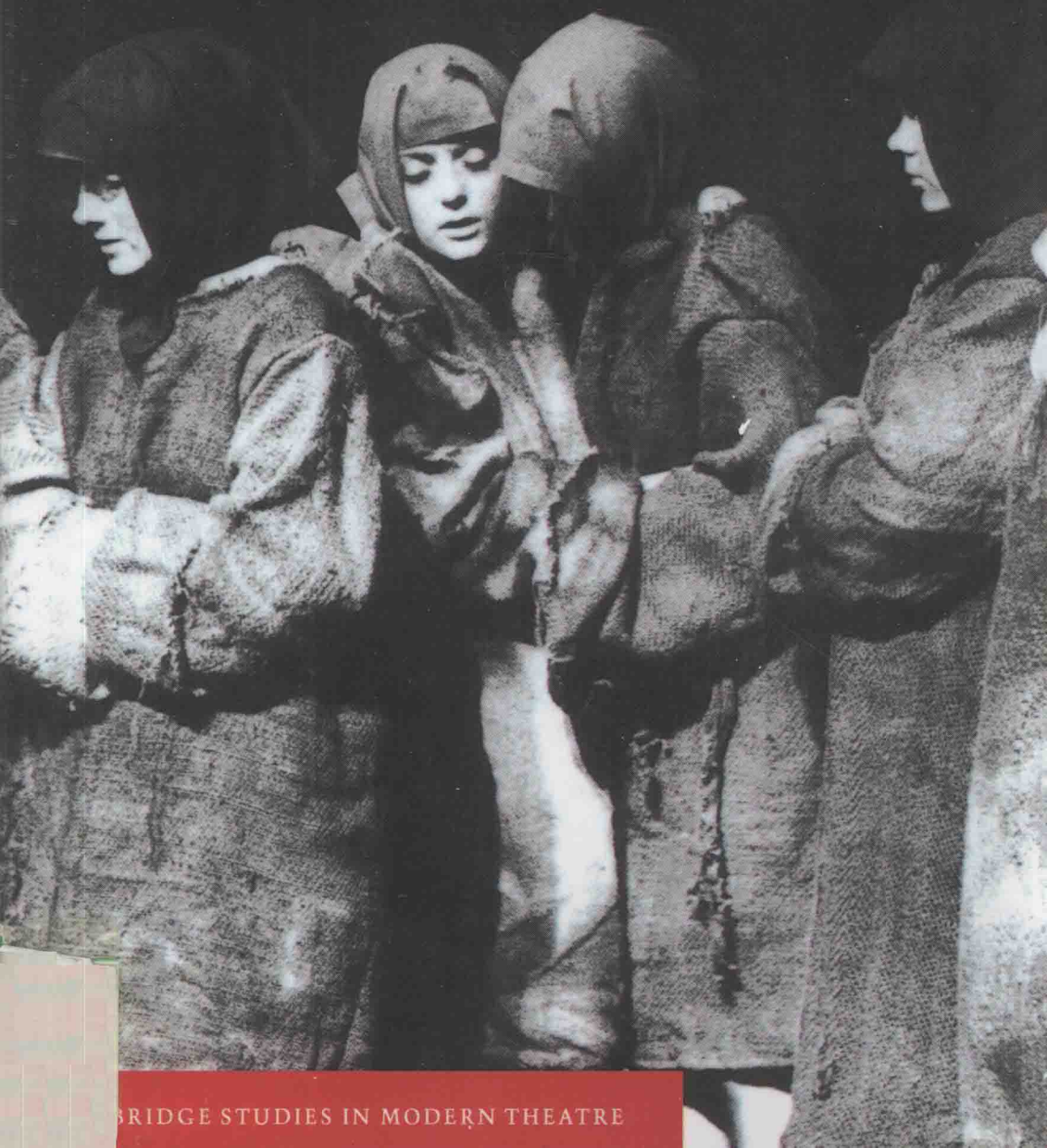


Staging the Holocaust

The Shoah in drama
and performance

Edited by
Claude Schumacher



BRIDGE STUDIES IN MODERN THEATRE

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Introduction

CLAUDE SCHUMACHER

However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed; they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers.

So spake some of Hitler's henchmen, 'cynically admonishing the prisoners' of the death camps.¹ Hitler, in the end, did not win. A few of his victims were spared annihilation and they came back to bear witness. A few returned, fewer testified, fewer still were listened to.

In his last book, completed weeks before his suicide, Primo Levi – who had been one of the very first to confront the nightmare of *l'univers concentrationnaire*, from which he had been delivered at the end of the war – declares that he, as a survivor, cannot claim to be a true witness to the Nazi hell:

¹ Quoted in Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* trans. Raymond Rosenthal, introduced by Paul Bailey (London: Abacus, 1989; originally published, New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 1, from Simon Wiesenthal, *The Murderers Are Among Us*.

I must repeat – we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion, of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those . . . who did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the ‘Muselmen’, the submerged, the complete witness, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.²

Some of the ‘exception’, exceptional men and women who through ‘good luck’ (Levi’s expression) survived, chose on their return to speak, not just hoping, but convinced that the world would be eager to listen sympathetically to the victims of an unheard-of evil. Robert Antelme, in the foreword to *L’Espèce humaine*, reflects on the verbal delirium to which survivors succumbed: at last they could speak (speak again); at last they would be heard. But the world (their families, their friends) refused to listen – they were told that their ghostly physical appearance was eloquent enough – and the survivors came up against an unexpected and insurmountable obstacle. Soon, to the survivors themselves, to the victims who still bore all the scars of months and years of torture, what they had suffered took on an air of unreality, what had happened to them became unimaginable; the monstrously unimaginable became unimaginable even to those who had endured the unimaginable: ‘A nous-mêmes, ce que nous avons à dire commençait alors à nous paraître *inimaginable*.’³ If the experience of the Nazi atrocities, so deeply inscribed in their minds and bodies, proved so intractably difficult to communicate by the victims themselves, what hope is there for others to speak or to understand the *univers concentrationnaire* in a deep, meaningful way? These questions have haunted, are haunting every human being who desperately wants to grasp that which is beyond understanding. ‘The Nazi slaughter’, says Primo Levi, is ‘dreadfully

² Ibid., pp. 63–4.

³ Robert Antelme, *L’Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 9. Written in 1946–7, *L’Espèce humaine* was first published in 1957.

Introduction

“exemplary” and, if nothing worse happens in the coming years, it will be remembered as the central event, the scourge of this century.”⁴

As I write this introduction (May 1997) new facts and fresh revelations are being uncovered. Yesterday (Tuesday, 20 May 1997) the British media announced that documents, dated September 1941 and now released by the Public Record Office, reveal that the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Jews started in occupied Russia a year before the Nazis ‘officially’ launched their Final Solution. More facts will come out as the secret archives dealing with World War Two are gradually opened. But, at a distance of more than fifty years, are new facts going to help the world towards a deeper understanding?

‘To portray the Holocaust’, Claude Lanzmann once said to Raul Hilberg, ‘one has to create a work of art.’ And Hilberg to comment: ‘such recreation is an act of creation in and of itself’.⁵ Raul Hilberg is, of course, the author of the most comprehensive, meticulously documented, closely argued analysis of the Nazi destruction of the European Jews. Without his courageous and painstaking historical work our understanding of the mechanism and the process of the Nazi genocide would be greatly impaired. Yet, despite his devotion to academic precision and intellectual clarity, he recognizes that, to bring us (those of us who were lucky enough to be spared the horrors of the war) anywhere near a grasp of what the Holocaust could have been, a daring imaginative leap is required.

Can theatre provide the artefact that will help the spectator towards a better ‘grasp’ of the Holocaust? Is such a theatrical ‘recreation’ justified? And if it is, how can an actor hope to portray either the perpetrator or the victim, without glamorizing or demonizing the former and belittling or sanctifying the latter? Such questions are not simply legitimate, they are so fundamental that the contributors to this volume address them over and over again; they are most cogently raised in Robert Skloot’s opening chapter.

⁴ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 8.

⁵ Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), p. 83.

That an artistic creation or re-creation has a positive impact on its beholder is self-evident. The reason why the question is raised here is because the Holocaust is an event of such magnitude⁶ that no play text or theatrical performance can hope to get anywhere near the truth. And, whatever Theodor Adorno said, or meant to say, about the barbaric impossibility of writing music after Auschwitz, his remark touched a nerve and it cannot be dismissed lightly.

Charlotte Delbo, in one of the rare plays that is set *inside* an extermination camp, *Qui rapportera ces paroles!*, ends her prologue by asking, provocatively: 'pourquoi dire'. Why speak, indeed, 'puisque ces choses que je pourrais dire / ne vous serviront / A rien . . .', since what she says will be of no use to us because the meaning of the words are not the same to her and to her audience. Her answer is the play itself. Deported in 1943 to Auschwitz, she came back in 1945, and she survived because she was determined to let the world know. Delbo's prologue is echoed by Elie Wiesel in his dialogue with Jorge Semprun: 'Se taire est interdit, parler est impossible' ('Forbidden to keep quiet, impossible to speak').⁷

To bear witness is one thing, but to 'perform' the testimony is another. The staging of a theatrical text requires the physical presence of the actor, that 'other', that 'impostor' who was not in Auschwitz. How can that actor, who lives in the same world as us, who performs in the same space which, we, the audience, inhabit, how can that actor effectively convince us that he is a camp inmate, a Nazi officer, or even a survivor from those days? My answer is that theatre – theatre which has true integrity and the highest artistic standards – does not try to create an illusion of reality (that cheap kind of mimetism found in cinema or television), and it is precisely in the absence of mimetic *trompe-l'œil* that the real strength of the theatrical performance lies. True theatre affords the spectator a heightened experience 'liberated from the lie of being the truth'.

⁶ 'The destruction of the Jews was an unprecedented occurrence, a primordial act that had not been imagined before it burst forth.' Ibid., p. 84.

⁷ Jorge Semprun and Elie Wiesel, *Se taire est impossible* (Paris: Arte, 1995). Transcript of a television programme, *Entretien*, broadcast on Arte, 1 March 1995.