richard Gough and the staff at the Centre for Performance Research in Cardiff for their support in providing a critical forum for the study of Fersen's work. To Dr. Osita Okagbue for his critical reading and insightful comments early in the process, and to my colleague Phillip Zarrilli for acknowledging my work on Fersen in his own research on Occidental Theatre practice and its relationship to Altered States of Consciousness. Thanks must also go to my colleagues at Columbia College Chicago, for their support during my sabbatical leave, which gave me valuable time for the completion of this book. Finally, enormous and heartfelt thanks to my wonderful wife Tess for her critical technical reading of early drafts of the manuscript, and her constant support and encouragement on every step of this journey.

PART ONE

FERSEN, THE STUDIO AND MNEMODRAMA

INTRODUCTION

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SIX: The Dark Play of Mnemodrama
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This chapter identifies the various modes of *Trance* that may be accessed by a performer of Mnemodrama, and examines the relationship between Mnemodrama, traditional models of shamanism, and parashamanic modes of actor training..

INTRODUCTION

In May 1996 Alessandro Fersen (1911-2001) received a Golden Aeschylos, Italian theatre's most prestigious award, for his "Services to Theatre and the Creation of Mnemodrama", a public recognition of the achievements of one of the most strikingly original theatre artists in mid-twentieth century Italy. An individual who was by turns a distinguished theatre director, playwright, teacher, scholar and actor, who graced the screen in a number of character roles in the Italian cinema of the 1960s and '70s. Less well known to anyone outside of Italy's theatre and academic circles was Fersen's role as a pioneer of post-war experimental theatre practice, where his achievements included the creation of the first independent theatre school in Italy in 1957, into which he incorporated the first post-war studio laboratory in Europe.

The initial catalyst for the creation of this theatre laboratory was Fersen's desire to find a practical answer to the question, "Why the modern theatre? With what aims and by which means does it exist within the framework of our society?" Commencing with a rigorous practical testing of Stanislavski's theories of actor training, Fersen embarked on a search for a "genetic code" for the Occidental actor which led him into a practical exploration of archaic forms of performance existing on the threshold between ritual and theatre, resulting in the development of a series of acting experiences which, after 30 years of experimentation, he codified under the generic title of *Mnemodrama* a "drama of memory".

In essence Mnemodrama provides a psychic training for the performer, which involves her voluntarily entering an altered state of consciousness through the manipulation of a scenic prop, such as a stick of wood or bolt of cloth, onto which she projects meanings excavated from both the autobiographical and archetypal or "mythical" levels of her unconscious. Through regular repetition of this process, the performer is able to explore different aspects of her "performative" persona, without recourse to a pre-existing text. This mode of enquiry was inspired by Fersen's own exposure to states of possession manifested by initiates (Adoxus) of the *Candomble* religion that he witnessed in Bahia, Brazil, in 1958.

Viewed historically, Fersen's laboratory represented a continuation and development of ideas and practices initially articulated by the pre-war theatrical avant-garde in Paris, in response to what they saw at the time as the dead traditions and false approaches to the craft resulting from the Romantic period and the bourgeois naturalistic theatre. Drawing on the legacy of Jacques Copeau, via his encounter with Charles Dullin in the 1930s, and the writings of Antonin Artaud, which were translated into Italian in the late 1950s, Fersen embraced the idea that the essence of theatre was not literary, but ritualistic and physical. In philosophy and practice, his laboratory experiments anticipated by several years those of Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook both of whom, together with Julian Beck and Judith Manila of the Living Theatre, observed his early experiments and participated in the symposiums that formed a vital support to the practical research.

Fersen's theatre laboratory may be seen as part of a specific movement in mid-twentieth century Occidental theatre practice, a response to what the Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann (1966) described as the 'breakdown of consciousness' in modern art; a breakdown which he believed necessitated a rediscovery of archaic qualities of *participation mystique*, an all embracing participation with the world, that could contain "the constructive, creative elements of a new world vision"[1]. Neumann was influenced in his thinking by the writings of the French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl, as was Fersen before him, who studied with Levy-Bruhl in Paris in the 1930s, and whose interest in anthropology pre-dated his engagement with theatre. His subsequent experiments were conducted with the collaboration of anthropologists working in the field of ritual practices, one of whom, Alfonso M. di Nola (1978), witnessing performances of Mnemodramas, observed that:

> In anthropological terms and in a careful decoding of the languages provoked by Fersen, we find ourselves in the presence of experiences, which are, for Italy, extremely new and profoundly archaic. Ancientness is the rediscovery of a "sacred" level of acting and being belonging to the great cultural traditions which have been forgotten, those, for example, emerging in the whole shamanic, possessorial and Dionysian current, disintegrated, broken up or deprived of its significance by consumerism and the superficial type of culture within which we are immersed [2].

I had the great good fortune to be invited by Fersen to visit his studio in Rome in 1990 and 1992 to witness Mnemodramas in performance, and discuss the experience with his cohort of participants, especially his senior

collaborator Paola Bertolone. From them and from extended conversations and subsequent correspondences with Fersen, which also included unfettered access to his writings, I gained an understanding of this unique approach to occidental actor training, which is the focus of this introductory study. “Introductory” in the sense that, despite his achievements, Fersen’s work still remains relatively unknown to an English speaking audience. He rarely travelled internationally and only twice presented his work to theatre communities in the United States and the United Kingdom, although he was enthusiastically received on both occasions. Similarly, his writings on theatre in general and his experiments in Mnemodrama in particular, have not been readily available in translation, an omission that I seek to redress in the second half of this volume, with a selection of his writings on the genesis and practice of Mnemodrama.

ONE:

WITNESSING MNEMODRAMA (1)

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again
—Walter Benjamin

DEFINITIONS

i

The Mnemodrama–literally a "drama of memory"–is a psycho-theatrical technique of anthropological matrix, finalized to self-knowledge and to the expression of one's deep/profound identity [3]

ii

Mnemodrama: The actualization in dramatic-oneiric form, of an event or trauma that emerges from the unconscious of the performer and which is expressed scenically. The Mnemodrama is the result of a kind of exercise that represents an advanced step in the "techniques of abandon": the play-relation to a neutral prop. Mnemodrama can be spoken or silent, the work of one person or a group. It is spontaneous and does not proceed from any text or direction. It is not a play, only a personal experience for the actor [4]

iii

The Mnemodrama offers the actor a new human and artistic dimension, which confers upon his work a profound dignity, constitutes an incentive towards the research of his expressive originality and renders him aware that his work, far from being a purely mimetic "routine", can bring about profound and decisive experiences of life [5]

iv

Mnemodrama stops on the threshold of interpretation and therefore it does not cross over into interpretation. So what is the quality of transformation in terms of theatre? The Mnemodrama is specific–it cannot be transformed into other types or styles of theatre [6]

ENCOUNTERS

i

A stage. The scene is set at night in a room in a castle under siege, a woman paces, endlessly wringing her hands. She is observed:

> Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One: two:
> why, then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky! Fie, my
> Lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? What need we fear
> who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt?
> Yet who would have thought the old man
> to have had so much blood in him? [7]

ii

A space deemed sacred. Bahia, Brazil, 1958: An Adoxu manifests the Orixa that has possessed her during a Candomble ritual. Among those observing the performance is Alessandro Fersen:

> By following one night the dangerous evolutions of a young girl in trance, possessed by Ogun the god of war, I have reached some interesting conclusions. The young black…was taking enormous leaps into the air and was facing imaginary battles whilst waving about a heavy silver sword (symbol of Ogun) without ever touching with her downward strokes, the large number of faithful gathered around the barracao walls. By observing the beautiful face transfigured by the orgiastic trance, the closed or semi-closed eyes, a slash of foaming like a wound at the side of the mouth, I thought I saw in her abandonment to the turbulent god a subtle presence, an imperceptible fringe of control presiding over the whole of that exhausting possession [8]

iii

The Studio Fersen of Scenic Arts, Via della Lungara, Rome, March 1992 [9]. A performance of a *Gestural Mnemodrama* observed by John Green.

A large room, well-lit and empty but for a few scattered chairs; performances always take place against a brick wall at one end of the studio, the stage area (approximately 15 ft. square) is marked out by six spotlights on mobile stands. The performer, Paola Bertolone, wearing street clothes and no make-up, lies alone on the stage floor, within grasping distance of her scenic prop, a stick of wood some three feet in length. She lies on her back in total silence and is instructed by the director

Alessandro Fersen to empty her mind of all preconceptions regarding her imminent performance. This is the sum total of her preparation.

The houselights dim and there is total darkness for three minutes. When the stage lights come up, the actor is lying on her front, eyes closed. She is completely still for a long time and then slowly, languidly, stretches out and makes initial contact with the stick, grasping it firmly in her left hand. After a slight pause, she begins to describe wide arcs with it, sweeping the floor behind her head and passing it from her left hand to her right, with arms held rigidly at full stretch. As this movement develops into a firm rhythmic pattern, her legs begin to move in time with her arms, conjuring the image of a swimmer. This movement is sustained without variation for some time and then slowly transforms into a brisk scrubbing action–the stick grasped in the right hand and manipulated vertically up and down the floor. Throughout all of this the performer's eyes have remained closed.

Suddenly she changes position and begins to lever herself forward using the stick as a crutch. As she pulls her body along her eyes begin to flicker rapidly as if reacting to a blinding light. It is apparent from her physical exertion and the tension in her body that she is applying her whole weight to the stick as she slowly begins to describe a complete circle on the floor with it. The action completed, she pauses, squats, her eyes flickering rapidly, and suddenly thrusts the stick away with some force, then crawls across the floor to retrieve it. This action is repeated several times until a rhythmic pattern of great beauty fleetingly develops in which, prior to grasping the stick, she arches her arm languidly describing a circle in the air which becomes an exaggerated follow through once the stick has been grasped and rejected. The total effect combines childlike pleasure with the precision and grace of a dancer.

Without warning, the lyrical image is abandoned as Bertolone thrusts the stick between her thighs and proceeds to crawl around the space, creating a new and disturbing image which fuses the childlike with an aggressive, phallic, animalistic quality. This proves to be a brief interlude before she suddenly returns to her previous pattern, which is now accompanied by vocal sounds, wordless singing and odd snatches of indistinctly mumbled phrases. Slowly she stands and, walking backwards, drags the prop, which appears to have grown heavier, across the floor with both hands. Once again this "choreography" develops through repetition, and finally involves her lifting the prop high above her head and then pushing and pulling it along the ground. She holds her body rigid and at full stretch

throughout this sequence, her pupils dilated, as she describes whirling patterns in the air with increasing vigor, until she suddenly strikes the prop with all her might on the floor. As this action progresses she opens her eyes fully for the first time but refuses to allow her gaze to fall on the prop; it is as if something else, something internal, holds her gaze. Fersen stands close to her throughout the performance, but she appears to be unaware of his presence in such close proximity to hers.

The pattern of Bertolone's movement changes again as she dramatically falls to her knees, using the prop to dig into the floor in a rhythm which takes on an increasing sense of urgency until she rises to her feet and continues moving in a circle, accompanying her actions with strange hooting sounds. Suddenly she falls to the floor and assumes a fetal position, which she holds quite still, for well over a minute. Then slowly she begins thrusting out her legs again in a reprise of her earlier "swimming" action, while lifting her prop slowly into the air, once again creating a very delicate image. The fetal position is briefly resumed and then abruptly abandoned as she rolls over onto her back, caressing the prop and undulating her body in an image of sensuous abandon, laughing to herself as her movements become erotically charged and the laughter turns to deep sighs. Suddenly a scream rips from her lips and she throws the prop away with a force that seems to exhaust her. She lies quite still with her eyes closed once more. All action ceases for some minutes until she slowly stretches out her hands feeling for the prop and, upon discovering it, cradles it gently in her arms and collapses into the fetal position, stroking the prop as she does so.

At this point Fersen moves quietly away from her side to the periphery of the playing space, from where he signals to the stage manager to play some music. The first measures of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* fill the space, and on hearing the music Bertolone suddenly clenches the prop between her thighs again, then violently casts it away, but this time leaves it where it has fallen and retreats to a corner of the studio, where she again collapses into the fetal position. She now lies completely still for the longest time in the whole performance. Fersen watches her intently and then slowly indicates that the studio lights should be dimmed to blackout, signaling the end of the performance. When the house lights are restored, Bertolone is still lying in her final fetal position, eyelids flickering, murmuring incoherently under her breath. The whole performance has lasted exactly seventeen minutes.

Slumped across two chairs, in a state of total physical and emotional exhaustion, an hour passes before Paola Bertolone is able to speak. As if waking slowly from a dream she repeatedly describes her performance as a "beautiful experience"[10]. Two days later she is able to provide me with more detailed insights, and begins by explaining that in the period of darkness before commencing her performance, she attempted to empty her mind of "everyday reality" while remaining conscious of the presence of the audience. As the stage lights came up, her initial move towards the prop was completely spontaneous and in those first few moments she found herself listening to the pattern of sounds created by the contact of the stick with the floor; following this soundtrack intently as she conjured up a vision of the prop's "flight path" as it whirled through space. This image of the stick in flight became the dominant ludic relationship in the early stages of the performance and her vocalizations at this point were an attempt to communicate with the prop, to encourage it to "fly". As the performance progressed, the prop appeared to her to manifest a greater weight and power, as if it was animating her, literally dragging her across the floor. The moment when she perceived this transformation in the prop, she was filled with its presence and abandoned herself to it, losing consciousness of her own movements, the audience, and the time/space reality of the studio itself, all of which were replaced by the sensation of a huge breath of air which pressed into her as if it could tear her apart. It was this sensation that provided her with her "beautiful experience":

> My senses were communicating to me heightened responses to the outside world: The light was excessively vivid, the whole scene was too brilliant for my eyes to tolerate but at a certain moment, unpredictably, my fingers found a rather hard and compact object and my interest became completely absorbed by this "foreigner". It was beautiful to caress it and when I understood that I could play with it, I suddenly felt a deep joy. The strength of that stick was enormous; it was pulling my arm, then my back and all my entire body everywhere it wanted. Something I do remember exactly, was the fact that I really was compelled to twirl on the ground, that something was conducting my empty body. I cannot remember how long it lasted nor the way everything finished: I have no personal awareness but since the normal length of this kind of Mnemodrama is about 20 minutes more or less, I have to deduce a similar condition in this case too. I only have clear memories of how I felt altered, "inflected", for many hours in the evening when the group was having dinner together and even afterwards[11].

As our interview continued, Bertolone reflected on what she discerned to be a strong autobiographical thread running through her Mnemodrama, drawing attention to the recurring child-like images of crawling, playing

with the prop as if it were a baby and adopting the fetal position. However, all of these images presented themselves in the abstract, rather than the evocation of concrete memories. What was present for her was the half-glimpsed revelation of a "great power" which lay submerged beneath her daily persona, and which was partially released during this performance:

> It is like seeing objects, people and ourselves through a magnifying glass: Everything looks truer than reality. You can often be granted the extraordinary gift of finding again lost emotions, lost smells, lost feelings, lost images of your past, sometimes pieces of your hidden life…[12]

Her performances always leave her with the feeling that her daily existence is now physically and emotionally diluted, characterized by her sense that her body feels much heavier in her daily existence than when she performs Mnemodramas. Comparing her work with Fersen to her previous training as an actor, she noted that:

> With Fersen one is working with one's own personal narrative, not with a personal narrative designed to stimulate the needs of a character. Stanislavski never asked his actors to abandon themselves. By way of contrast, with Fersen the actor is always searching for herself-any narrative is always inward looking.[13]

In this first chapter I have outlined four definitions of Mnemodrama as proposed by Fersen during various stages of his studio experiments, and three examples of its manifestation in performance. Lady Macbeth's "sleepwalking" scene locates a trace of Mnemodrama running through the western cannon of dramatic texts; while Fersen's description of the dancing Adoxu, viewed through the lens of anthropology, identifies a ritual practice located outside Occidental Theatre norms. Finally, Paola Bertolone's performance represents the apex of Fersen's thirty-year experiment in excavating the performer's unconscious, and bringing to light hidden vistas of her persona, by means of inducing an altered state of consciousness. The metaphor of a journey is crucial here not only to an understanding of the processes of Mnemodrama, but as an insight into Fersen himself.

TWO:

IN SEARCH OF LOST DIMENSIONS

> I am without roots and this feeling has determined the path of my work
> —Alessandro Fersen [14]

He was born Alexander Fajrajzen on December 5th, 1911 to a family of wealthy Jewish bankers, in the City of Lodz, Poland. Two years later, replete with an Italianized version of his name, he was uprooted and taken to live in the family's newly adopted home in Genoa. Henceforth, Poland became an exotic landscape of his imagination, fueled by his mother's stories, a "lost dimension" not in a geographical, but in an ontological sense.

Family tradition determined that the young Fersen would either become a banker or follow a career in the law. At eighteen, he duly enrolled as a law student at the University of Genoa but almost immediately became interested in literature, philosophy, and anthropology. The awakening of his mythopoeic spirit can be found in the pages of his doctoral dissertation *The Universe as a Game* ("l'universo come Giuoco") written in 1933. In it he put forward the argument that the original free play of the universe, the primal world of wild spontaneous energies, had been transformed over historical time into one of socially conditioned order within which man's ability to directly experience the ecstasy of primordial life had been buried under the unconscious layers of the individual psyche. Fersen argued for mankind's return to a condition of "creative abandonment", a concept modeled on anthropological descriptions of archaic feasts, in which the distinctions between celebrant and witness dissolved in the "playful" ecstasy of mutual participation:

> In that youthful work, "play" was conceived as an essential disorder – psychic and cosmic – contrasting with the order superimposed on it by the rational apparatus of the human mind. I wrote the term chaos with a capital letter ("Chaos, Caprice, Game") with a certain adolescent emphasis . . . At that time the wonderful "Homo Ludens" by Huizinga had not yet been published, it appeared several years later. That far-off work of mine was

> conceived as a translation in modern terms of a fragment from Heraclitus: "life is a child playing with dice: it is the sovereignty of youth". [15]

The thesis was heavily influenced by his absorption in the writings of Nietzsche, which had recently been translated into Italian by the philosopher Giorgio Colli, who was later to become a personal friend of Fersen's and an advocate for his experiments in *Mnemodrama.* What attracted the rootless Fersen to Nietzche's writings was the latter's characterization of the "mythless man" of the industrial West who was fired by the energies of material progress but at the same time troubled by an immense nostalgia for the original generative moment of mythic consciousness – the *illud tempus* – the "time of origins", when the great archetypal events of myth took place:

> The tremendous historical need of our unsatisfied modern culture, the assembling around one of countless other cultures, the consuming demand for knowledge-what does all this point to, if not the loss of the mythical home, the mythical maternal womb. [16]

In addition to Nietzsche, Fersen's thesis showed the influence of the writings of the anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl and the playwright Luigi Pirandello, the former's appearance in his work incurring the wrath of the university authorities for whom anthropology could not be considered a legitimate field of scientific study. Although as yet disinterested in the theatre as a possible vocation, Fersen was attracted to the plays of Pirandello because of their emphasis on the dualism of man living a life and witnessing himself living that life. For Pirandello, in such works as *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), this was the definitive condition of man as a role-playing entity in society, but for Fersen it represented an image of mankind's coercion from the spontaneous play of primal participation to a state of psychophysical control through the advent of science. The mythopoeic dimensions of Fersen's thesis caused a scandal and he was accused of "anarchic intentions against the state" by the university authorities:

> My thesis was already a rebellion against that entire bourgeois world from whence I came and also a rebellion against the official culture of the time. My thesis supervisor was Giuseppe Rensi, a great teacher, a skeptic philosopher of the Pirronian School, who periodically ended up in jail because of certain books/pamphlets of his against Mussolini, the Regime and the official philosophy. It was precisely during one of these sojourns in the motherland's jail that I had to discuss the thesis with his direct antagonist, an *ante-Marcia* philosopher. They called two extra professors

> for the defense insults flew thick and fast. I was accused of "anarchy," the thesis was defined by the Professor of Pedagogy as "dynamite" for the State and the like. They were quite right. In contrast with that social and cultural reality, strictly organized into cadres and aimed at great destinies, *The Universe as a Game* exalted the return to a life free from violations and oppressions, released from the schemes of the "useful," with an innocent touch of nostalgia for the Primitive life [17].

It was only with the greatest difficulty that Fersen finally obtained his degree, which was published in 1936. In retrospect, the ludic emphasis of *The Universe as a Game*, whilst it initially remained unknown outside the world of Italian academia, does suggest that Fersen was in tune with the mythopoeic spirit that was coursing through the veins of the artistic avant-garde in pre-war Europe. His thesis not only anticipated the publication of Huizinga's seminal work on the psychology of play, *Homo Ludens* over a decade later, but echoed Martin Buber's concept of the *I-Thou* participative relationship between the self and the world, the moment when the details of existence are experienced afresh, as if for the first time in an act that Victor Turner and others would later define as "spontaneous communitas".[18]

Following the debacle over his thesis, Fersen decided to leave Genoa and flee to Paris, a move prompted by his desire to avoid taking up Italian citizenship which at that time would have required him to join the Fascist Party, and with it the prospect of conscription into the army. His subsequent Parisian sojourn as a nationless citizen of the world, an action taken against the wishes of his family, may be seen as a further stage in his mythopoeic journey. Upon his arrival in 1936, he immediately enrolled in classes taught by Levy-Bruhl at the College de France and was slowly drawn into an artistic climate still captivated by the glow of the Surrealists:

> Paris for me was the Sorbonne and then the College de France with Valery and with Levy-Bruhl and the discovery – dazzling – of anthropology; and the disinterested meetings (I was not in the least thinking of making theatre yet) with Charles Dullin and the theatrical aversion to Naturalism and conversations with Andre Gide, Arthur Adamov and with many others…At the same time I was leading a second life: living hand to mouth, working to survive[19].

Although 'disinterested' in making theatre at the time of his meetings with Charles Dullin, the latter provided Fersen with his first connection between the nostalgia for the "primitive" as expressed in his thesis and its actual influence, in the form of ritual processes, on a wider artistic

practice; sowing seeds of inspiration that would later come to fruition when Fersen eventually embarked upon his own theatrical vocation.

Dullin had received his training from, and was a disciple of, Jacques Copeau, who emphasized movement and play as essential elements in releasing spontaneity and creativity in the actor. A key component of Copeau's training was the use of masks to help develop "sincerity' and 'presence". Leabhart (1995) makes clear that the manifestation of an altered state of consciousness was the ideal goal for Copeau's actor:

> Reading the abundant texts of Copeau and his main disciples-among them Jean Daste, Michel St. Denis, Charles Dullin, Etienne Decroux and Jean Dorcy-we are struck by the frequency of certain metaphors; each of these men use a similar language to write of a certain ideal state-mental and physical-for the actor. Jean Daste said he was "possessed" and that he experienced "moments of frenzy". Dullin writes of an "altered state of consciousness." Jean Dorcy uses the word "trance." And Jacques Copeau writes of a character that "comes from outside, takes hold of him, and replaces him"[20].

Dullin founded his Theatre de l'Atelier in 1920, as a combined theatre and training school, organized on the principle of a commune. On the walls of the Atelier studio were hung brightly painted masks, many in black leather or imitation wood. Following Copeau, Dullin's adoption of mask exercises indicated a decisive shift in emphasis in actor training at the time, away from the psychological "effective memory" technique initially propounded by Stanislavski, towards the realm of ritual performance, with the masked actors entering a state akin to Edward Gordon Craig's *ubermarionette* awaiting animation, "actor plus fire, minus ego"[21]. One of Dullin's earliest students was Antonin Artaud [22] and in one of those interesting quirks of historical timing at the very moment Fersen arrived in Paris, Artaud departed for Mexico and the territory of the Tarahumara Indians, where he intended to study their ritual practices. Fersen would never meet him, but he later acknowledged the deep impact that Artaud's writings on theatre and his concept of the "actor in trance" had on the development of the laboratory experiments.

Theatre and Resistance

On November 18th 1938, Mussolini's Fascist government introduced race laws designed to severely repress the social and economic freedoms of the Jewish population living in Italy; as a consequence of this Fersen was

unable to return home. Instead he joined the Italian Socialist Party in exile and led an itinerant existence in Eastern Europe:

> I did the most diverse and incredible jobs: teaching, photo journalism, waiting tables, repairing Persian rugs (the hardest and most dangerous), floor polishing and in the end, through a series of circumstances that tossed me here and there in Europe, working in a military airplane factory on the Nieman.[23]

In 1943, following Italy's surrender to the Allies and the subsequent German invasion, he joined the Resistance Movement, working for the recently formed National Liberation Committee, in the region of Liguria. Later he was sent to Switzerland where he worked in a refugee camp in a tiny village in the Valais. In the camp he met the artist Emanuele Luzzati and through him became involved in creating theatre for the first time:

> Fersen (for me at that time Professor Fajrajzen) was giving me French lessons and exciting my fantasy with tales of shows seen in Paris, of what had been done and what could have been done in the theatre, of how he conceived the action of movement, of sound etc. I see the images of our first show, done in Switzerland with the refugees: *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, my first design for the stage, all made of rags, not by choice, but of necessity, because there was nothing else…going to visit Fersen, and asking him for a text for this show, for which we had thought of everything but…telling the story. Fersen was then for me more a poet, a writer than a director [24].

Following the liberation of Italy, Fersen returned to Genoa where he was appointed to the Secretariat of Cultural Re-organization for the Committee for National Liberation for the region of Liguria, a position he held from 1945 to 1947. In 1948 he resumed his theatrical journey, when he was invited to become the writer and director in residence at the Nuovo Theatre in Genoa. Teamed once again with Luzzati as his designer, Fersen chose for the inaugural production his own adaptation of the *Lea Lebovitz*, a traditional Hasidic legend that tells the story of a young girl who sacrifices her own life in order to save that of a young student of the Talmud with whom she is in love:

> The label of "Jewish Theatre" was that which, in the aftermath of the war, opened for us all the doors of all the theatres in Italy. I had made the *Lea Lebovitz* into a legend set within the framework of Jewish folklore, and this in order to satisfy two requirements: the first, that of a moral testimony towards a civilization almost entirely destroyed by Nazism together with all its wealth of traditions, poetry and wisdom; the second, that of a very

> precise choice of focus, from the point of view of the show, which excluded, even in the legendary character of the plot, midway between heaven and earth, any naturalistic dimension, privileging instead the moment of theatrical stylization. It was improperly defined as "theatre-ballet": In reality, it was the first spontaneous attempt at what was then-with an ugly formula-called *total theatre*: with the word flowing into the song, the mime intertwined with the dance, with an anti-literary physicality dictated by the use of Luzzati's huge masks. [25]

The production of *Lea Lebovitz* enabled Fersen to explore artistically the "lost dimension" of his own cultural roots, and in his description of the mise-en-scene, including the use of giant masks, we may detect the first influence of Dullin on his emerging theatre aesthetic:

> I was rehearsing the *Lea Lebovitz* at the Nuovo, and next-door Girgio Strehler together with Paolo Graasi had founded the Piccolo Theatre, and was staging Gorky's *The Lower Depths.* We had started the adventure with no organization, no means, no place for rehearsals, no money, and, above all, with not the least idea of the practical problems of making theatre. But we were animated by a faith so strong that we managed to surmount all obstacles, to put together some hundred thousand lire and perform. All the cast, when they were not rehearsing, were painting with big paint brushes Lele's rags and jutes, under the direction of the novice scenic designer. A show within the show that would have shocked any professional: but since it seemed absolutely natural to both Lele and I that it should be so the actors accepted and…painted. Moreover I must confess to you-do not think I am immodest-that as soon as I set foot on stage, something strange happened to me: I knew everything or it seemed to me that I knew everything about the secrets, tricks, the "magic" of the theatre. And for the actors, but also for the critics I was, "an important director from Poland or somewhere around there…with great experience of staging plays." [26]

Following the enthusiastic critical and public reception accorded the *Lea Lebovitz*, Fersen attempted to refine his version of "total theatre" in subsequent productions, but without achieving anything like the same success. A looming crisis of personal artistic confidence was momentarily averted when, in 1949, he was invited to direct a production of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, staged in the parks of Nervi, a little town near Genoa. The production marked Fersen's first professional encounter with the classical cannon and comedy:

> The company of *Wives* was a company of major "stars". But Lele and I were not, in spite of the joy at our success, completely satisfied: at the time we wanted to do our own theatre, not the repertoire theatre: to lock ourselves up in the professional theatre did not interest us. We were asking

> a lot more from theatre, experiences of life, creating a community of collaborators who would research new ways of making theatre. [27]

Unsure of how to proceed professionally, Fersen exorcised his frustration by writing in quick succession three manifestos: *The Out-of- Date Theatre, The Destiny of Theatre is in Its Origins*, and *Theatre Saved by Cinema* in which he attacked the literary focus and industrial packaging of productions, advocating instead for a return to the origins of theatre, for the excavation of the original, primal impulse that created community through performance:

> There already was, implicit, the rejection of the purely aesthetic function of theatre, in the name of the original reasons for *performance* as a human activity. The literary text, then, was no longer enough. There was, in these manifestos, the nostalgia for the medieval pantomime and there were also some polemical "re-evaluations" of the Opera, of the Broadway musical, and of the cinema, almost as if in search of a modern *Commedia dell'Arte*.[28]

The publication of the manifestos in 1951 caused a sensation that split the Italian theatre community into pro and anti Fersen factions. In an attempt to realize in practice something of the spirit of his polemics, Fersen and Luzzati created the first "Happening" in Rome in the winter of 1951. At this time Fersen was supplementing his meager earnings from theatre by working as an assistant producer for a film company, from which he managed to scrape together enough money to open a small café-theatre, where he gathered together an international group of performers which included Catherine Sauvage, Etienne Decroux's assistant Eliane Gyuon, dancers from Martha Graham's company, and a New Orleans Jazz band. The resulting show was entitled *Nottambuli* ("Sleepwalkers") a "surrealist cabaret" of modern dance, mime and songs together with readings from the writings of Bertolt Brecht and Eugene Ionesco, both relative unknowns in the Italian theatre at this time. Fersen's program note for the show deliberately evoked the spirit of his manifestos:

> It is our belief that in modern times the need for a return to the original unity of theatrical life is becoming progressively outlined and accentuated. In every era, at every latitude, within every civilization – in the Greek Tragedy as well as the Medieval Miracle Play, in the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, in the Javanese and Chinese theatre-those which we consider autonomous theatrical arts: prose, singing, dance, live together harmoniously fused in the complex and rich equilibrium of a unique work of art, they constitute the undivided elements of a single language which is

> that of the authentic theatre. When this unity is broken, man's theatrical vocation tends to be distorted and neglected. [29]

The presentation of *Nottambuli* brought Fersen into conflict with the civil authorities who regarded him as an anarchist, and he was forced to close down the café-theatre in the face of oppressive police surveillance. The project had been a genuine attempt to re-create the conditions of Dullin's *Atelier* for the theatre-going public in Rome. The fact that all the performers lived together as a commune, receiving food in payment for their performances, not only acknowledged Dullin's model, but also anticipated that of the Living Theatre whose directors Julian Beck and Judith Manila became regular visitors to Fersen's studio during the 1960s. Later Fersen would return to the montage style of *Nottambuli* with another original piece *Crazy Show*, which he devised with the cooperation of Guido Stagnaro and the young composer Luciano Berio. Fersen described this piece as a "funambolic surrealist cocktail" and it proved to be Rome's first experience of what would later come to be known as "Theatre of the Absurd." Once again the experiment faltered in the face of establishment hostility and Fersen was forced to abandon it:

> They were a few bitter months of dire poverty and debts to be disposed of. Scattered friends and a refugee's life in the heart of Rome: from whence I was providentially rescued by a fellow student from university days who was trying to become a film director. He gave me a role in his first film, which was also my first role as a film actor and it was also Sophia Scicolone's first film (she was debating whether to assume the stage name of "Sophia Loren"…). And right after I ended up with something like 28 films made at bewildering speed in a little over two years, which permitted me to repay my debts and return to a normal life. But that goading helped me to clear my head: when they offered me a directing position at the newly opened Teatro Stabile in Genoa, I accepted. [30]

Fersen's first production at the Teatro Stabile was Beaumarchais' *The Barber of Saville*, followed by stagings of works by Moliere, Pirandello, Ben Jonson and Lope de Vega, as he devoted himself to the growth of the Stabile's reputation between 1952 and 1957, a period in which he truly immersed himself in learning the techniques of professional theatre practice:

> When I started working there, the Stabile had its home in a cellar, and was managed by an overwhelming administrator called Furia who left all the artistic decisions to me. Thus, starting in 1952, I officially and definitively became a director, and I put aside, at least for a number of years, both the

> idea of a laboratory and any playwriting activity. I must say though, that they were extremely formative years on an artistic level for me, because-due to the extremely poor means of the Stabile-I had the opportunity to be involved in all the technical concerns of the stage, from lighting to the smallest problems with props; and from this craftsman-like relationship with the production process, I learned a lot. My own way of tackling the staging of a classical or modern text became clearer and better defined; the stylization of my early shows became more humanized, without nevertheless renouncing that scenic essentiality I had learned from Dullin. I can say that if in the beginning I pursued theatre as an avocation, in those years I became a professional. [31]

However, Fersen the "theatre professional" was still wrestling with the questions and doubts concerning the "lost dimension" of theatre's role in society, that had prompted him to write the original manifestos:

> It is not a coincidence if, at the end or a little before the conclusion of that period-precisely 1957-I founded the Studio in Rome, whilst still working in Genoa. I felt the need for recapturing the thread of my theoretical meditations and for testing them through scenic experimentation. It was a categorical necessity: I had to give an answer, my answer, to a series of tormenting questions, in which the direction of my life was also involved, and which can be summed up in a single one: Why the modern theatre? With what aims and by which means does it exist within the framework of our society? These are perennial questions, I know, dealing with the position of the theatre within a community. But in those years-with the boom of cinemas and the imminent growth of television, the question assumed a disquieting urgency. And from the deepened knowledge of the theatrical event-I would be able to deduce that which could be for me the "meaning" of the theatre within our culture and modern society. [32]

In seeking a practical answer Fersen turned for inspiration to the model of his *Nottambuli* project, only this time he substituted the concept of a *theatre laboratory*, with its implications of serious scientific research, for the commune. However, the authorities refused to provide either funding or planning permission for the scheme, and rejected his proposal. Eventually Fersen compromised by agreeing to include his research laboratory as a discrete unit within the general curriculum of a theatre training school:

> I was a director, why should I create a School? The Studio was created specifically as a theatrical laboratory. Except that, at the time, talking about a laboratory or theatrical research was very premature: it was impossible to understand what this Fersen wanted to do. And the etiquette of "school"