

Performance Practice

I watched 'On Your Feet' at Liverpool Empire theatre, a West End musical based on the life of the Cuban-American singer Gloria Estefan. It was directed by Jerry Mitchell, with choreography by Sergio Trujillo and book by Alexander Dinelaris.

The performance was held by the Cuban music element in coherence. The aesthetic principle of the production portrayed the story through Cuban culture, fact that it was plain to see from the music, the scenery and the costumes. The Empire theatre, is an imposing, huge late Victorian building and that day it was almost full, that is why many people, including myself, were sitting at the circle, the visibility though it was good. The stage was big enough to simultaneously hold both the dancers and the actors which made the stage seem like a colourful party accompanied by Latin music.

As the play is a biography, the actors should impersonate, automatically they used Stanislavsky's techniques as the actors emotions were in a great resonance with those of the characters and the action. For instance, the dialogues were simple and familiar, with a Spanish accent, some of them were funny, but still the actors' hidden emotion to each word and each gesture; because of their interpretation, the text does not seem to have any relation to the real world despite the fact that the play is based on real life, everything seems to be quite easy and I could not find metatext in this text. The warm lighting following protagonists, well-designed glittering costumes, the alternative forms of scenery using projection magnetized the audience's attention.

'On your Feet' is clearly a musical comedy, as it includes both comic and romantic characters. There is Emilio with his Spanish accent and his limited English making often the scenery a cartoonish version of reality and on the other hand is the romantic Gloria with her hummable and structured songs. A naturalistic detail is also identified in order to combine the musical with the narrative. Naturalism is the highly realistic description of man's environment. The naturalist does not seek to show the reality since he is not interested in following man-made laws. As there is a need for an increased realism not only in script but mainly in

visual structure with coherence, the duty of director is extremely important. The whole play depends on the view of Gloria's experiences and not in the circumstances exactly as they are, but how she perceived them. In this way the play becomes more emotional as the audience empathizes with the main character and he relates to his role.

The story is about Gloria Estefan and her husband Emilio, how they managed to walk together in the common path of life and music. Gloria at a very young age had to take care of her father, who had multiple sclerosis. At the age of seventeen she meets her husband and she starts singing with his band despite the fact that her mother was against her decision. Soon Gloria's vocals launched the band's success globally and she became a star. Her triumph as a performer and her joy of being a mother did not cover her need of her mother, who had been estranged for twelve years. In 1990, she had an accident with her tour bus that caused her serious injuries to the spine and a year out of work. Her complete recovery was doubtful. A year later, she managed full recovery thanks to her extensive physical therapy, family, fans and her mother's return into her life. The play ends with Gloria's first appearance after the accident at American Music Awards.

It is a play-life, which is inevitably influenced by social and political circumstances. From the beginning of her childhood Gloria experienced persecution because of the Cuban Revolution, at the age of two she and her family fled to Miami. The next three years her father was absent as he was held captive for a year in the Bay of Pigs invasion and for two years he served in Vietnam on the side of the US army. When he returned he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which causes him to lose the abilities of decision making, speaking and walking. We should also take into consideration how Miami was during the eighties, after the traumatic Cuban Revolution over one million people went to the USA and most of them to Miami and they transformed it into a Latin American city, Cuban life and culture was active in Miami; however crime and violence were identified too.

Estefan's mother was strict; she worked by day and at night she was doing her actual job, teaching. Circumstances made her a strong woman and a leader of the family; at the play she seems bossy and uncompromising about her daughter's future as she wanted her to study at

University and not spending all her time in music. As a mother she cares about her daughter and she wants the best for her, nonetheless she is a realist and after all she had been through in her life she became suspicious.

Gloria had responsibilities in the house and the priority of them was taking care of her father. She did not have an easy life and when she decided to follow her passion, she did not have the support of her mother. The principle of family stigmatized Gloria's later life, as a result, when she made her own family she argued with her husband so their child would always have one parent at home. The active Cuban culture in Miami explains why the Cuban rhythms are identified in Gloria's music career.

It takes a form of resistance to global political and social changes through self-transformation. It comes in contrast with the way of thinking of those times with the demand to care for others and family and the care to you and to your dream. What emerges from the play is a melodramatic journey illustrating how and why taking care of others can lead to taking action towards realising a dream. The performance can be described as a 'fairytale' with some insuperable obstacles which can be called the 'action'. In every essential scene music and dance were included; in view of that, the harsh situations were intensified and the good ones were dignified. The motivational, positive, dynamic and unconventional to its society story drew the audience, maybe because passion and faith are some feelings that are missing from most people's lives or if they exist they are hidden because people do not want to be characterized as selfish, thus cowardice and insecurities are taking their places.

Taking everything into account, I can realize now that I watched Gloria Estefan's life as it seems to be; but if we admit that our life is the result of our decisions, I watched Gloria Estefan's choices. I will find it more interesting though in spite of being a spectator to her choices, to be an attendant of it. Instead of being 'given' the situations, I would prefer to know the options that lead her to them. Brecht recommends the idea of creating a larger number of options available than people normally assume. In that way, the audience will be aware that they are not watching only a drama but a scenario contrived by human and therefore humane, optional and changeable. That can be achieved through the

songs; every time which the protagonist is in deadlock songs can remind her of her options, the dancers can also hold placards or be like a chorus commenting on her decisions and suggesting alternative choices. At the same time it would be really fascinating to watch Bausch's techniques in Cuban rhythms. Expand her idea of questioning what needs to be expressed as a part of rehearsal process and not a product. Instead of watching the American dream product it would be absorbing to see the process and the struggles of it accompanied by Latin vibrant music and watch simple movements which reflect Gloria's inner world. It will seem abstract but it will have the sense of emotional coherence from act to 'dance', from presenting to processing. In order to build an honest relationship between audience and performers that it would continue after the performance, I believe that the audience should know every available option and not just be expected to accept every 'given' circumstance. In this way, a network of association will be made and it will cultivate the sense of understanding the process of making a choice and not just the choice by itself.

The thing that had no reducible meaning for me is the role of Emilio, because even though at first he seems loving and caring, then he is acting like Gloria is his property and he is just 'selling' her by booking tours and performances for her, he is acting only as her manager and not her husband. I would like to have a clear picture of him; I would like to see him as the lover and the shelter for Gloria. I would also like to have as a main theme Gloria's choices that lead her to her success, I would like Emilio to be her Deus ex machine who will be in every decision making process by her side, supporter and not adviser. In that way, the whole play will elevate from a comedy musical, to social, humane musical, about some woman's life, which made sacrifices in the past to managed to be where she is now.

Susan Bennett is talking about the 'horizons of expectation', in other words how the audience's reaction is established on preconceptions and as a result how the audience perceives a performance. However, in relation with Levinasian ethics, spectators are not supposed to experience a story of their subjectivity through a performance, but to allow themselves to take the ethical responsibility for another person's life. In my opinion there is a need today more than ever to trust the audience and

build a true connection with the performers. Nowadays superficial relationships have taken the place of the meaningful ones, let theatre be the innovative bond of reality and honesty.

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