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The Candlebearer by Giordano Bruno¹

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Abstract

The author explores the affinity between the “philosophy of theatre” and “theatricality of philosophy” of Giordano Bruno, and the contemporary understanding of the links between theatre and philosophy in the 20th and 21st century. The staging of Bruno’s *Candlebearer* by Ljubomir Draškić in 1991/1992, in Belgrade’s “Atelje 212” theatre, closely related to the Italian tradition of the 20th century, is put against productions made at the beginning of the 21st century, in order to “excavate” various types of mediatic presentations of Bruno’s philosophy and their functioning in the modern theatre.

Key words: Giordano Bruno; Philosophy in Theatre; New Media; Translation of Ideas

There is a strong relation to be established between the theatrical aspect of Giordano Bruno’s philosophy on one side, and theatre practices of the 20th and 21st centuries and their use of new media on the other. It has to be viewed as a form of translation in order to explore the mutual dependence of different types of media involved in the philosophical and the linguistic experiment that Bruno’s philosophy offers. I started by researching Bruno’s relation to the new media of his own time – a printed book, a revolutionised theatre: just like the book a century earlier, in 16th century, the theatre was going through a change that made it into a new media – one that Bruno actively used as a tool in his work (Mančić 2015: 58-64, 102-123). This research led to a logical next step: research of Bruno’s works in the context of the

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new media of the 21st century. Even Giordano Bruno's mediatic personality has had a revival as a result of archeological research the authors made using new media. The archeological work is to be done here as excavations and discovery of material traces buried under the thick layers of sedimentary strata of learned dust, in order to translate his ideas creatively into the present time. On the other hand, it is the new media that enabled me to gather most of the material on which my research is based, and to realise the extent of Bruno's presence and relevance today, although it can equally remain blurred by an overwhelming mass of other material, imposed by the same new media. A few points are offered here in order to present the current state of my research in progress.

The Candlebearer

Giordano Bruno's powers of memory and his provocative ideas about the infinity of the universe gained him notoriety of an unorthodox thinker among the highest intellectual circles of 16th century Europe and inevitably attracted the attention of the Inquisition, which had him burned at the stake as a heretic in 1600. Bruno valiantly defended his ideas and his right to maintain them to the very end. His name, even from a distance of four centuries, still causes controversy among scholars. Recent historical assessments have shed new light on Bruno's scientific and philosophical work, undeniably provocative, and the same can be said of his literary work. The radical tendencies are evident in his erudite comedy *The Candlebearer*, which is often considered the end of the Renaissance genre. There is a general consensus among critics that the work is excessively enigmatic, offensive, and obscene. But the stylistic and thematic excesses that have aggravated critics are entirely intentional. By including an exasperating number of prologues and an overkill of obscenity, cupidity, false learning, pedantry, and related motifs, Bruno pushed the genre to its ultimate capacities and made a mockery of its "rules". A quintessential example of his aesthetic philosophy of the extreme and of his attitude of antagonism, *The Candlebearer* is entirely in keeping with the workings of Bruno's mind in general, as evidenced by his other intellectual endeavors that made him a martyr to intellectual freedom.

The Candlebearer, a comedy written in Italian (*Il Candelaio*), was completed and published by Bruno in Paris in the summer of 1582. He goes against the current, by publishing in Italian in France, and by publishing a comedy as a book, instead of putting it on stage. Actually, Bruno's sole theatrical production goes against the current in every possible

way. It is divided into five acts, in accordance with the ancient and the humanistic canon, but it is preceded by a series of unusual literary materials: a burlesque sonnet recited by the book, a dedicatory letter to “Madama Morgana B,” a tripartite “argument,” and finally a prologue, also in three parts. If the division into five acts is canonical, the long introduction in turn constitutes a pyrotechnic phantasmagoria of inventions with which Bruno establishes his distance from the humanistic tradition and the models of contemporary culture, literary, philosophical, and religious. And indeed, the comedy is written in a language rich in terms drawn from spoken Neapolitan, one that absorbs the realistic and burlesque practice of Aretino, Ariosto, or Francesco Berni, mixing it with parodic echoes of classical and ecclesiastical rhetoric. The result is a contamination of linguistic planes, rhetorical levels and literary genres that yields a violent critique of the learned language, which is reduced to a repertory of formulas, and transports onto the social plane the coincidence of infinitely large and infinitely small, illustrated in the cosmological dialogues. That is how Bruno uses the most important media at his disposal: the language. Always going against the current, he applies the same principle to the usage of other media as well.

Giordano Bruno

For an uninformed observer, the claim that Giordano Bruno was an important media personality might come as a surprise. And yet, in 2008, Paolo Coelho began his speech at the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair remembering the 1973 film *Giordano Bruno* by Italian director Giuliano Montaldo. He also remembered the fact that Bruno regularly visited the Frankfurt book fair (an institution with origins directly related to the revolutionary new media of the movable type printing) throughout the last decade of the 16th century. Bruno has been strongly attached to the new media of his time.

His mediatic appearance is in recent times linked to the first aired episode of the American documentary television series *Cosmos: a Spacetime Odyssey*, “Standing Up in the Milky Way”, premiered on March 9, 2014. The series, a follow-up of the 1980s television series *Cosmos: a Personal Voyage* by Carl Sagan, is hosted by astrophysicist and author Neil de Grasse Tyson. It explores astronomy, space and time, astrophysics, biology, and other diverse areas of science. In the first episode, in an animated segment, Tyson discusses life and vision of Giordano Bruno, voiced by Seth MacFarlane, as a person championing an expansive understanding of the Earth’s place in the universe. To show Bruno’s vision of the

cosmic order, he uses an animated adaptation of the Flammarion engraving, a 19th century illustration that has now become a common meme for revealing the mysteries of the Universe. However, the short animation provoked a small storm in the American media, and a series of reactions ensued, as well as a controversy between evolutionists and creationists, in highly polemic tone, from questioning the role of this “idiosyncratic Dominican monk” (Higgitt 2014) as a scientific hero and martyr, to the outright denial of any scientific importance of Bruno’s thought. A list of participants in this debate was long, and it included all sorts of media, from *The Guardian* to the *Discovery Magazine*. At the beginning of the 21st century, the character of Giordano Bruno remains mediatically attractive and controversial.

As a symbolic figure of the 19th century, Giordano Bruno was an exciting theme: The Warburg Institute catalogue lists half a dozen plays inspired by his life written between 1870 and 1929. At the beginning of the 20th century, in 1908, he became a hero of a silent film by Giovanni Pastrone. Through centuries, his symbolic has undergone certain changes. Late nineteenth-century Italians saw Bruno as a national hero and an apostle of modern science. In mid-twentieth century, in London, an influential Bruno scholar, Frances Yates, recasts him as a religious reformer, a mystic, and a practitioner of magic. Giovanni Aquilecchia, her younger contemporary, saw Bruno primarily as a philosopher. However, his alter ego in *The Candlebearer* is not a philosopher or a scientist, but an artist.

The Candlebearer Revival

Since the sixties, Bruno’s comedy became first-rate material for intermedial and transmedial art forms and experiments in theatrical domain. The impulses for the alternative theatre arose in the mid-1960s from a sense of dissatisfaction with traditional theatre, both in terms of its repertoire as well as its production methods and hierarchical structures. Known variously as underground, experimental, guerrilla theatre, these non-traditional forms became widespread in the general climate of youthful political involvement throughout the Western world. Only then, after all the experiments conducted in the 20th century theatre, was Bruno’s comedy put on stage for the first time: after Artaud’s only attempt at putting his theories of the Theatre of Cruelty to the test on stage in 1935, in his own adaptation of the story of the Cenci, that somber Renaissance story of incest and patricide, the theatre of Jean Genet, and Brecht’s theatre technique, which all created new theatrical treatment of the narrative.

Italian theatre actor and director Paolo Poli staged *The Candlebearer* in 1964, in Torino. His production combined several urgent issues of the time, and an experimental scenography made by famous theatre designer Eugenio Guglielminetti (Teatro Stabile 1964). The staging was cited as exemplary in the booklet accompanying the only Serbian production, made in 1992.

Luca Ronconi, another important figure of the Italian theatre, produced his first production of Bruno's comedy in 1968 in the Teatro Fenice in Venice, with a labyrinthic scenography and language as its principal motor, followed by a second one, a co-production of Milan's Teatro Piccolo and Palermo's Teatro Biondo Stabile, directed by Ronconi in Teatro Bellini, in Palermo, in 2001. **[Picture 1]** The time span between the two productions establishes a relation between significant eras in the history of the (Italian?) theatre, crucial in the search for new expressivity. Aldo Trionfo produced Bruno's comedy in the Teatro Stabile dell' Aquila, in Abruzzi, in 1981. In his vision, the piece tackled the problem of language, the participation of the audience, the blurring of the levels of reality and fiction. In tune with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Aldo Trionfo saw the perpetual procrastination of the finale as one of the important features of the comedy. At the beginning of the nineties, famous theatre actor and director from Southern Italy, Tato Russo, directed, in the Bellini Theatre in Naples, a production that involves the issues of language even more deeply, and translates, through the standard Italian as a mediate agent, Bruno's multiple languages back into 16th century Neapolitan. The production was considered a Tato Russo masterpiece, an expression of his artistic maturity and an extraordinary invention. Its performers were men only, playing both male and female roles. Acclaimed by critics, his *Candelaio* was considered a significant event in the history of the Italian theatre, with an excellent cast of the first class Italian stage actors, led by Tato Russo himself. The staging of Bruno's comedy was a sort of an initiation to the new, experimental, and politically engaged forms in theatre, and those theatrical experiments of the 20th century lead to a new turn made in the 21st, when Bruno's philosophy and his theatre become virtually discovered by the new media.

The Candlebearer in Serbian Theatre

In Serbia, the figure of Giordano Bruno was present through the Italian Risorgimento influence since 1890s (Đurić 2012: 257-265), and it must be taken as an important issue, as the interaction with the Italian scene of the time was fruitful in several aspects, political, as

well as artistic. Later on, in the first decades of the 20th century, since the philosophical writings of Ksenija Atanasijević, Bruno was present mainly among the philosophers, and in the second half of the century, his presence continued in translations of his philosophical works. A 1992 production by Ljubomir Draškić in Belgrade's "Atelje 212" theatre, however, seems to have been influenced by the Italian productions directly. In a year especially difficult and crucial for Serbia's history in the last decade of the 20th century, director known as the "veteran of the avant-garde theatre" staged a 16th century comedy *Il Candelaio*, or *The Candlebearer* (1582). Historians of Italian theatre describe Bruno's comedy as "a farewell to the cultivated Renaissance drama". What can we possibly excavate from these heteroclit elements joined together in a play performed in a newly renovated venue, the focal point of Belgrade's avant-garde theatre from its inception in the late fifties, which was "Atelje 212"? The production of the play was more or less classical, and there was nothing to suggest otherwise in the director's comments (or even silences, for that matter) about it. On the contrary: "Even the classical theatre can be new if one is not familiar with it", Draškić said in an interview (Petković 1998). The connections between Draškić's selection of the play and the circumstances surrounding his production seem to be important. It was the first and only production of Bruno's comedy, based on the translation by Ivan Klajn (Bruno 1992).

[Picture 2]

The date of the premiere, on one of the leaflets found in the theatre's archives³, is October 6, 1991, but the booklet of the program printed for the occasion states another date: July 4, 1992. Political events might have played a part in the postponing. For the moment, I have not gathered all relevant facts. The same booklet states a relevant fact that the theatre building, closed since 1988, was reopened in the summer of 1992. However, the booklet puts the premiere of *The Candlebearer* in the theatrical colony *Barski ljetopis*, in a town on the Montenegrin coast. [Picture 3] In any case, the excellent cast was representative of "Atelje 212". Until the last performance on June 29, 1993, it had been played 36 times, not only on the stage of "Atelje 212", but also in various towns and at theatre festivals throughout Yugoslavia. In comparison, Draškić's famous production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu*, which lasted 14 seasons between 1964 and 1978, was played 205 times – about 14 shows a year. A problem to be addressed in future research is why *Svećar* disappeared from stage so quickly. There is no video recording of it, as far as I have found. On this occasion, I did not want to

³I use this opportunity to thank Gordana Gončić, dramaturge of "Atelje 212", who is currently working on the reassessment of the archive of the theatre, and kindly made the graphic material available to me. Besides this material and the booklet, there seems to be no other sources – video materials, press-clippings, etc. – kept in the theater archive.

collect testimonies of others, so I am only presenting available facts, like the graphic material provided for the play, the leaflets and the booklet. But the directors' trajectory struck me as telling. This staging fell into the oblivion, not to be disturbed, as yet, by any media archeology. Thus the chance for Bruno's theatre to be translated by avant-garde movements to Serbian theatre seems to be lost.

Prison Theatre

The short overview of the productions of Bruno's *The Candlebearer* in 20th century Italy offered here should present us with the tradition to which in the years 2007 – 2009 a production by Fabio Cavalli in the prison theater of the high-security Roman correctional facility of Rebibbia inserts itself. Made famous by the brothers' Taviani film *Caesar Must Die*, the Golden Bear winner at the Berlinale in 2012, the prison company of inmate-actors guided by the theatre director Fabio Cavalli recorded a rehearsal of their performance of *The Candlebearer* in the Rebibbia in 2007. However, it was uploaded to YouTube only on May 20, 2013. It consists of four parts that can be found on the *Prigionieri Dell'Arte* channel of an inmate-actor, Cosimo Rega. The video is of very poor quality, and its first part had 549 views. First three parts last approximately twenty minutes each, and the last one consists of only a minute and a half-long closing speech. The premiere was held on May 17, 2009, in the Prison Rebibbia Theatre, as "*Il Candelaio* all'Academia dei Diavoli Commedianti". **[Picture 4]** The trailer for the performance was uploaded on October 1st, 2009, and has had 1.452 views since. Seen from the perspective of Taviani's film, it already has all the essential components: the actors-inmates translate Bruno's language into their own languages, mostly jargons coming from the south of Italy. To understand why their *Candlebearer* is more intense than one might expect, why it ranks among the most involving adaptations of Bruno's comedy, one has to know exactly what it is and how it came into being. Presented by inmates serving life sentences inside the high-security section of Rome's Rebibbia prison, emotions of the comedy correspond with the world that the prisoners came from. Actors are men who truly understand violence, and the characters' desperation becomes theirs. The video uploaded on YouTube shows the play's rehearsal period: another similarity with the brothers Taviani film. The actors make situations in the comedy their own by translating the lines to their particular regional dialects, using the same technique that was used later on, in the staging of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in the 2012 film, as if this experience prepared them

for the later experiments, and enabled them to translate their own lives into the play's situations, in search of the metamorphoses they can offer as actors, or as human beings in a particular situation.

Morgana B Company

The relation that female readers – researchers, translators, philosophers, or, in this particular case, actresses – establish with Bruno's texts is a very peculiar one, and deserving a study in its own right. Feminist theatres appearing in the 1970s experimented, among other things, with breaking down of the assigned roles of the writer, designer, and technician. In that vein, the actress Angela Antonini and director Paola Traverso, forming "Morgana B Company", produced *The Candlebearer* and staged it in Rome, premiering on February 2011, [Picture 5] to be followed by a series of presentations in Nola, in February 2014, in Paris in April 2014 [Picture 6], and again in Rome in April 2015.

Angela Antonini and Paola Traverso have chosen to stage an original adaptation of the drama for a single actress playing many characters. The piece is set in the key of the Parisian cabaret and vaudeville. The two artists see Bruno's comedy as a frontal attack on the symbols of power ("the candle is the obelisk, the phallus, the master's stick"). They describe their performance as a desecrating challenge, where a woman, a single actress, gives voice and body to the many characters involved in the comedy, following Bruno's principle of singularity in multiplicity.

This production is most interesting from the media archeology point of view in the strict sense. On YouTube, again, we can follow its development through the years in recordings made successively, and get a clear picture of its evolution through different phases, mirroring different translations of Bruno's work to the stage that the two artists produced. In this case, the new media kept full record of the metamorphosis. The first variant was staged in Rome as a monodrama performed by Angela Antonini, with sound and music composed by Paola Traverso. The trailer was uploaded on September 28, 2011. It is four minutes long, and had 1.520 views by November 2015. It was followed by a piece entitled "*Candelaio*" di Giordano Bruno, presenting a few images of the performance at the Vittoria Theatre in Rome on November 23, 2012, photographed by Maurizio Guiducci, and made public on March 22, 2013, and a trailer *Candelaio Promo*, uploaded on May 8, 2012, seven minutes long variant, made after the two actresses-producers discovered a practice developed

in the time of Goldoni, of a single actress playing all the roles in the play. This made them redirect their production towards something different. The artists made a five minute-long special trailer for their 2014 performance at the Bruno festival in Nola, in slow motion, posted on April 14, 2014. The new, 2015 trailer – prepared for a festival in Paris and subtitled in French– follows their performance’s further evolution.

Pantamorph and Morphing

Bruno conceived a concept of *pantamorph*, a form that includes all possible forms in a combination of *metamorphosis*, a perpetual change from one form into another, and closely related to *anamorphosis*, a distorted projection or perspective requiring the viewer to use special devices or occupy a specific vantage point to reconstruct the image. Bruno explains that *pantamorph* is “a multiform beast; apparently it is one, and actually, it is one, but it is not uniform [...] it has many forms, because it is shapeless and has no face of its own.” In a certain sense, his comedy *The Candlebearer* also invites performances that feed on the concept of *pantamorph*, which easily relates to the mediatic concept of *morphing*. In that sense, it is interesting to mention a collaboration of Gaetano delli Santi (poet, writer and professor of Aesthetics), Claudio Pappalardo (film director) and Fabio D’Ambrosio (virtual set designer) in the production of a video play based on interdisciplinarity of the competences of each, titled *Fra’ Giordano Bruno redivivo*. The video play presents the beast of a politician-pontiff-business magnate as an Inquisitor of our time, tormenting a 21st century Giordano Bruno portrayed as a biker persecuted by a series of flashes accompanied by loud noise. It offers a poetic, literary and ideological key to the inquisitorial process of the philosopher Giordano Bruno of Nola, based on original documents. Set in a multimedia space, with use of screens and cameras, inspired by the planetarium form, it is continuously balancing between archaic and modern. The show was presented in Rome at Metateatro on February 12-16th, 2003, with the participation of Amnesty International (which provided video footage of public executions, projected during the show) and *Applicando*, a computer magazine.

Starting with a text written by Delli Santi, and involving various experts in the project: technicians and scholars working in the field of new technologies of virtual communication and artists using new technologies in their creations, Pappalardo produced his own virtual translation and conceived a scenic space which includes different artistic

disciplines. He created a play dedicated to a language experience inspired by the interdisciplinary nature of the arts. Everything is contained in what might be called a great scientific instrument, a colossal machine, a cathedral synthesis of modern and archaic, where allegory, art of memory and science merge. It is “a machine exponentially evolving and processing; a man (Giordano Bruno) becomes an operator and an instrument, processing and synthesising. Bruno is a neuron, a part of a brain intertwined in a game of structures and macrostructures, of languages and metalanguages (Pappalardo 2003).” Information is presented as virtual: a projection of images taken by an intubation in the interior of the body; a flux of numerical data, geometrical forms and fractals; web surfing; visualisation of the text while it is pronounced; consultation of universal data banks. From diverse angles and in real time, the cameras register the particulars of the interaction between actors and virtual machines; images are projected on screen or the monitor.

Giordano Bruno, whose idea of theatre was closely related to the Elizabethan theatre in England, but more provocative, had the courage to renounce an attractive plot, and more or less traditional attractiveness of the characters, and even stage effects, in order to imagine a perfectly liberated theatre. This form of theatre renovation was forgotten for the sake of others, less disturbing than Bruno's. In the second half of the 20th century, and in the 21st, several paths opened for translation (in broader sense) of the art and the thinking of the 16th century philosopher into the new media. Rather a social media than a mass media, YouTube is an important (we might even say ideal) place for dissemination of this type of art, deeply concerned with philosophy, which I hesitate to call marginal. Instead, I would say it is hermetic, in the same sense that James Joyce, or any other great artist, before or after, influenced by Bruno's texts, can be labeled hermetic. The new media offer a major accessibility to the hermetic arts, and even though – as it is perfectly appropriate – their visibility is incomparable to the massively distributed ones, their presence is strongly felt.

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List of graphic material

[Picture 3] A scene from Luca Ronconi’s *Il Candelaio*, 2001.

[Picture 2] Giordano Bruno’s *Svečar* by Ljubomir Draškić, a 1991 poster.

[Picture 3] Giordano Bruno’s *Svečar* by Ljubomir Draškić in “Atelje 212”.

[Picture 4] *Il Candelaio* by Fabio Cavalli, prison theatre, Rome, a 2009 poster.

[Picture 5] *Il Candelaio* by Angela Antonini and Paola Traverso, Rome, a 2011 poster.

[Picture 6] *Il Candelaio* by Angela Antonini and Paola Traverso, Paris, a 2014 poster.

