Chapter 18

**Re-cycle/Up-cycle: A Conversation** Gian Carlo Rossi and Jacek Ludwig Scarso

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Abstract

In this conversation between Gian Carlo Rossi and Jacek Ludwig Scarso, both authors reflect on what recycling and the idea of the “re-thing”, to use John’s and Knut’s phrase, mean in relation to their own directing work. Drawing on the changing connotation of recycling in an environmentally concerned world, parallels may be seen in the conceptual and aesthetic adaption of existent ideas, and the physical re-use of items of performance. The conversation takes examples from their respective work, including Gian’s Shakespeare productions for the Gdańsk Festiwal Szekspirowski and Jacek’s multimedia performance installation at Tate Modern. Do existent texts and images get recycled because intrinsically relatable or gain relatability and longevity through recycling? Is postmodern recycling an inescapable condition and does the meaning of such recycling evolve as our world changes? Is the idea of originality consequently redundant and may it be replaced by the idea of up-cycling?

JLS: Recycle, recycle, recycle. The familiarity of this phrase has forever (or at least it feels that way) been linked to a postmodern agenda, in which the consciousness of “imitation with no original”, to use Butler’s famous wording (Butler, 2004, 127), transcends our experience of identity and pervades every form of cultural expression. From the “dying Author” of Barthes, whose work is reformed and reborn in the reception of the Reader, recycling continues to be an unavoidable term of comparison with which to describe how we make and understand things in art. Yet, if this notion of recycling has for decades been hard to challenge, its present experience, I would propose, may be shifting a little, or perhaps substantially.

I cannot, in this current era, hear the word ‘recycling’ without its inevitable environmental connotations. And recycling in this sense is not simply a phrase that is embedded with social duty, but, at least in my own experience, with a good dose of guilt. Recycling is what I am supposed to do, not necessarily what I may achieve at all times, or efficiently at least. In performance, I recycle my projects via their documentation, attempting to bypass their ephemerality with the somewhat illusory desire for permanence. Aside from the written or digitally recorded material reflecting on my work, what do I do with performance “remains”, i.e. costume, set, props, etc? Do I give them away to save on the increasingly burdening cost of London’s storage facilities? Or do I keep them, as they do capture what the performance did and there is always a chance of an encore? Probably the latter.

Where possible, I may keep things in communal spaces, for other projects to incorporate. It can be a strange feeling to see an element used in one of my performances being recycled by another. Whether a physical object or a conceptual idea, seeing something that I recognise in somebody else’s work may lead to mixed feelings and sometimes of judgement as to where that element may have been used better or whether there is a right for it to be recycled. Conversely, it is impossible to look at my own work without realising how much of it has components of others. So, recycling is unavoidable and its possible manifestations endless.

In the 'inevitable stealing' connotation suggested by John and Knut, perhaps a distinction should be made in the consciousness of such process. What we may refer to as recycling may indicate an active adaptation of the (re-)thing. Alternatively, it may be an involuntary absorbing or even plagiarizing, borne out of a culture that has declared its own insurmountable state of postmodernity. But to go back to my previous statement, recycling may also be a by-product of a throwaway society that acts guilty: this recycling may be found in the empty documentation of ephemeral projects, left for posterity but never truly used; in the things we keep from a performance, not really as memento but on the off-chance that they may be needed again. In the ideas that keep cluttering our creative minds – not so much because they are a recurring interest, but because we can’t quite bring ourselves to come up with anything better.

GCR: I concur and identify with much of this Jacek.

We have a recycling of the geographical and the temporal that has been common to theatre practice since its primeval origins in ritual, and later in the manipulation and transformation of the urban landscapes of towns and villages that we see in Medieval Pageants for example.

At an anecdotal level, many of the props and items in store at London Met are ‘my’, items and objects, bits of furniture that I have dragging around with me for at least 28 years as I move from job to job and site to site. Only recently one of the year 3 Directing students was using a length of black sash chord that is still around from my work with Rosemary Butcher on Body as Site back in 1992. Recycling of a very materialist kind of course. In fact, on having read these articles by John and Knut, I’m thinking of using recycling as a key term in the delivery of the Directing module next year – recycling The Maids, The Lesson...it’s a positive approach that has a degree of humility about it.

On reading the John and Knut pieces, I was immediately reminded in particular, of the work I did for the International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk between 2005 and 2012 ( and indeed some of your work too - the ‘recycling’ of iconic renaissance paintings, the recycling of found objects in some of your 3D work…) where I considered my work a re-mix or cover version of Shakespeare, clearly in these terms, a recycling. And in turn, a recycling of popular music, giving – as one example of my use of popular music - Take That: a new historical and cultural context by using their music as an overture for Petruchio.

One thing (of many) that resonated in particular in their pieces, was the reference to spectator as ‘poacher’ in Impossible Theatres. I equate this with my work as a theatre maker along the lines of a poacher, but more of a thief, truth be told. And this is very much inspired - or perhaps excused and reconciled by seeking solace and recognition in Elizabeth Grosz’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari

In her call to dynamise thinking, to liberate notions of text from the dangers of cultural stagnation, Grosz provides us with a methodology with which to approach and consider notions of text, and we extend this to embrace and consider notions of theatre production, and in this case, towards the production of a classical text.

It would be good to dynamize thinking, to think of a text, whether book, paper, film, painting, or building, as a thief in the night. Furtive, clandestine, and always complex, it steals ideas from all around, from its own milieu and history, and, better still, from its outside, and disseminates them elsewhere... A text is not the repository of knowledges or truths, the site for the storage of information... not simply a tool or an instrument; this makes it too utilitarian, too amenable to intention, too much designed for a subject...Texts, like concepts, do things, make things, perform actions, create connections, bring about new alignments. They are events­ situated in social, institutional, and conceptual space. (Grosz 1995: 125-126)

In Deleuzian terms this becomes a ‘nomadological’ or ‘rhizomatic’ approach to theatre making, taking imaginative and intuitive leaps in the dark and finding out later where you land. As Grosz goes on to elaborate:

Instead of a Derridean model of text as textile, as interweaving - which produces a closed, striated space of intense overcodings, a fully semiotized model of textuality - a model that is gaining considerable force in architectural and urbanist discourses, texts could, more in keeping with Deleuze, be read, used, as modes of effectivity and action which, at their best, scatter thoughts and images into different linkages or new alignments without necessarily destroying their materiality. Ideally, they produce unexpected intensities, peculiar sites of indifference, new connections with other objects, and thus generate affective and conceptual transformations that problematise, challenge, and move beyond existing intellectual and pragmatic frameworks. (Grosz 1995: 126-127)

So, it’s about taking an anti-genealogical approach, a mode of text that ‘scatters thoughts and images into different linkages’. Working with *Measure for Measure* for Gdańsk 2005 for example, it was about an approach that would ‘problematise, challenge, and move beyond existing intellectual and pragmatic frameworks’, embarking on a journey that would ‘steal’ and ‘borrow’ from the fields of performance practice and critical theory without any ‘commitment’ or ‘loyalty’ to anything in particular – now heading I would suggest, in the direction of Howard Barker’s theatre of promiscuity... - Mats Ek, Merce Cunningham, Baol, 1950’s Doo Wop, Cixous and Irigary, the work of Polish theatre director Jan Klata; we took something from them all. And we keep good company – the edition of *Measure for Measure* we used in production cited seven pre-existing sources which to varying degrees contributed to Shakespeare's (whatever this might actually mean) *Measure for Measure*.

I believe that this form of recycling (and this points us back to reading performance as a form of recycling in Impossible Theatres), creates a formal tension between the recycled agencies at play because we left these ‘unresolved’. As ‘dying authors’, (or unwilling perhaps) we abdicate the position of ‘truth’, refusing to ‘do the work’ for the spectator, by ‘pulling it all together’ - we leave it to them.

At a lecture at the Barbican in May of 2004, Robert Wilson (a very impressive recycler) was discussing the influence that the work of choreographer George Balanchine had had on him. Wilson said that one of the things that Balanchine did, was to make the performers perform first for themselves, to make the audience come to them, rather than take the work to the audience. I think this is an interesting dynamic that I enjoy entertaining and playing with in making work. It’s about a form of recycling that is not interested in providing answers, but asking questions, even if the question is...’What on earth are they doing?’

We are asking - in the words of Robert Wilson - not 'what it is' but 'what is it?' We are addressing the question, not the answer. We are asking 'where is it going?' rather than 'where does it come from?' In Deleuzian terms, a state of becoming rather than being. Or as the translator of A Thousand Plateaus, Brian Massumi suggests in his foreword:

The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?

The answer for some readers, perhaps most, will be “none.” If that happens, it’s not your tune. No problem. But you would have been better off buying a record. (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: xv)

And yes, some of this has been recycled from a paper I gave in Gdańsk. Quite a bit actually.

JLS: Consciousness of the collectivism of recycling may be key here.

Let’s take an example. In my recent project In Limbo, in collaboration with Tate Exchange, I explored the idea of waiting through a participatory live art / VR experience. Roaming around Tate Modern, the public would meet a group of performers wearing suits and large angel wings. These “Angel Bureaucrats” would walk slowly towards selected members of the public and deliver them a secret message, directing them to a metaphoric waiting room in the Blavatnik extension: here, amidst stage smoke and alongside a specially commissioned VR journey created by Felix Dodd and A-VR, they would receive a form to fill in including a doodling task to complete while listening to a gentle waltz punctuated by a clock ticking. The forms would include playfully worded questions exploring their experience of waiting: from personal to societal instances of waiting for something to happen, or for something to change, attempting to quantify time employed waiting and evaluating whether such action would be worth it. The completed forms would then be handed back to the angels, who, in a ritualised performance, would hang these carefully on a large wall, eventually reaching around 1200 completed forms in the space of one week.

There are many levels in which recycling may be seen as relevant to this project:

* The image of Limbo and angels. The familiarity of these image, thus recycled from popular usage, is key to how the audience related to it. By making the piece accessible at face value, I believe that it encouraged the public to dig deeper into their response, to trust the piece and to allow for its playful setting to provide a safe environment in which to explore their personal experiences of waiting. An unfamiliar image might have made the public more cautious about sharing these and I was indeed humbled by the generosity and intimacy of the thoughts shared on their forms (crucially kept anonymous).
* The re-envisioning of the limbo space as both physical and virtual. The combination of live and VR elements was significant, arguably with the latter recycling the former in a remediation of the staging concept. In fact, when I worked with VR designer Felix Dodd, it was important to stay true to the live setting, but also to stylise it further in its re-mediation, creating a distorted and seemingly infinite version of this. Additional features were added to this, depicting this Limbo as a creation of the mind, as we virtually experience flying away from this and realising that it is located in a large scale human brain.
* The recycling of the act of waiting as participatory performance. The piece presents waiting as a universal condition, particularly in relation to the pervasiveness of technology and the state of impatience it generates – the more waiting times are reduced by technological efficiency, the more conscious and intolerant we are in relation to these. By recycling this experience into a performative shared environment, we highlight our awareness of it, representing and stylising it.
* The recycling of the soundtrack. The use of a vintage waltz recording created a playful mood in the space. The tune may not be familiar, but its gramophone quality suggests historical recycling, which in turn may generate a mix of nostalgia and postmodern humour. This recycling of a perceived past and the combined clock ticking sound were also crucial in encouraging a contemplation of time passing, aided by the repetitive nature of the track, continuously looped.
* The recycling of audience’s responses into a collective artwork (the mural piece created by layers of forms stuck on the wall). This last form of recycling is for me its most significant. As the audience’s forms are completed and hung on the wall, the resulting display creates a communal response, recording a zeitgeist, so to speak, of what waiting means at this moment in time, in this place. The fact that this too becomes part of the experience, with audience members keenly exploring other participants’ responses, exposes the idea that participatory art is comparable not only to recycling as an act of repetition and remediation, but also to the ethics associated with its environmental connotations. The more the initial stimulus is recycled and reinterpreted across many responses, the more the participant feels comfortable in adding his/her own and may, I propose, feel a “social duty” in doing so and contributing to the experiment.

If this multiple understanding of the word recycling risks diluting the definition of this term, what In Limbo showed to me is that connotations of recycling, however understood, may share a principle of collectivism. In a participatory experience, the memories, performed actions and communicated experiences, recycling and reinterpreting a given stimulus, increase each other’s impact the more they are accumulated and seen against one another.

GCR: Since I last wrote on this, I’ve been considering my work in relation to the notion of ‘up-cycling’

(I feel the need for a hyphen and its inherent dynamism…). Does this make what I might have considered as ‘re-cycled’ actually ‘up-cycled’ - in some or all cases? And I do wonder, how might all those canonical and perhaps heretical figures we admire and consciously or unconsciously re-cycle feel, if we considered their work along the lines of waste materials, useless or unwanted products, no longer fit for purpose. I imagine (or hope!) that joining us within the parameters and spirit of this discourse, that they would accept and recognise the process as one of homage, a symbolic and performative acknowledgement of our ‘place’ in the genealogy of theatre, and an act of reverence (if not actual submission).

So, crudely, did I make something ‘new’ when I worked on my projects, or did I add value? Or is it the case that in this form of cultural production, in re-cycling, did I up-cycle? Clearly it would be an unprecedented act of vanity for me to make such bold claims; as this discourse seems to suggest that ‘new’ is a contentious claim perhaps, but for me to claim that I ‘add value’ to (for example) Shakespeare, Witkacy, Ionesco, Mrozek; well, that’s bold and contentious. But is simply introducing them to new audiences in a new way (re-freshing?) in itself adding value? Perhaps audience reception, recognition and acknowledgement are key to this?

While in Gdańsk, I was never going to ‘challenge’ the superlative craft of Lev Dodin, Irina Brook and Silviu Purcarete and their companies amongst many others, I could at least entice and surprise audiences with an untraditional approach to Shakespeare that re-cycled or up-cycled the abilities, qualities, attributes, energies and personalities of the student casts that I worked with.

The most heart rendering instance of Shakespeare I ever heard, was from the documentary The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off (First shown March 25th 2004 Channel 4), the story of Jonny Kennedy who suffered terribly from Dystrophic Epidermolysis Bullosa, a condition that means skin falls from the body at the slightest touch. It’s a remarkable documentary. Towards the end of this emotional journey as Jonny nears death, he narrates:

I know inside that there’s more to life than this mortal coil. It’s a very shallow minded person who thinks that somebody is born and dies and that’s it. I haven’t gone through thirty odd years of suffering and doing what I do and looking at other people who are born and die with cancer with AIDS with whatever, and think, well what was the point of that. There is a point to everything, and we’re here to learn, and it’s just a learning curve and we move on, and this is just a shell. It’s just I’ve got a dodgy shell. (43.40)

This is one of the many daily re-cycling examples of Shakespeare, but in this case, perhaps an up-cycling.

I’ve seen many productions of Hamlet over the years, and heard the soliloquy delivered (and ‘dismissed’ on occasion) by many revered actors, but never has reference to the shuffling off of the mortal coil been delivered with such eloquence and breath-taking emotional resonance and truth. It made me realise that it isn’t so much about what Shakespeare brings to us (a common attitude and approach), but about what we bring to Shakespeare. It is Jonny’s illness, disease and suffering that brings the ‘truth’, that realises and unleashes the creative potential for brilliance from Shakespeare, without any training, any technique, any measured rehearsal, any R and D. It’s his life that has been all of this, and more. The re-cycling of his pain and Shakespeare’s literary eloquence culminate in an up-cycling that gives added value to that which we already value. So, for me, it became about what my students can bring to Shakespeare in performance. Their – comparative – youth and exuberance, their energy/ies, their unbridled commitment to risk taking and trust, their desire to play and experiment, to dance and to laugh.

This connects with your reference to a form of collective re-cycling in regard to In Limbo. Working with graduating students on these productions became a collective re-cycling of the ability to play, to take risks, to not worry about ‘getting bruised’ if you fall off the bike. As nominal director, it became my role to orchestrate and facilitate play using Shakespeare’s text as a framework, a kind of climbing frame, a slide or a swing, or a flight of steps on a housing estate, a park or woodland. The ability to play is something we begin to leave behind, it becomes forgotten waste, a nostalgic waste land that holds us back, whereas returning to it can unleash such creative potential. I began to develop a way of exploring Shakespeare through play, through building an ensemble that began with a conceptual framework and a generally heavily edited text or selection of texts, and then explored and developed this through play in a manner that drew on the characteristics of the ensemble to bring it to performance. The boundaries between workshop/rehearsal and performance/production become and remain increasingly blurred and the sense of the unpredictable maintain a ‘youthful’ (approach and attitude rather than age based) liveness throughout. This work was later developed within the context of intergenerational workshops.

Any good workshop will stimulate the participant to release their energy, to free their body and their voice, to listen, to think, to be creative, to engage in focussed exchanges with other people, to take risks and to watch others...A workshop should promote collective learning, where a group of people spend time together using certain materials and, more importantly, each other as resources to explore ideas through interaction. (Hahlo and Reynolds 2003: xii)

This dynamic of ‘freeing up’ has been fundamental to the work of many of the practitioners that have shaped the way that theatre and performance has been transformed – Grotowski and Artaud in particular – and is likewise central to much of the work done in collaborative theatre practice.

In 'Psychopathic Characters on the Stage', Freud hints at why the use (or dynamic) of play can be so effective – especially for those with little or no experience of acting. In his essay, he suggests that as adults we lose the ability - and opportunity – to enact and explore ‘heroic conduct’ through play and that going to the theatre (or cinema and playing video games) allows us to identify with ‘heroic’ conduct without any risk of encountering the pains and sufferings that can be the outcome of such activities. For the adult then, spectatorship (seen in this instance as Aristotelian catharsis) replaces play, and Freud suggests that in intellectual activity, joking/fun/laughter serve to disrupt as a means of emotional engaging with the sensations of pleasure and enjoyment – as ‘blowing off steam’.

While questions and notions of spectatorship have developed and ‘matured’ since Freud’s works, and Aristotelian catharsis is no longer the/a primary need or means of engaging with theatre and performance, the idea of spectator as a person who ‘experiences too little’ is a useful indicator of why this form of experiential engagement and learning is of such great value.

Why talk about how to build an ensemble and work collectively when you can experience it and have fun doing so. Initially through more abstract notions of space and spatially – Defend the Chair that in itself became a feature in More Than A Woman (Gdańsk International Shakespeare Festival 2008), a re/up-cycling of Taming of The Shrew and a selection of sonnets; incorporating music from the Bee Gees, Andy Williams and The Spice Girls. This is then layered and developed perhaps with a range of exercises, games and specific performance techniques – Laban and Michael Chekhov – that deliver a more demanding group engagement through and with the language of Shakespeare.

JLS: And I still remember those games all too well, having had the pleasure of seeing these productions and in many cases observing the rehearsal process. Playing is another interesting example of re-cycling: rules are consciously repeated, but the outcome is always ephemeral and elusive. The same game that was once a memory for the playground may be tailored to different groups and needs, becoming suddenly significant in reinforcing an ensemble spirit or in understanding the dynamics of a particular play. It is precisely because it re-cycles an experience of childhood that a game may be such a powerful reawakening of spontaneous playfulness.

GCR: Through play, we lose our inhibitions. We open the mind and the body. We whisper and we shout, we run and we chase. We build and store energy then we dissipate it and exhaust ourselves. We fall over and we pick ourselves up. So, by allowing us to return to the pleasure principles of play traditionally associated with childhood, we become free to experiment and engage with what until this ‘moment’, are considered complex and demanding cultural activities.

Much of the work I have done (and seen) can be seen to have a conceptual drive framed as another notion of the ‘re’, in the ‘re-theatrification’ (in Witkacy’s terms perhaps ‘re-chewing’) of ‘original’ text through the fragmentation of text and character.

Since the times of the Great Reform at the end of the 19th century, the history of European Theatre had unfolded between two radical solutions embodied in the slogans ‘TRUTH against CONVENTION’and ‘STYLE against REALISM’. The first slogan was enunciated by both the naturalists and the symbolists (who had a different understanding of both ‘truth’ and ‘convention’). The second slogan dominated the last of the heroic phases of reform when Fuchs, Evreinov, Meyerhold and Copeau proclaimed the ‘retheatrification’ of the theatre and the need for conventionality. (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 146)

In Pleśniarowicz’s reading of Kantor, it brings to mind Kantor’s re/up-cycling of memory in much of his work, and in the way that he plunders and reworks the texts of Witkacy for example.

This discourse also raises the question of ‘why’? Why do we do this? Our colleague Dr Karen McNally in Film at London Met challenges the idea that the growing popularity of Hollywood re-makes is ‘bound up in the notion that technological advances aimed at connecting the world have led instead to a disconnected generation now looking to the past and familiarity for solace’. McNally, while recognising the appeal of a technologically-based theory, posits the more interesting and ‘embodied’, and culturally aware theory that - for example - ‘Contemporary reboots re-framed around black, ethnic and female characters, moreover, highlight the role of popular culture in the formation of a shifting cultural landscape of diverse stories and perspectives, reconstructing the familiar by revealing the unfamiliar’. <https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/news/expert-commentary/2019/may/sequels-and-remakes/>

The term re-boot in our ever-developing lexicology, has an attractive energy about it; kicking the ‘classics’ back into play with a renewed vigour in a manner that reflects and affects shifting cultural landscapes, that realigns and reaffirms the cultural worth and capital of that which we seek to revitalise. Those cultural commodities that we are forever drawn towards, those sparks that ignite the fire of creativity and collective rejoicing when we see - for example - John Donnelly’s new version of Moliere’s Tartuffe delight audiences at the Royal National Theatre.

And as a final footnote to this, John and Knut’s ‘call to arms’ informed my reception and reading of an event I witnessed at the Venice Biennale this year at the ARTI3160 Gallery. They presented an off-site Biennale project by Claire Zakiewicz and Danni-Lu Carr; IMPRECISION: The Aesthetics of Failure.

As Zakwiewicz explains: IMPRECISION: The Aesthetics of Failure examines the tensions between failure and perfection: the techniques, limitations and the implications. ‘In my drawings, I've noticed that aiming for something ugly can produce beauty. Failure creates new pathways; it disrupts prescribed patterns’, says Zakiewicz. ‘Drawing blindfolded with one’s attention on something other than the drawing, almost, always produces a quality of line, unity and balance of shapes - even - or more prominently, as control moves further away.’

The ‘something other’ in this was Carr and Zakiewicz’s use of Meisner technique, and for me, this was an intriguing and engaging example of the re or up cycling of a technique traditionally associated with theatre, re-placed on the pavement outside of a gallery on a glorious May afternoon in Venice.

JLS: So, to add one last provocation, if incidents of re-cycling, collective or individual, deliberate or by default, radical or reactionary, are not just pervasive but effectively unavoidable, why does the concept of originality persist as an absolute in both artistic and academic practices? After thirty or forty years of postmodern consensus (here’s an oxymoron) on the impossibility of the original, why do we still refer to this word in measuring the cultural value of a work? Perhaps we should draw exactly on the environmental framework and, to use your wording Gian, focus on whether a piece is successful in up-cycling the cultural references it draws upon: not to say that it improves upon these (surely that would be another myth, very much akin to the one of originality), but that it generates impact through their re-use, that it ensures their relevance by extending their reach, their lifespan: just like a re-cycled object that, instead of being mindlessly thrown away, clogging and choking its own environment, finds a new life in another adaptation.

GCR: Well, maybe not the ‘last’, as you set me thinking again Jacek...

On further reflection, might we not consider that without this strategic form of intervention, that these ‘works’ may simply have become landfill? Unacknowledged/able by contemporary audiences? For sure, the raw materials are outstanding, but it takes scavengers and scroungers (as well as poachers and thieves of the night), to identify for themselves what is precious, to sift through the materials, to extract what can be re-used for their purposes and steer it away from oblivion. Where would Shakespeare be without ‘interventions’ by the likes of Peter Brook in 1970 with his ‘Dream’, or Jan Klata’s performance ‘H’ (after Hamlet) for Teatr Wybrzeże in 2004, played in the historic Gdańsk Shipyards; and who is truly responsible for ‘his’ longevity and apparent ‘immortality’?

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