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CARMELO BENE'S *PHONÈ*  
Radical Renovation or Reinvented Tradition  
of an Italian Outcast Actor

At the 1968 Venice Film Festival, Carmelo Bene (1937-2002) refused to hold his press conference in front of Italian journalists, who were simply asked to leave the room. Only the foreign press was allowed to ask him questions. Bene argued that the national media had a long history of deliberate misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the actor's statements, and therefore their presence in the room was pointless. In 1994, Carmelo Bene delivered his most famous and controversial television appearance.<sup>1</sup> During a two-hour talk show critics, fellow actors, journalists, and general audience interviewed a delirious Carmelo Bene who playfully addressed spectators with epithets like "zombies", "useless creatures" and "you do not exist and you are unaware of it." He ramblingly chatted about his own "non-existence", his own "negation", and concluded that the whole interview process was irrational and illogic, as how could one ask questions to a non-existing entity? Eventually, Bene invited spectators, on a national network, to go fuck themselves because erotic acts constituted the only artistic expressions worth being talked about. Carmelo Bene was an iconoclast, an irreverent provoker, a mad-hatter, an *enfant prodige* of Italian theatre, a forerunner of artistic avant-garde, a hedonist, a consumer of the early society of spectacle<sup>2</sup> who was at once consumed by it, a *corpo disfatto* (a broken body). It would be, and is, impossible to pin down and reduce Bene into one cohesive definition, as he often said that anyone attempting to understand or explain theatre was a lunatic or, even worst, a dangerous person.

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1 "Uno contro tutti" with Carmelo Bene inaugurated a series of thematic interviews hosted by journalist and TV personality Maurizio Costanzo. The talk show "Maurizio Costanzo show", recorded live from Teatro Parioli in Rome, turned into an arena in which public controversial figures would confront their critics and admirers.

2 I refer here to Guy Debord's notion of a pervasive superficial transformation of all human interactions and values into goods produced for and consumed by the contemporary cult of the image.

Bene's artistic fame rose in the mid sixties in Rome thanks to an upper-middle class intelligentsia that praised his work, both in theatre and films. At the time, attending his productions had become the hot ticket in town, although many spectators were attracted more by curiosity or trend, rather than a real appreciation for Bene's extreme experimentalism. Through the years, he was capable of obtaining a wide popular success, although he never compromised his experimental aesthetic to be more accessible for a wider audience. Paradoxically, Carmelo Bene was uninterested in the masses, indifferent to any social or educational outcome of his theater. He did not believe in political theatre, of the like of Dario Fo for example, and he never pursued an expanded notion of what constituted knowledge through art. Bene's theatre – and movies – were highly self-referential, exceedingly intellectual, incomprehensible for the average person, pregnant with complex references to art, philosophy, religion and mysticism. His point of reference were totally extra-theatrical. He intensively studied the life of Christian saints and mystics rather than theatre history, hence infusing his work with loads of religious traditions that belonged to popular cults – those same instances of every day people's belief and religious syncretism which he overtly despised as he never wanted to teach anything to the masses. So, what makes Carmelo Bene's work so important today, after ten years from his early passing at the age of 64?

Two elements come to mind when trying to analyze Bene's appeal and relevance for many decades of Italian culture. The first is the paradoxical, overt attack to both high and low culture, albeit the fact that he became the favorite of many Italian intellectuals and, at the same time, rose to national fame for the general audience thanks to his television appearances. The second, and most important factor, is the technical element of his performance – a technicality which appeared as a never-before-seen element on the Italian stage, yet, this is my main contention, as a form of inheritance of that long tradition of actors' demiurgic intervention as seen in Italy since the traveling wagons of *commedia dell'arte*. Bene's real act of genius was to present, as brand new, some performance elements that had a long tradition in Italy; to trick audiences and critics into believing that he was an improviser, a feverish actor who created art by acts of impulse and sheer talent, whereas he possessed an immense structured knowledge based on research, study, and effort. After all, the gift of an actor shines through his ability to perform as if it was natural a behavior that is instead the outcome of an artificial, planned and rehearsed training.

We could consider Bene's appearance on the Italian stage as a rupture with the past, and with the trends of *teatro di regia* (director-based theater

a la Giorgio Strehler) and *teatro d'attore* (actor-based theatre a la Vittorio Gassman), while at the same time containing elements of indisputable performative continuity with previous technical acting styles. Many elements in Bene's aesthetic ideology functioned as a dramatic fracture line in the national cultural trajectory: the hybridization of high and low, of sacred and mundane, the transformation of Catholicism in mysticism, of holiness in dirt. Bene embodied the Foucauldian paradox of a national narrative that has to include at once subjugated knowledge and privileged positionalities in order to constitute a complete public discourse on its internal differences.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the new media could not apprehend under the same rubric the complexity of a subjugated knowledge that encompasses erudition, production of culture, historical perception and local beliefs, common sense and the popular traditions that have been often neglected and marginalized, Bene found in theatre-making the perfect tool to mix and match that which apparently did not belong in a cohesive observation of life.

In various interviews, Bene showed an extreme low tolerance for those who wished to understand his theater. He perceived a violent vulgarity in any attempt to analyze or categorize art. "Can you understand life? No! So why trying to understand theater?" was his visceral reaction. Language, he believed, had created the most damages to theatre, nullifying the real meaning of acting. Bene wanted to abandon once and for all the contemporary obsession with the signified and the meaning, the desire to follow a plot, the need to analyze and understand. Language was for Bene never more than a series of black holes, as one can only speak of what he is not. The nihilistic philosophy turned him into a preacher on behalf of the non-existent, the non-being. All forms of human and artistic expression, all performances, could only and simply contain signs of the on-going decay that would conclude with the death of all living beings, all ideologies, all speeches, all minds and bodies.

The actor's biography surely had an impact on forging this pessimistic ideology, as Bene suffered from a weak health since early childhood, and experienced constant proof of physical pain and the possibility that his body will desert, abandon and betray him. This constant danger, rather than turning him into a cautious man careful not to jeopardize his health any further, pushed him to the opposite extreme. On stage, Bene often played characters with a tortured body, embodying a physicality which conveyed a tremendous sense of stress and distress; off stage he unremittingly in-

3 Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, Paul Rabinow, ed., Robert Hurley and others, trans. (New York: New Press, 1997).

dulged in heavy drinking and smoking. In this sense, the actor's reference and homage to Artaud's theatre of cruelty is most apparent, as the French director inspired Bene's vision of the decaying physical entity, only by chance represented by the body he inhabited, which always resonated as perfect metaphor for the unstoppable landslide of all things social and cultural.

Bene's performances exposed the flesh of our time, and brought to surface its essential contradictions by employing a plethora of literary tools – humor, distancing, leaps, repetitions – and technical ones – recorded voices, distorted sounds, auditory hallucinations. His theatrical productions, readings, movies and installations were an explicit interrogation of the invisible, exalting the experimental theater's culture of the body whose intent does not reside in mere entertainment, but rather consists in the desire to distance oneself from the object of the spectacle. Bene directed the audience towards feelings of loss as metaphors of a world that tends to exclude, not include, certain individuals within its borders. He felt as an outcast, and played one throughout his life as a self-inflicted punishment. The altercation between inclusion versus exclusion served as the springboard upon which Bene inserted his stylistic signature of parody and the grotesque, which transformed the full daylight of Puglia – the Southern region of his origin – into daytime nightmares, and represented the night figures of our tormented dreams as producers, not merely products, of dreams, desires and hopes.

Bene did not comply with social cohesion out of belief or ideological commitment, as he strongly felt that much of the bourgeois *fare bella figura* (to keep up appearance) was the superficial consequence of a hypocritical reasoning, unveiling society as a non-space, deformed and elastic, and denouncing its inhabitants as bored puppets of an old "theatrical" act that repeats itself over and over again. Hence theatre, played on stage as an open denunciation of this fake reality, was more real than reality itself. The heavy make-up that transformed Bene's face into an iconic element of his theatricality, with huge open eyes circled in black mascara, often gazing into a seemingly void, was the truth yelled on everybody's face, a truth more real than the forced smiles or exaggerated sadness imposed by social circumstances.

Most significant about Carmelo Bene's aesthetic – or lack of it thereof – was his constant inquiry on the relationship between power and the right to exist as an artist, a renaissance man, an inspired genius, and a full-rounded creator of immaterial wealth. Consequently, the vibrant tension of Bene's plays developed along the following lines: the power of the talented actor

over his audience, the power of the established theatre circuit over the iconoclastic director, the power of economic reasoning over freedom of expression, the power of irreverent language over bourgeois norms, and finally the power of strong imagery and distorted bodies over the demure logic of social life. However, Carmelo Bene soon became a victim to his own self-constructed and inflicted genius. He pushed the boundary of middle-class respectability, and every time his audiences expected more. Bene faked indifference towards spectators' respect and admiration, yet by exaggerating his lines of research, he gave them exactly what they expected. Spectators (and critics) on the other hand, often pretended to be disgusted or disturbed by Bene's attitude, yet crowded the theaters, and later the media platform of television talk shows, in order to catch a glimpse of Bene's madness, and his over-the-top persona. In Bene's case, it is impossible to say where his acting ended and where his daily attitude began; the one triggered into the other.

Technically, Bene's incommunicable, incomprehensible act of doing theatre is condensed in the *phonè* – the noise beyond the human voice, that which indicates the boundary between seeing and listening, that which reproduces the image of the voice and reminds us all that vision has first and foremost an original acoustic substance.<sup>4</sup> The *phonè* is the tension and rupture of that alleged synchronism between body and voice, gesture and utterance, sound and meaning. These binary concepts are not only uninteresting but false, fake construction of self-caged humans in desperate need to give life a meaning. Bene worked to subtract his voice from language, to distance his own vocal expression from the plebian and prostitute-like vulgarity of a forced oral intentionality. He used his voice to create barriers and caesuras between the act of saying and that which is said, between the act of speaking (that is to say the mechanical implications of the mouth apparatus) and the spoken utterance delivered to himself or to the audience. Reading Saussure and Deleuze, Bene developed the idea that the signifier is and must create an acoustic image, which has nothing to do with the intended, usual, everyday meaning of words. Speaking to communicate is a bourgeois, fake theatrical convention; instead, articulating the air through one's own larynx, oral cavity, nose, and lips is a natural yet mechanical ex-

4 When referring to the *phoné*, Bene always said that he had no interest in thinking of it in philosophical terms – as a dialectic thought process. *Phoné* to him meant the void, the non-existence or the end of existence of art, history, and the world. Cited in Carmelo Bene, Ugo Artioli, *Un dio assente* (Milan: Edizioni Medusa, 2006), pp. 131-2.

ercise directed to destabilizing or implementing one's own right to breath primordial sounds, not to create a relation of meaning with others.

But how did Carmelo Bene achieve this goal? Through a precise technical training that had little to do with natural talent; it was rather rehearsed through a specific method and the use of modern technology. The close examination of Bene's vocal performance, which was commonly defined by some critics as a *parlarsi addosso* (introflexed speaking), followed a specific technique centered around the main and predominant use of the head resonator, aptly and quickly alternated with the lower resonators of the actors' throat and stomach. Sounds and utterances in Bene's acting style never gave the impression of a fluid and smooth flow. Sounds resonated first and foremost in Bene's head and mouth cave, and only by accident, or so it seemed, they then occupied an outside space – the space between the actor's mouth and the spectators' hears – in which words were at once gathered and dispersed. Bene's voice rather than being used to communicate, seemed first and foremost a residue, the object of refusal, as if coming not from the actor's body but from an inner entity – an alien, a possession. Bene's voice seemed to erupt before, or even against, the actor's consciousness, slowly but inexorably extending away from its source towards its target. Bene himself often seemed amazed and bewildered in hearing his own voice producing the sounds it produced, again as if the actor was possessed by some outside force.<sup>5</sup>

However, that which Bene tried to convey as a natural inclination of his own vocal apparatus, had little to do solely with natural talent in so far as it was the product of a keen research on anatomy, performance theory, linguistic, and philosophy. Bene's talent required the ability to force himself into a deliberate training and construction of a vocal script. Hence, his theatre was the union-suspension between knowledge and creativity, between harsh discipline and liberty. In order to pronounce words correctly, the actor must control the whole trajectory of the sound, from its original conception in his deep consciousness, to the articulate, mechanical and difficult effort to say something. Hence the physical trajectory of the sound, through one's own stomach, lungs, larynx, head, and mouth must and will affect the actor's physical gestures, not just the way one says something but how that something is accompanied by facial and body expressions. To pronounce is also to be in the moment before the pronunciation occurs. It entails a confrontation with the plethora of sounds available in every mo-

5 On this see: Piergiorgio Giacché, *Carmelo Bene: Antropologia di una macchina attoriale* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997), p. 147.

ment, in order to disregard all the sounds that are either excessive or too weak, and select the ones that most suit the actor's perception. Eventually, the final delivery of the sound will contain this whole trajectory and the story of conflict or loss that is always related to language. It is in this loss, in this conflict that theatre finds its own reason, its own unique theatrical significance. Theatrical in so far as Bene, as said before, declared his ignorance of any social or political search for meaning, his lack of interest in the expanded notion of what constitutes knowledge beyond the artistic act. Language loses all its reassuring elements. As Nietzsche once wrote:

In language, what is best understood is not the word, but the tone, the intensity, the modulation, the rhythm with which words are uttered. In short, the music behind the word, the passion behind that music, the personality behind that passion. That's why not everything can be scripted; that's why writing is of little importance.<sup>6</sup>

Human beings fool themselves when they believe that there is a universal correspondence between signifier and signified comprehensible to all, because everyone apprehends that relation based on his or her own personal history of linguistic loss and conflict.

Bene's voice was used to evoke atmospheres rather than emotions. He broke down the meaning of logical reasoning by placing linguistic caesuras where they would not normally go, by breathing and pausing in unexpected moments only to rush through the next line, or say it in such an intimate way that words seemed to reside in his oral cavity rather than come out to be delivered to an audience. He moved from one resonator to the other, dark one moment, squeaky and light the next one, with no apparent meaning if not the playfulness or show off of a perfect control of his breath. Yet in this seemingly, unscripted oral movement, Bene condensed the ability to create worlds and atmospheres in front of our own eyes. As if he was one of those traveling storytellers from Southern Italy, or in the plains of the North, who would move from one farmhouse to another, entertaining people during the long winter nights with traditional stories that fed off his vocal capability and nothing else, so Bene subtracted all external theatricality to reduce everything to sounds. His productions moved from dialogues to monologues, and from big casts to one-man shows, in order to focus on the gist of the theater's act.

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Giancarlo Dotto, Carmelo Bene, *Vita di Carmelo Bene* (Milan: Bompiani, 2006), p. 206.

Critics defined Bene's vocal tones as confidential, condescending, mocking, hieratic, erotic, masturbatory, blasphemous, and sarcastic. Deleuze, who greatly admired the Italian actor, once said that in Bene's theatre even the images required the ability to listen: the bodily postures, the physical tension suddenly released in abandonment, the actor's intense gazes, everything contributed to the music of Carmelo Bene's stage work.<sup>7</sup> However, these tones belonged to Bene, and only to him, in so far as he trained himself to become Carmelo Bene, forcing every other actor since then to imitate or emulate him. Bene did not live a scripted code that could be studied by future generations to reproduce his technique. He did not establish a school, neither did he train young actors. Any of these activities would have been proof that there was an actual technique behind his genial improvisation. However, any of these choices would have been in open contrast with Bene's nihilistic philosophy of his non-existence. The continuity of Bene's art beyond his life, by the act of passage of his knowledge to the new generations, would have been logical had Bene given historic value to himself and his work. But that wasn't the case, as Bene believed that one cannot teach or learn theater, one can only be in the limitedness of his being. It goes without saying that for the Italian theater, the lack of a documented written code constitutes a problem, as performance exists in the disappearing. Since his death, Bene's shows have been rarely represented on stage, because the superimposition of his dramaturgy with his personality was and is absolute. Anyone attempting to stage Bene's plays would necessarily expose himself/herself to becoming a copycat of the original, that is to say a lesser imitator of a master with no servants.<sup>8</sup>

In the course of his career, Bene kept on subtracting superfluous elements from his theater, and incorporated more and more technical devices in his performances. Eventually even the voice, that same voice which so much had characterized his dramaturgy, receded into being a pre-recorded sound which the actor-director often played in play-back. Experimenting

7 Gilles Deleuze, 'Un manifesto di meno' in Carmelo Bene, Gilles Deleuze, *Sovrapposizioni* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978).

8 Ironically it has been easier for female actresses to work on the lineage traced by Carmelo Bene. I think here of Ermanna Montanari, leading actress of the award-winning theatre company Teatro delle Albe, whose vocal performances have often been equaled to Bene's. Montanari often works on strong female characters, and she represents their emotional journey by means of sharp change in tones, rhythms, and depth of vocal delivery. On Montanari see: Raffaele Furno, 'Woman – daughter – actress – icon – murderer: Ermanna Montanari performs Beatrice Cenci' in Julie Rajan, Sanja Bahun-Radunovi, eds., *From Word to Canvas* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

with new technical devices was an obvious choice in Bene's development, as he used to say that long before adopting the play-back mode, his natural voice already contained the quality of an artificially amplified tool. That's why, next to the early definition of *corpo disfatto*, Bene identified himself as a *corpo meccanico* (mechanical body), and left to modern tools of sound reproducibility and amplification the role of protagonists in his shows. Had he lived longer, Bene would have probably been a forerunner in the use of virtual reality and computer graphics on stage, as additional elements that could participate in the disappearance of the actor's body, loaded with the negative connotations of its meaningless presence and petty physical traces.

In his long interview with Giancarlo Dotto, which acquired the value of an official biography of the actor, Bene clearly stated:

On our national stage, professionals are so committed to dedicating all existing resources to the visual elements (hundreds of watts spent to light the stage) and the least amount to the auditory ones (zero watt). This distinction is ridiculous. Why not acting lit by candles, if your barking voice will sound so poorly undressed [...] to abandon oneself to a microphone, one must possess an extraordinary and dynamic vocal spectrum; frequency modulations inhabit only exceptional bodies.<sup>9</sup>

Recurring to technical devices was not, as a profane could believe, a way to spare energies and put less effort in the theatrical action, but quite the opposite. Mechanical amplification was not conceived to project outside, as far as possible, the actor's voice, but to allow the actor to work on the inner vocal emission, which requires a level of tension and modulation's control that is high-energy consuming. Paradoxically, amplification was not synonym with magnitude, but rather with concentrating on that which is smaller, less perceptible, more intimate and tense. This sort of obsession for the phonetic power of a man's body was linked, according to Bene, to the primordial existence of all human beings. The first relationship that babies develop with the outside world, while still in the mother's womb, is auditory, as sounds travel from the outside into the amniotic sac. Vision and sight become predominant, actually tyrannical, only days after a baby's birth. Nothing would be more natural than recuperating that direct relationship with the auditory senses, albeit mediated by mechanical speakers, microphones, and so on.

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9 G. Dotto, p. 341.

Notwithstanding the originality of his production for the Italian stage, Bene embodied traits of continuity with forms of experimentalism that pre-existed him. Bene defined his own identity and theatre as non-living and inexistent, even though he launched theater on a quest for the possible – the suspended space between what is known and what is yet to be discovered. The culture of capitalist dominance, which lies at the core of the mind-body split, mapped the cognitive backdrop against which experimental theater-makers politicized their bodies and denounced the discriminatory norms of class distinctions. In Italy, this passage also designated for artists an emancipation from Catholicism and its teachings, which had mortified the body as a receptacle of deadly sins against the purity of a man's soul. Instead, the experimental physical aptitude embraced the low elements of dirt, sin, tactile memory and pain to delineate reality in all its performative twists and turns. However, such emancipation rarely took the form of a rejection *tout court*. The stratified layers of a millenarian Italian culture, the country's overlapping rituals paralleling naturalistic religions along the scripted sacraments provided by Catholicism, gave artists like Bene the possibility to recuperate childhood memories of ancestral traditions. For an artist, born in the peripheral Southern tip of the Puglia peninsula, images of old women conducting séances to liberate someone from the evil eye would and could naturally merge with the Bible, and the life of the Saints. The official religion would have probably shied away from such practices, but the theatre of memory embodied by Bene fed off the atmospheres of the magic South with no interruption with the preaching of Saint Francis or Saint Thomas.<sup>10</sup>

Bene, in line with historic avant-garde, embodied the passage from art mimicking life, to a life that becomes an artistic process; from mimesis and poiesis to kinesis. The intensity and natural connections with pre-existing theatrical traditions would be uncanny for Bene himself. The relation with the past, in Bene's own terms, never constituted a restoration, as he praised himself for being a disorganized and unforeseeable innovator. The continuity was rather an acknowledgment of the tradition's unstoppable decay; tradition was synonym with residue, debris, and as such Bene used it to highlight the decomposing traces of cultural roots. Bene grabbed the established style of Italian acting methods, condensed in himself the old system of the *commedia dell'arte* traveling families of actors, but rather than de-

10 Experimental theatre-makers often deploy the hybridization of religious rituals and beliefs. See, for example, in recent years the work of Romeo Castellucci and Societas Raffaelle Sanzio.

claring his contribution or belonging to such trajectory, he acted as if these were his own private possessions with a freedom and a lack of respect that some people heavily criticized and others called pure genius.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the passage from art mimicking life to a life that becomes an artistic process was the first stage of what would then become the distorted notion of fame in the contemporary world. The exuberance of Bene's attitude turned him into a mask, a persona rather than a person, marking him the founding father of a whole lineage of artists who built their fame on pure appearance. The abused idea expressed by Andy Warhol that everyone would be famous for at least fifteen minutes merged with the belief that the shock effect was fundamental to attract attention on one's personality, and hence obtain fame and fortune. Whereas Bene had the right to use the shock effect in so far as he constructed it on a solid talent and long hours of study, nonetheless his theater work first, and television appearances then, contributed to a certain spectacularization of his life as a proto-reality show. In this instance, the themes and concepts of Bene's work became less relevant than the flamboyant absurdity of his statements and irreverence of his public actions.<sup>12</sup>

Many critics actually evoked the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of the actor-based theatre to explain the rising to stardom of Bene; a fast and unprecedented event for a young actor not linked to any prestigious theatre academy or artistic family. However, Bene stayed away from that specific theatrical *milieu*, to look at other sources of innovation in tradition: religious belief, music, and philosophy, among others. Bene soon abandoned his early theatrical productions with big casts, to produce monologues. From the early

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11 P. Giacchè, p. 53.

12 There is probably some further serious research to be done in analyzing the relationship between experimental art, from the 1960s onwards, and spectacle today. In theatre, for instance, experimental artists had some solid reasons in using obscenity, sex, profanity and violence to construct the new poetic of their performances. On the other hand, the inclusion of such elements contributed to changing the audience's aesthetic capability and willingness to accept them. The more artists pushed the boundaries of tolerance away from a certain bourgeois good taste, the more society overall grew receptive of extreme imagery in its cultural production. Given this premise, do innovative artists hold any responsibility for the gratuitous and ever present use of sexual and violent images today? Was the original intent of shocking the middle class, shacking spectators from their apathy, and liberating the female or queer body from narrow cultural cages, more worth than the alleged meaningless use of the shock effect in spectacle today? Is it just a matter of degree, or rather the problem is the overflowing of spectacle out of its initial realm, and into economy, politics, news coverage, identity-building processes, religion and so on?

1980s many of his performances could be called concert-shows in which Bene increasingly confronted music and poetry alone on stage. The number of actors grew smaller and smaller, and the action grew more static, as the whole movement was provided by Bene's voice in its multiplicity. Stage movement disappeared as the vocal dramaturgy became predominant, also thanks to the use of phonic instruments. Bene was always fascinated by radio broadcasting and television technologies, often criticizing the media for having amazing instrumentation and not knowing what to do with it. However, he always defended his vocal performances from being overshadowed by technology. Bene used the same kind of introflexed voice both when he was acting without microphones and speakers and in his later concert-shows, poetry-musical readings, and multiple Shakespearean adaptations. Bene's fame rose with the decrease of number of actors show-cased in his performances: as capable as he was to orchestrate many actors on stage, he turned into a theatrical guru for many people when he showed that one single actor could embody and reproduce a whole orchestra.

These later performances completely fell in the realm of pure experimental research. The huge amount of possible sound combinations provided by microphones and amplifiers forced Bene, who was willing and happy to do so, into a perpetual montage of his own pieces. Spectators were never witnessing the presentation of a final project, rather one of the many possible combinations of Bene's vocal interpretation of words, lines, and sounds. The centrality of the auditory experience became such an obsessive interest in Bene's research, that he also abandoned the excessive make-up he had used in the past to enhance his magnetic eyes. Instead, he started placing on his face duck tape or gauze so that his facial features would disappear and not get in the way of the listening process. The innovative Bene ironically searched for invisibility, an iconoclast physical invisibility, in theater: a medium that is mostly constructed around the co-presence of the actor's body and the audience within the same enclosed space.

Bene's activity perfectly summarizes Richard Schechner's definition of performance as:

in between. It is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural – and therefore inherently unstable. [It] assumes that we are living in a post-colonial world where cultures are colliding, interfering with each other, and energetically hybridizing. [It] does not value 'purity.' [It] is unfinished, open, multivocal, and self-contradictory.<sup>13</sup>

13 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 360-1.

However, the previous discussion also shows that Bene was absolutely uninterested in becoming the character – Othello, Lorenzo il Magnifico, Pinocchio. He never searched for the superimposition of the character's life, emotions, and intentions over his own. Actually, he rejoiced of the contradiction existing in the clear presence of Bene – the actor – on stage, playing a character. In this sense, he once again reinvented *commedia dell'arte* and was closer to that tradition than he probably intended to be. Spectators of the *commedia* were used to masks and stock characters, which had nothing to do with identifying the actor with the character in the modern sense of the word. Likewise, Bene's spectators would attend the theatre to see Bene as the mask, Bene as the persona that extended at once on and off stage with all his exuberant, belligerent, and extreme mode of being too much visible – Carmelo Bene the icon of himself – and too little visible – the nullification of his own self to become *phoné*. Spectators did not expect a realistic or believable Hamlet, they searched for the artistry in Carmelo Bene to evoke Hamlet's suffering and madness; they did not see Hamlet, they experienced Bene's auditory and sensory idea of Hamlet's essence.

Musicality and the *phonè* persisted even when the use of play-back became a distinctive trait of his theater: recorded voices that not only dialogued with the live ones, but overlapped, annihilated, or simply contradicted one another. Bene's scenic art was self-contained and shined through the vocal declination of the *phonè*: sounds, whispers, recorded utterances, play-back, and so on. The movement Bene followed was from words to sounds, from characters to machines, from actions to acts, and from images to auditory visions. These elements merged to highlight the three insurmountable limits of theater, according to Bene: its sense of absence, the impossibility to represent, and the impossibility to communicate something. Abandoning the nineteenth century obsession for meaning, plot, and storyline, the *phoné* became the theatre's regression to its own origin, or at least the freeing of its original power in order to initiate the never-ending search for a path that would reduce those limits. In Greece, where Western-based theatre originated, ancient orators did not anticipate their ideas, but presented arguments in favor of a certain position and let them build up in the listeners' minds to convince them from within. As theatre was doomed to be limited, ruled by absence and incommunicability, Carmelo Bene did not try to convince the audience, and did not overload his expressions with meaning, but brought the audience towards a self-directed discovery of those limits. Through this re-situating of the theatrical experience, and through the dismantling of the visual obsession in favor of the auditory perception, the artistic process remained open, with no sense of conclusion

or accomplishment. As Bene did not work to educate or awake anyone's awareness, nonetheless his aesthetic engaged with an ethic in performance. When, from the stage of Teatro Parioli, he yelled at spectators that they were zombies, he was at once placing his constructed personality at the center of the scene, calling attention on himself as the rebel and the outcast, but also provoking a possible reaction of awakening. Although, had you asked him, he would have probably stated that all this is non-sense, because none of us really exists and we are all pale holograms of an absence.

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