

Theatre of Blood

1.

“ONE AT A TIME, ONE AT A TIME!” shouts the usher, standing beside a closed door and handing me a brochure.

He sweeps his hands over his jacket several times. It is difficult to say whether he is trying to straighten his creased uniform or simply shivering from fear.

“One at a time, I said!”

The waiting room is full, all chairs occupied. People await their turn in silence, yet look embarrassed and hold on tightly to tickets and brochures as if they were life-rafts in the middle of a stormy sea. We could have easily been taken for peepshow regulars: each of us would get a full five minutes with a young and bare male offering not his Apollonian merchandise but his ever-flowing blood, as thick and as warm as his most intimate bodily fluid. Whether we would reach a climax or not during those voyeuristic minutes would be a private matter between performer and spectator.

“Your turn next,” says the usher pointing his finger at me and opening the door.

I enter the room lowering my eyes. It has an antiseptic feel to it, ideally suited to this fake surgical procedure in the name of art.

“This is the Theatre of Blood and I’m its sole performer!” says a voice not unlike the sound of crackling fire and late night howlings.

I now look up and squirm. A man of diminutive stature is lying on a stretcher. He has an empty smile, and no wonder. On each of his limbs there are three cuts from which blood slowly but persistently escapes into heaps of sheets. As much as I want to look at him solely in the eye, I cannot avoid staring at his fresh wounds. I am still so shaken by the idea that he should inflict such harm upon himself that I cannot utter a single word.

The usher leaves and we are now alone.

“Ask me whatever you wish. You're here to interview me, are you not? Miss...”

“I...” I begin to say but cannot summon the strength to continue.

Even if I would want to stop the flow of events, as a figure of speech, the usher has just told me that spectators are not allowed to do a thing during the show, and certainly not get involved in any way. I wonder then from what moment onwards would it be right to intervene and bandage up those wounds. I mean, up to a certain point my gesture would be seen as an intrusion in an artistic act, and from the next moment onwards as the sheer salvation of a soul.

“The interview!” he reminds me raising his voice, and my moral dilemmas vanish temporarily.

Out of my bag comes the tiniest recording machine, the vital tool for my new job in the paper: sub-editor and interviewer, for the Arts supplement on Saturdays, the last person in line. I switch the machine on, and cannot avoid a rather personal first question: is all this bleeding not a painful exercise, if at all artistic. To which the artist replies that there are other more painful things to weep about.

“Are you referring to things that have happened to you in the course of your life?” I ask.

“No, I’m referring to things that have happened to others,” he says staring at the microphone, “because for the sorrows of my life I’ve already wept more than I can bear.”

His words are no less dramatic than his performance, and I feel slightly tempted to point it out. The full-colour brochure says that the artist does four shows a year and is available for private functions and consultations. As well as pictures of him bleeding from various parts of his body, there are snaps of undersized attempts by pupils to emulate the master –an earlobe prick or a tiny cut on the index finger seem to be the preferred option by the junior congregation. The brochure also says that the artist has appeared in talk shows that were broadcast in several European countries, and they have just finished a two hour-long documentary to be shown in cinemas throughout the world. His portrait –a naked and bloodied man lying on a stretcher, as would be expected– is soon to hang surrounded by red drapes at the National Portrait Gallery. Finally, there is talk that his wax-figure will be exhibited in the chamber of horrors at Madame Tussaud’s at the end of the year. Merchandising is not far off, and they are working on magnets, postcards and notebooks, soon to be on sale. I have been told that his website is about to be launched as well, with special sound effects of swishing liquids.

“But why do that to your body?”

“My business, you see, is to bleed!”

His reply is just a taster. I need a little more if I am to write the 1,200 words required for the morning edition. I already have a couple of photographs that he sent me by email last week: a bleeding session with a fish-eye lens, and a portrait with an open mouth that gives the subject the air of a fresh cadaver.

“So much blood!” I utter, seeing it run out of his body and soak all those pristine sheets.

“The blood that flows through my veins knows well what I am and have been, steadily trekking through every nerve, every thought, every desire –”

What he says is obviously excessive, too razor sharp if one can forgive a pun at a time like this, but I suppose it is not appropriate to reproach him that he is just a little over-prepared for the interview.

“Every thought, every desire?” I ask interrupting him, as I am not entirely persuaded by what he is saying.

He chooses not to reply but continues to bleed. I dare go further with my questioning.

“Are you perhaps... perhaps taking all this too... too seriously?”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head.

“What really startles me is the public's response,” he finally says, overtly refusing to answer my question, but instead delivering a reply that seems to have been prepared somewhat earlier. “Some spectators enter the room ever so eagerly, and stand very close to me as though they want to smell or even taste my blood. There are others who remain by the door and barely look at me –they just stay there, trembling in anticipation. It seems like some dark urge they know nothing of has compelled them to attend my show. Yes, everyone has a peculiarly different reaction!”

The word *reaction* makes me fall into the trap.

“Well, my reaction is that reality,” I start saying, because the temptation to protest is just far too strong, “produces acts like yours in abundance, but then no one would dare qualify a blood-spattered accident as artistic or irreverent or subversive or _”

The artist shakes both bloody hands in the air to silence me.

“This time... yes, this time, I think I will go even further!”

“Further than... than all this?” I ask him, looking around the room and shaking my head in amazement.

“Yes, today I’ll bleed just a little longer than in my last performance!”

Faced with the vision of sheets bloated with blood and an artist blanching by the minute I am now convinced that I have to pass judgment.

“But what’s happening here right now,” I say, my voice gradually turning into a shrieking complaint, “takes place every day in every hospital in every town. Bleeding from all parts of the body, and cuts and wounds and injuries and all kinds of physical calamities! Words like lacerations, gashings and scars should not be linked in any way to art!”

I stop to take a deep breath before continuing with my verbal assault, and a second door with the word *Exit* written on it opens abruptly and the usher enters the room as though in a daze.

“It’s the next person’s turn,” he mutters mechanically, eyes half-closed, possibly to avoid the sight of blood.

As much as I did not want to enter the room earlier, I now find myself wishing more than anything to stay.

“I’ll meet you later in the ambulance!” says the artist without looking at me, but perhaps having read my mind. “There’s always an ambulance outside, just in case I need someone else’s blood at the end of my show...”

2.

I pushed my way towards the exit. I would have wanted to warn those in the waiting room to stay away, and they would have probably thanked me. But the convenience of two separate doors, *Entry* and *Exit*, kept both groups well apart.

And there I was, in the middle of the street, with the evening cold piercing my eyes. I decided that I would go back to the office and transcribe the contents of the tape I had recorded. Work was twenty minutes away by bus. Along the route I could only see the colour red.

Once in the office I realized that everyone had gone home for the night. I sat at my desk and got started. I would need to extract the last drop of the little material I had, fill up here, fabricate there. It was a brief, simple enough assignment, and as expected I completed the job in no time at all.

I waited for a few minutes, as I always did after a first draft in order to let things settle and sink in. I made myself a coffee and tried to sit comfortably on my typing chair. Taking a deep breath, I examined the zigzag pattern on the shade of my desk lamp. I could hear distinctly the ticking of the clock in the corridor, the soft gurgling of the central-heating pipes shutting down for the night. I checked the length of my fingernails for a while, and then looked out of the window at the hazy street-lights. There was no one there.

“Is it really that late?” I said to myself.

Everything around me still seemed to be tinted in red. And suddenly I could not help but look directly into the bulb. The intense brightness made me admit what the problem was. Yes, the memory of all that blood was still haunting me. Or was it

that my editors were testing my resilience? Or worse still, was this new job not perhaps quite right for me?

When I read the draft, I tore it to bits. The interview was light and innocuous. It made mockery of the interviewee, had no faith in its subject matter. The theme was bloodshed, the genre was satire. It was all too cold to the touch, not blood-curling enough.

“This damned interview will be my very own baptism of blood!”

I decided to go back. I had to finish what I had set out to do that day. After all, the artist had invited me to visit him again. “In the ambulance”, he had said. Something about someone else’s blood. Yes, I would go back to find out what remained of him, if anything at all. I had to see him once again, and not necessarily on account of the interview. It was as if there were other pending things, as yet unnamed.

3.

The artist has definitely gone too far. He is lying on a side stretcher in the ambulance parked outside the venue. Through a catheter, the dark liquor of transfusion steadily enters his arm. Some of his wounds have been cleaned and bandaged, but a few smaller ones are uncovered and still bleed. He surely looks like the victim of some horrific accident. When I put the microphone alongside his mouth, I ask him whether his show has not been in vain.

“No more in vain than the bloodshed during the massacres of innocents,” he blurts away without a shred of strength in his body, “no more in vain than ritual death, torture, capital punishment, martyrdom, war... death as a result of negligence or

defiance... murder, whether imaginary or real, dreamt or desired... death as the end of all things known or the beginning of something else... And in a few months I'll do the same again, and then again, until my show brings about my death!"

Inside the ambulance they have to treat various members of the public who have passed out. Nobody seems to realize that on one of the stretchers lies the man who has caused such a nuisance to them all.

"But isn't death exactly what you pursue?" I say to him, contradicting his overtly dramatic assertions.

"My art," he explains, both words and hands in very slow motion, "is chillingly close to the boundaries with death, but it's still an expression of life itself!"

His emotional delivery makes it difficult for him to breathe. I should put an end to my questions, but he shakes his head to make it clear that he wishes to continue to the very end.

"So what you're saying is that your show is a product of your need to contribute to the world?" I ask, trying like a true journalist to put words in his mouth.

The artist takes the microphone from my hand and touches his lips with it.

"You see, I... I don't know how else to do it."

The transfusion is about to draw to a close. I have the powerful impression that the amount of blood in that bottle is not going to be enough for a person in his condition. Not even the two nurses in the ambulance seem to realize what is happening, as busy as they are recording the blood pressure of a woman with a face so pale I could have sworn she had already bled to death.

During the ensuing silence the artist slowly hands back the microphone. Droplets of sweat fall from his temples, there is no trace of colour on his cheeks. This time he has gone so far that getting back is not going to be easy.

“My type of blood is... is uncommon!”

“So?”

“It's difficult to find donors...”

“You'll soon be fine,” I reply without too much conviction.

He shakes his head.

“You don't understand!”

“What do you mean?”

The artist sighs, but barely. He seems to require an altogether different statement from me. Although unspoken, there is a clear invitation in his eyes to something that I cannot quite define for now.

“Yes?” I ask requesting clues.

His lips shake, but not a word can be heard.

“In order to understand you, I... I don't have to imitate you,” I reply unconvincingly to a question that has not been put to me in so many words.

“I don't want anything from you,” he explains, recovering his voice temporarily, “but if I were to be asked I would say that I prefer to be imitated than to be understood.”

“Because it's the only way to...”

The artist finishes my sentence for me.

“It's the only way to stop others doing it to us!”

His voice trickles, but the interview has to go on.

“On the contrary, your act makes you more vulnerable to outside attacks.”

“In my act, as you call it, there are no two sides to the same coin: victims or executioners, innocence and guilt, good and evil. Imagine... yes, imagine a coin without sides.”

“A coin without sides?”

“Yes! The coin of the blood with which I pay for my life has no sides!”

I shudder when I hear him say those words, so washed out and emaciated as he is in the petite and untheatrical setting of an ambulance. His blood has dried up in his wounds, cracking like mud pies under the sun. Only malignant and contagious tumours can sprout from such foul openings. My head turns with the stench of decomposing matter, and I am invaded by a never before experienced impulse pushing me to add something to that shattered body. I cannot justify what is happening to me nor can I fight it off. It is wild, uncontrollable, groundless.

“And so...” he whispers, as if he knows what I have just experienced.

Without saying a word, I sink my hand in the depths of my handbag and I find what I am looking for. I lift the nail-file until it nearly touches my eyes. A torrent of shrilling neon light falls on that narrow stretch of metal.

“Here it is!” I announce, fiercely pressing the sharp tip on his forehead until a red line appears.

It is not a deep wound but it looks perfect enough. Along that stretch, blood flows with accurate bearing, not much of it though because surely the artist cannot have a lot left by now.

“You’ve finally understood!” he replies, attempting fruitlessly to smile.

He touches his belly and his chest to show me what has been inflicted upon him before I ever came into the scene, but my eyes cannot shift from the straight line that I have just drawn on his narrowing forehead. It is such a provocative and suggestive contour that I can only describe it as a work of art.

The artist's eyes go blank with the formidable effort required for just a few more words.

“As in a canvas, my scars and those of others...”, he says.

With the bloody weapon in my hand, I am shaking violently.

“I would’ve liked something... something more permanent,” I reply, barely hearing my own words.



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