A sentence stands out in Richard Powers’ novel about trees, *The Overstory*:

‘No strangeness stranger than the strangeness of living things.’

As in many other parts of the book, here is a reminder that we are not done with Earth; the place we inhabit – this place that we are – will always exceed our grasp and understanding. It is not just dazzling octopuses or metamorphic insects that elicit sentiments of strangeness and awe; it is simply, mysteriously, the very fact of there being natural phenomena at all: a world, this world, with its atmosphere and its skies. That is why even the most mundane natural event or entity can propel us to the other end of the cosmos. As Walt Whitman mused in the nineteenth century: ‘A leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.’

There might, however, be a strangeness which is stranger than the strangeness of natural things; I am referring to the strangeness of artificial things – theatre things – moving or posing as natural things: curtains, smoke machines, microphones and lights, for example, being observed as clouds, as wind, as sunset. There is a deep strangeness in witnessing an indoor theatre as
though it too were a landscape, a night forest, a full-blown sea storm replete with swaying curtains and slamming doors.

But is this an adequate account of Edurne Rubio & Maria Jerez’s *A Nublo*?

My early attempts to describe the performance to friends back in the UK (after having seen it in Paris in May 2022) were less than successful. I would start my description powered by hyperbolic enthusiasm, before quickly hitting a conceptual wall or impasse:

‘OK, so: imagine you’re sitting in the theatre, yes? And then smoke spurts out, which *kind of* looks like clouds, and you just watch the smoke unfurl and dissipate. And then it’s dark for a while, so it’s *kind of* like night time, just the sounds of animals ... and then a large curtain moves down really slowly, revealing an orange light, so it’s *kind of* like sunrise ... I mean, do you know what I mean?!’

Kind of.

I now realize my struggle had something to do with a creeping self-doubt, an uncomfortable naivety, as though I had suddenly forgotten everything about theatre – as though I’d forgotten that its most basic conventional function is to offer a representation of the outside world: clouds, sun, sea, battles, wars, deaths. It’s all there, in the theatre, but unreal, simulated. At least since the Italian Renaissance, with its reinvention as an enclosed space simulating an elsewhere, theatre has been about representing the outdoors. So why the enthusiasm for this performance of a simulated elsewhere?

Here was the impasse: the sky, clouds and other natural phenomena that I had witnessed in *A Nublo* seemed radically different from those I’d seen on other stages: here they were at once more real and more artificial. To make matters more puzzling, I couldn’t explain the sense of astonishment and wonder that the show had elicited, beginning with the bewilderment at *witnessing* (not merely seeing) an orange light emerge, sun-like, from behind a lowering black curtain.

Before describing some of the show’s particulars, especially from the first section, let’s briefly consider its general shape. Over the duration of an hour, *A Nublo* stages the passage of a day: from early dawn to sunrise, leading to a sunlit misty morning, then darkening clouds, a thundering storm, and finally sunset. Its circular logic already aligns theatrical convention (beginning, middle, end) with the alternating rhythm of day and night that characterizes life on Earth. This pairing of theatre and Earth might in fact be the work’s chief ambition and quest: to align theatrical mechanics with weather, geology, cosmos, birds, fleeting awe and brute elemental force. Reworking William Blake’s romantic invitation – to see a world in a grain of sand – we could say that *A Nublo* is about seeing a world in an SM58 microphone.
Arriving at the Théâtre de la Ville, Les Abesses, an announcement in the foyer informs the audience that the show is about to begin. We enter and take our seats inside a subtly altered space: a few lights are directed from the stage to the auditorium, blocking the view ahead; smoke occasionally spurts out from machines placed among the rows of seats; even before starting, the whole room is framed as performative or eventful. The two artists are visibly positioned among the audience, making drawn-out wind-like breathing sounds amplified by their microphones, or reproducing the hooting of an owl through cupped hands; they are clearly not interested in concealing their role and agency as the chief architects of the evening.

After the performers leave and the lights are extinguished, for five minutes or more we remain listening, wondering, waiting in the dark. Despite the sounds of night animals and insects all around us (some live, some recorded), it is difficult to tell whether the show has properly begun; after all, theatre conventions, as though modelled on Earth’s daily rhythm, dictate that the show begins with light. But of course this extended darkness is the beginning: over several minutes, I notice my eyes gradually adjusting to the lack of light, my ears simply registering sounds, and my body acclimatizing to sitting, sensing, being here.

From the very start, A Nublo invites a mode of spectatorship that is fully about the theatre – the closed, windowless secular space in which to stay a while and pay attention – and yet a theatre reworked by what we might call a flat dramaturgy; by this I mean that foreground and background have collapsed into each other: like in a forest or natural landscape, any and all events occur equally, without fixed attentional hierarchies. The opening darkness, pinpointed by night sounds, prepares the audience to inhabit this theatre landscape: it is John Cage’s 4’33” reimagined as a walk through a dark forest.

The protracted darkness readies the audience for the first of several ‘events’: a large black curtain descends almost imperceptibly, slowly revealing a glowing circular orange light, which illuminates a bed of smoke covering the floor of the stage. It is a sequence that powerfully conjures images of sunrise (for example, seeing a red sun from an aeroplane, its light majestically bathing a bed of thick pink clouds). I distinctly remember gasping at seeing this sunrise on stage, and I remember hearing other spectators similarly react with awe. However, before addressing the gasps, it is important to understand how this staged sun, as well as the show’s other occurrences, differ from standard theatrical stage effects. For while the performance possesses seemingly simple and direct natural events, these function very differently from the theatrical illusions typical of, for example, naturalistic plays.

Firstly because, unlike in a play, here sunrises and storms are the only events, as opposed to being back-
of execution belongs to performance art, but what is produced, without illusion, is something like a cosmic occurrence – a solar eclipse at the theatre.

Now onto the gasps.

Nothing more dispiriting, I've sometimes thought, than spending entire days in the black box, rehearsing or setting up for the evening show, without any sunlight. When finally stepping outside, either after the show or for a short break, I have to negotiate the disappointment of missing a day on Earth. Surely, then, it would make sense to position the work outside – where the natural world dazzles and breathes – rather than inside this artificially lit cave?

And yet it is only because of the black box, the artificial entombment, that A Nublo manages to find that dazzlement, that breath. From inside the theatre, Edurne Rubio & Maria Jerez find its outside. And this apparent contradiction, I suspect, accounts for some of the astonishment that audience members experience.

The work isn't about creating spectacle and illusion: it is rather about taking theatre’s mechanism – an apparatus built on particular histories and ideologies of perception – and subjecting it to a phenomenology of the landscape, or a cosmic modification. By working directly on the theatre’s mechanism, the artists are also intervening on our perceptual modes, allowing...
us to tune into cosmos and Earth. Let’s return to the example of the oh-so-gradual lowering of the curtain to reveal an orange circle: this is just one of theatre’s oldest tricks – the curtain reveal – but in this case it is subjected to the tempo of Earth’s rotation, producing a cosmic slowness of sunrise. And so, firmly within the theatre, we experience something like a bodily and perceptual attunement to cosmos.

Gasp.

This work engenders modes of looking that are usually reserved for observing skies, storms and sunsets. The template for this way of seeing might be sky gazing, such as that practised by the artists over Telegram for several months (and which I was generously invited to contribute to while preparing this text). Sky gazing as a practice of looking and not knowing, over and over again. For to look up at the sky, or even at a photograph of a sky, is a reminder of a certain humility, and a literal groundedness: to look at the sky is to practice a mode of habitation, of being here. And it is a joyful pursuit. To once more quote a passage from The Overstory, in which a character reflects on the practice of observing the movement of beech trees:

real joy consists of knowing that human wisdom counts less than the shimmer of beeches in the breeze ... There is no knowing for a fact. The only dependable things are humility and looking.

In A Nublo’s theatre of weather events, where every-

thing is so strangely artificial and so strangely alive, we practice observing the ways curtains fall and sway to powerful machine-generated winds, the patterns of smoke changing colour in the light, and the changes in a lightening and darkening room. It’s as though the artists were proposing – sensorially, materially, bodily – that in fact there is no inside, and perhaps there never has been.

Here, where the theatre becomes an environment again, is a powerful reminder that we have not yet left the Earth.

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