

Alessandro Serra The magic of objects



*One single mystery of people and objects.
(Robert Bresson)*

Placing an object on stage is like placing a single stone in a Japanese gravel garden. Just a few centimetres off, and the whole space dies. Once the right spot is found, the space's energies are activated, and from that solitary stone waterfalls will descend like lines skilfully drawn by the rake. It would be invisible water, even more refreshing than the real one, because it is created in the spectators' minds.

An empty space and few objects, each radiating its own energy, are all that is necessary to induce the spectators to activate their first creative act — seeing the room, and after that seeing the walls, the wallpaper, the hanging paintings, the chandelier, a window and the moon beyond it. All this is the spectators' task, and to take this privilege away from them is to mortify them as a mere consumers of representations. The spectators participate in the ritual, they act, imagine, create silence, shake the air with their laughter, that is the oxygen the actor feeds on to start again with *momentum*.

Such a prodigy is performed starting from objects. The objects, those indicated by the author, are pulled from the text and then explored in their dynamic, narrative, and

evocative potential. This operation must be performed away from the text. The connection is made with objects as autonomous entities.

The first general impression is one of poverty and bareness. Is that all? A chair, a bed, a table? And yet, our lives unfold around these three objects. We spend eight hours on a bed, and we eat, study, work at a table.

Drawers, cupboards and sideboards are magical places. They indiscriminately accommodate clothes, letters, postcards that have travelled or that were never sent, small insignificant objects that oblivion has charged with a force that can be overwhelming when stumbled upon. Closets contain silent hangers setting in a pose ghosts, the dead, angels, our grandfather's coat, our mother's wedding gown, specked with a tiny spot of blood. Drawers are memory boxes that we began to fill ever since our childhood. We must, following Benjamin's precept, spend hours in the wood of dreams before returning home with the precious booty, the *viaticum* of imagination, "... to purify it, secure it, cast out its spell. His drawers must become arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt. "To tidy up" would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tinfoil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem-poles and copper pennies that are shields."¹

An object acquires autonomy when it loses its function, and becomes useless. From that moment it enters the realm of memory and art.

Each object appearing as the most miserable of *clichés* can turn into the most powerful of archetypes. When in an object we perceive the exterior representation of an archetype, writes Plotinus, the heart is shaken and the Original memory is awakened.

This dynamic depends on three factors: the nature of the object, its disposition in space, and its relationship with the actor.

In order to bring back to life the enormous edifice of memory, it is necessary to capture the objects at their negative acme. Objects gain power when they are used, worn out by life, broken, imperfect, incomplete or defective, as though that missing portion could perfect itself or leave room to the viewers' active imagination. This happens to simple objects, with no particular value or price because they're no longer needed – old wood, or faded, scuffed, rusted surfaces.

Wear and tear prevents these objects from functioning, but it gives them a second chance in the realm of art. This allows for unprecedented possibilities, absurd and sinful, and occurs with objects now useful only for narrating the past, almost like talismans, existing on the border between life and art. Like worn staircase steps, which give back in an instant the million paces that have scraped off micro particles of wood from them. Each of those particles becomes a life to tell, a millions stories are enclosed in the image of a worn step.

The flow of time charges objects with light, and as time goes by, matter absorbs photons – the older an object is, the more light it will be able to emanate. Modern techniques used to date ancient artefacts are based on the method of *luminescence*. The amount of light emitted by an object is directly proportional to the age of the object itself. Assimilating time, in an aesthetic sense, is equivalent to filling with light.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The One-way Street*, cit. p. 74

Take chairs – they are very powerful objects, and their use is extremely risky because their overuse might cheapen them. However, just as attaining the sublime requires going through the pathetic, in the same way for an object to exist on stage as an archetype, it must first be treated as a *cliché*. This is a real exorcism. A chair is nothing other than a chair, an everyday and banal object, but it can also be a throne for monarchs, popes, or those condemned to death.

The chair we used in *MACBETHU*, from a small village in Barbagia, was originally painted and stuffed with straw. When we used it on stage it had completely lost its seat, and the traces of colour had almost entirely disappeared. During the rehearsals, I never mentioned the word *throne* – we never even considered the issue. We simply played with that object, and the resulting material was there at hand. The chair materialised on stage sustained by two invisible arms. During an improvisation, Macbeth, for the first time and by pure chance, saw the chair while cursing Banquo's descendants who could usurp his throne. He then sat down, with warlike gracefulness, on a throne that looked like a child's toy, while Banquo's body was being carried away before his eyes.

In *Nella città di K (In the city of K)*, my very first play, the chair on which the old grandmother sat, suddenly disappeared under the skirt, giving the actress a particular posture that allowed her to sit anywhere. In *AURE*, a chair is slowly dragged out of a room. The actress' body was so tightly connected to the center of the object, so deeply engaged in the dynamic of the movement, that she became transparent. All the spectators saw was the chair, as though in a close-up, sliding away from reality.

In *Il Giardino dei Ciliegi (The Cherry Orchard)*, my latest staging, I chose as props twelve iron chairs of different design and construction. The chairs are on stage from the very beginning, they turn old Firs into a giant mother hen crossing the scene laden with chairs for his masters. The very same chairs dance to the funeral march in the third act. They stop to form two ranks, shoulder to shoulder. The actors, once seated, start playing *musical chairs*. One at a time, after their line the actors exit the stage carrying their chairs, leaving only the King's chair on which sits Lopachin, solitary and majestic in his misery.

In the closing scene, a stack of iron suspended in the air hangs over the characters' heads. Yet, these stripped and rusty chairs are the same ones that in the third act appeared so sumptuous and elegant to the inner eyes of the spectators.

There are objects that have been with me for a long time and that for years I have tried to give back to the art world. I always have them with me in the first days of rehearsals, even without a specific indication in the text. They are ambiguous objects which, stripped of their function as mere accessories, take on abstract and archaic forms. This is the case of an old rain machine from the Goldoni theatre in Livorno: an old wooden parallelepiped, with numerous cracks repaired with improbable plastering. I can imagine it serving its function for many years, hidden behind the proscenium arch and fixed to the wall by a crank that a diligent machinist turned artfully. Then restoration came, and with it the violence that all too often our splendid theatres suffer, plundered of their magical machineries and of the patina of time, and above all abused in the acoustics. The parallelepiped was rescued by a machinist, a soul of a class to which the design and the restoration of any theatrical environment should always be entrusted. Architects are good for houses, not theatres. The magic machine stood in full display, on a pedestal that allowed it to swirl and perform its rain concert. It took a lot of convincing, but out of love and exhaustion the machinist who rescued it finally gave in, and entrusted it to me to be preserved like a treasure.

In *MACBETTU*, the rain machine regained life in art. In the scene following King Duncan's death, the rain machine joins in a funeral march that evokes the King's funeral. Again, I didn't plan this and we never talked about it, but that scene for the spectators is Duncan's funeral. This does not appear in the text, and there are no contextual clues for reading the scene unequivocally. That's simply the way it is.

Life plays weird and wonderful tricks on art. On October 25th 2020, the once dismissed rain machine finally returned home. The day before the theatres had to be closed, we presented *MACBETTU* at the Goldoni theatre in Livorno. That most humble object, until then hidden from the spectators' view, was at last given a person's dignity. After having served the gods of beauty for years, it triumphed in its theatre, slowly crossing the huge stage, singing its glorious march of chickpeas and lentils before a dumbstruck audience.

Magic objects

Where physical appearance is replaced by semblance, when the disguise of mystery seems to reveal itself, like in a sleight of hand, conditions are created that are favourable for the mystery to drop the act, stretch the limbs, and play some strange tricks on us, taking advantage of our complicity. If we tease it, the mystery will come to us complacently and, protected by illusion, perform a true prodigy.
(Pavel Florenskij)²

This prodigy is activated only on condition that the spectators come to the theatre to rediscover the lost mystery. Spectators grant us their trust because they wish to see beyond reality. They pay to engage with the mystery. They activate the covenant; they play along because they know that only by trusting this artifice can they hope to see the transparency of reality. Spectators come to the theatre because they need the supernatural. Not everyone loves theatre, and this becomes apparent ever since childhood. When you show children a magic trick, some remain enchanted and inebriated by the mystery, while others do not believe it, and always insist on learning where the trick is. Are the latter more intelligent than the former? No, they simply do not participate in the mystery, and so, as adults, they'll perhaps prefer the passiveness of cinema to theatre. In theatre, it is not possible to trigger the magic of scenic illusion without the active participation of spectators.

When children feel the need to figure out the secret behind a magic trick, it is because they have stopped playing with dolls and puppets, and have started taking them apart in search of their soul. From that moment on, warns Baudelaire, numbness and sadness begin.

Magical objects are first created in fairy tales, then they reach theatres. Prospero's cloak, Eduardo's cylinder, Harpagon's treasure chest, Autolycus' trunk in *The Winter's Tale*, filled with objects stolen in one city and sold in the other, all come from fairytales.

A wooden stick for a child does not *represent* a horse, it *is* a horse. The same dynamic occurs on stage. If the actor relates to a stick as if it were a horse, the spectators will grant him the vision of the horse.

² Translated from Pavel A. Florenskij, *Ai miei figli. Memorie di giorni passati. cit. p.225*

Watching children playing in the street, one is fascinated by the energy that their bodies can release in an empty space. Children play *cowboys and Indians* riding a broomstick, and activate a creative energy that is all the more powerful, the more rudimentary the object that ignites it. In certain blissful moments, this energy manifests itself without being triggered by objects, and children gallop in the sun transforming their whole body into a horse and rider. They are tireless. Tireless because they are not riding but an imaginary horse that as soon as it stops, it vanishes; tireless because the generative power of reverie is inscribed in a perfect rhythm that banishes fatigue. The more we strive to provide children with objects that resemble a horse — a rocking horse made of real horsehair and glass eyes — the weaker the energy used by the child in the game, and the less interesting for us to observe it. Every night, actors on stage draw on the same creative force of the game. A force that resides in the void, in the purity of the humble and simple object. It is through a child's amazed eye that actors and spectators must look at the objects on stage — and this is the only, true, deep vision of reality.

We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory.
(Louise Glück)