

Notes on Cleansing the Senses by Cecile Rossant, February, 2006

In the opening scene of *Cleansing the Senses*, Main Street, we are drawn into the concrete reality of Peter Rose's life, complete with specific dates and places – California, New York, Berlin - that will figure in the ensuing scenes. The year is 1989, the place: Santa Monica, California. Rose is poised for a zenith of success in his performance work. His hit play, *Berlin Zoo*, is revived in a Santa Monica theater and the play's fantasy of bringing down the Berlin Wall has become reality. Too busy celebrating his new notoriety, Rose, diagnosed bi-polar, defiantly refuses to take his lithium.

This entire scene is played with a steady intensity buoyed by a self-deprecating humor that awakens the audience to Rose's plight as he enters into an ascending and descending spiral. Penniless and jobless, shunned by friends and his lover, Rose manages by innate charm to care for his daily needs aided by a handful of odd angels scattered across his daily beat up and down Main Street. There's Dave at the Rose Café who buys the actor his daily coffee and muffin, and the cocaine-snorting waitresses at the Firehouse Restaurant who "always had a blueberry pancake to throw my way". There is also L.A.'s first female rabbi, Naomi Levy, who confirms Rose's standing as a prominent local actor by asking him to read the Talmud blessing. Rose performs the blessing with a deeply resonant voice; following the actual service he nourishes himself further with the Sabbath Buffet.

Is Rose's nomadic existence viable? He refuses to think of himself as homeless, taking great pains not to be in those parts of the city frequented by the real homeless. Perhaps most importantly, wherever he goes along his route, he performs: he insists on an intimate relation to place and people. This task demands conviction about his artistic power. And although Rose must be continually on the move to avoid recognizing his own homelessness he challenges himself to engage actively with the ever-changing set: the world is a stage and Rose never stops investing himself in his calling as an actor.

In this autobiographical scene we bear witness to the tension between Rose's work as an artist and his unavoidable task of steering through the roller-coaster ride of a manic episode. In the last part of Main Street, Brian, a producer who wants to stage *Berlin Zoo* on television, approaches Rose. The offer is gold but, as Rose soon finds out, the conditions for the gig are uncompromisingly strict. Rose must begin taking his medication and remain, if not literally imprisoned, at the very least under the producer's watchful eye. The dilemma he faces becomes painfully apparent. In

order for Rose to present his work on the theater stage commonly understood as such by society, he must accept the confinement and conditions of being “an artist in residence” as others define it. He must give up his nomadic life and accept enclosure, circumspection, and in some sense surveillance.

It is telling that this scene flows directly into a scene in the California desert where Rose is both embraced and embraces the landscape’s wild openness. He experiences a mystical communion with the desert’s animals and flora, listening to and allowing himself to be the vessel for their voice and movement. As we shall see, this theme of communion with the beast resurfaces later.

In quotes...in song and incantation: the art of the Cantor

Poetry, prayer, and song punctuate Peter Rose’s narrative as he recounts his mental and artistic decline, ascent, and self-overcoming in L.A., N.Y., and Berlin. These other forms of expression do not interrupt the narrative, but subtly allow him to embody another identity or voice. The Rose who recites the Talmudic prayer, shawl thrown over his shoulders, is transfigured. Though intrinsically related to his own identity, the other figure is projected through the act of ‘incantation’. I want to make the distinction between the speaker, storyteller or actor who quotes and ‘re-cites’ a poem and Rose’s means of returning a poetic or spiritual text to original expression. How does he do this? One aspect is movement. He doesn’t ‘stand and deliver’; he draws figures with his movement, dancing into life the character of the homeless bard and the inspired cantor. The narrator is a wandering figure who has different callings, nationalities, a shifting social standing, and speaks different languages: Yiddish, Polish, German, and English.

In Peter Rose’s performances, the set is constructed and deconstructed continually: the dining room of a Polish Restaurant in NYC fluidly becomes a glass domed train station in Berlin. What are his materials for construction? A set is built by stage designers. They construct a setting within a setting. But in Peter Rose’s work, place lies between narrative and movement; his gestures, his dance, and his body draw imaginary lines within the room, without a set. A set is too fixed.

Rose hooks onto specific points and particularities of any given space. He also uses props: a wash basin, a stepladder, a red shawl, candles, old black leather shoes and water. A prop is a substitute for something else: another object or even a character. An object or a person can become a love object or the ‘beloved’ insofar as the lover is able to project his vision and see the object as representing that vision. Rose’s ‘love objects’ are extremely dear because throughout the performance they lend

themselves to different identities through transformation and rediscovery. The ladder is platform, ledge, or perch; if raised above the actor's head it becomes a roof; if held in front of his face it becomes a prison, to name just a few of its eventual transfigurations. The basin, the 'bottomless vessel', is also the beloved. Its wide open 'face' is large enough for the actor to lose his face within or to step inside. It can also be filled with water: Rose turns it into a sacred vessel into which to recite a blessing. In another scene he achieves a visually poetic moment by lighting flames within it, allowing the basin to glow with its own light. The vessel is both open and containing: it holds fire, light, and water: cleansing water, sacred water which can also spill on the ground when the basin is knocked over: the basin can be emptied. We are transported from one symbolic or concrete place to another through song, dance, and dramatic narration – again, as fluidly as necessary, that we may see the whole array embodied by one all-embracing figure.

A story of a man's life is recounted in the wake of the set's unfolding and its necessary disappearance. The actor depends on the expressive capacity of his body, his voice, and his limited props to externalize these settings. His movements often challenge the defined perceptual envelopes of space that keep setting and consequently consciousness in a stable state. We keep wall as wall, floor as floor, and we respect the usual height established for sitting, the usual height for wainscoting to embrace a room: Rose turns these perceptual references on their head to achieve a full and open mechanism of expression. We are compelled by an assault on our senses to re-interpret perceptual markers as the scene evoked in the performance demands.

Poetic and religious languages operate with illusion or symbolic metaphor: both call forth forms that do not exist in the concrete material world but are nonetheless, for the length of the incantation, invested with palpable necessity even if it is inescapably ephemeral. The 'cantor's' charge is to evoke these forms in the fullest possible way, to allow himself to pass through, and with enough conviction that the existential / metaphysical questions contained within his words may emerge as concretely as possible. In *Cleansing the Senses* Rose often assumes this role of the 'cantor'. In this role he has the chance to throw light on both the delusional and the inspired aspects of autobiographical sequences because he, the cantor, the poet, the singing vagabond or raving madman, through incantation, brings to life a different point of reference. Finally it is the way that Rose performs and embodies these poetic texts that gives ground to them as living expression rather than quotation.

The capacity to invoke and express the extraordinary might be likened to the feats of any number of comic strip superheroes. Spiderman climbs walls. Not only does he bring to us a new perspective of space of our hometown metropolis, he also swings on a thread from scene to scene and space to space with an exhilarating speed and urgency. Peter Rose also climbs walls and redefines the usual boundaries of stage, audience and fixed identity.

Unlike the superheroes whose transgressions are necessary to highlight the battle between good and evil, Peter Rose's performances focus on a range of boundaries, both concrete and physical or metaphysical: The boundaries between rooftop and ground, being animal and being human, madness and sanity, bodily death, spiritual death and resurrection, gender and the transformation into its loving twin.

Peter Rose inhabits these states of being - walking the tightrope line "in between" - in actual or symbolic settings. Again we come back to Berlin's Bahnhof Zoo, to a circus tent, to New York's Lower East Side, and to the California coast and desert. I can easily complete the analogy between Peter Rose's performances and our Superhero Spiderman by saying that Rose's naturally tough spider's thread is the narrative itself. But this is not entirely true. The storyteller's voice carries our somnambulant selves but Peter Rose's movements are too daring for a sleepwalker.

The pointing, gesturing, and urgent sculpting of space as it spins out of one man's body follows from his expressed desire to "engage the actor's limitations and invite him to overcome himself."

Rose repeatedly confronts us with his hunger for ecstasy and encountering limits. In one of Berlin's main train stations, squatting beneath the station's glass dome, the actor is mesmerized by the doves flying in and out and especially by those that repeatedly shoot up towards the roof, hitting themselves against the dome's glass only to fall back to the ground. This poetic image and dramatic paradox is further articulated through the poetry of T.S. Eliot: "The dove descending breaks the air / With the flame of incandescent terror / Of which the tongues declare / The one discharge from sin and error / The only hope or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre / to be redeemed from fire by fire." There is a subtle irony here: the artist has found both his artistic and cultural calling, his spiritual ground, but he is unable to ground either in his current context. Rose, the actor, still insists on performing his ecstatic dance, even if alone. With an even subtler irony, Rose, with his arms raised, sings a traditional Christian spiritual, dancing in a Yiddish and ecstatic style.

The Provocative Beast

Still in Berlin, looking for a place to spend the night, Rose remembers the circus tent on Anhalterstraße, and slips through the tent's canvas flap, settling down in his sleeping bag. Like the scene in the Berlin train station, the narrative is taken from Rose's 1983 play, *Berlin Zoo*. The actor narrates the scene lying on his back describing how he is awakened by a "clump of this slimy substance" hitting him on the chest, on the back, face, and neck. Recognizing it is just a playful elephant seeing a handsome young man or a pretty young girl, a *sheyn maydele*, and wanting to flirt by tossing a bit of dung his way, Rose happily wishes the elephant a good morning. Eventually discovered and banished from the tent by a circus guard, Rose runs away. Still, charged by the elephant's provocation, an incitement to act, he comes up with the idea to stage a big party - invite more elephants, a ragtag group of his Berlin friends, and other outcasts to knock down the Berlin Wall. An evermore-ecstatic Rose envisions a wild knock-the-Wall-down party ending in the unification of the two Germanys with himself riding on the elephant's back as the unified land's new king.

This scene was first written and staged in 1983 in New York and then throughout West Germany. At that time The Wall still existed, as did its status as physical icon of the cold war and a divided Europe. "*Berlin Zoo*' is about the demographic reality of a city that's divided", explained Rose in an interview in 1989 on the occasion of the play's premiere in L.A. "At the same time", he goes on to say, "this piece is also about the split within its protagonist." In 2005, 16 years after the big party that did in fact bring the Wall down, this scene has a more personal meaning, revealed in the relation between elephant and man or provocateur and provocateur. The protagonist, incited by the elephant's action, imagines fantastic possibilities. Of course he is thrown, his dream as the unifier unseated, his position as king of a unified world dethroned. Still, the moment arrives when the actor recognizes that he is the elephant: the provocateur, the strong sturdy beast who can now carry a fledgling dream on his back.

Rose leaves Germany celebrating by way of an ecstatic poem written and performed in German about a new unleashed energy. He is on his way to Wroclaw, Poland, and headlong into contact with Jerzy Grotowski's Active Culture and Open Movement...

Cleansing the Senses: Open Movement and the ecstatic dance

New York, 1979, Rose has just returned from being in Poland with Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre. Sitting in a Polish restaurant with fellow "scene" performers on New York's Lower East Side, Rose reveals how deeply he was inspired by his training and experiences in Poland,

"Cleansing the Senses...To live and create more fully," he declares, "That's one of the goals."

As Rose gains confidence in sharing his understanding in a string of active verbs that describe a transformed state of being and dance, he suddenly finds himself deserted by his audience, his fellow actors. He is left alone with the Polish waitress to whom he performs the opening section of *Invocacia*, by Adam Mickiewiucz, in Polish. Rose has become an exile in his own context. He is no longer in Poland at the Laboratory Theater that had become his artistic home. He is displaced from the cultural homeland invoked in the Polish poem and to which he feels linked through his own Lithuanian grandmother. In a more general sense, he is exiled by his own pursuit of ecstatic performance: who else will participate in this project?

In the Polish restaurant on NY's Lower East Side, we experience Rose's struggle with cultural and artistic authenticity. His questioning evolves in a given sequence: The return from Poland to New York and from one artistic and cultural scene to another. The food might taste the same, and the waitress may be Polish. Still the expectation that the resonance of Open Movement that Rose carries within himself can be transplanted to his hometown is at least momentarily delayed. The audience of potential collaborators dwindles to one: the authentically Polish waitress. Rose has not yet arrived, nor has he yet captured this new stage that he desires. The Shakespearean sonnet with which he ends his performance, however, beautifully expresses his will to do so.

A seated Rose, speaking into his shoes, recites Sonnet #15. One can interpret this poem as an Ode to the Present Moment and to Time's Check on Youthful Vigor and Ascent. As the poem turns to the unknowable relation between the proliferation of worldly things and the celestial sphere - "That this huge stage presenteth naught / But shows whereon the stars in secret influence comment" - Rose addresses the words to his shoes' dark and hidden interior before slipping them on his feet. Is this a kind of cosmic joke: the sphere above slipped over one sole and then another before being pressed to the ground?

In *Cleansing the Senses* the ground of performance is charged. Rose is the lyrical Pan, prancing on the grass mound coaxing it with his at times half-crazed evocation and song to swell and crack, revealing or releasing the buried bones. He charges at these suggestive remains, shaping his relation to them and inviting the ephemeral identities to dance until they fall again to pieces and slip back into the crack.

The work ends as it has begun: with two lit candles: the gate or many gates through which we have flowed. ...”And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time...When the tongues of flames are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one.”