For many years now I have been working on a research project called “Theatre of Places”, through which I have learned much that may be of general interest, which I should like to share. This research adopts a real location as the starting point in creating the play, just like a written text in other forms of theatre. The focus of attention, as well as the generative function, thus shifts from the written word to reality. I will try here to describe what I have learned, following a path that I consider an on-going quest for knowledge, from the places, people and artists I have met, and from my own research.

I became interested in theatre at the beginning of the ’seventies, in Rome, in the so-called “cantine romane” (“Roman wine-cellars”) – former car-repair shops, garages, or actual wine-cellars – which many young artists and theatre groups used as their workplace. It was a time of creative ebullience, giving life to a theatrical research that critics later called, perhaps a little reductively, “image-theatre”. Such works usually were not scenic transpositions of written texts, and experimented rather with procedures of “scenic composition”. The play was largely created during rehearsal, with equal contributions from the different languages of word, body, space, light, sound.

I closely followed for many years the work of the Italian director Giuliano Vasilicò and his main partners: his sister Lucia and Goffredo Bonanni. Vasilicò has just recently passed away and I wish to honor his memory on this occasion. Witnessing their passionate discussions, seeing how dedicated they were, and watching the result of their work in rehearsal and performance, I felt for the first time that I was dealing with research strongly motivated by reasons that went far beyond theatre: this was about existence itself. Vasilicò’s work was not narrative, but poetical in a way, trying to show on stage the “soul” of
the authors it focused on. At the time, those authors were De Sade, Proust and Musil. One of the most striking aspects I found in Vasilicò’s works was his use of light. It wasn’t there only to illuminate the actors and the set, and it certainly wasn’t meant to produce “theatrical effects.” Light belonged to the essence of the play; it could convey profound thoughts and emotions. That is when I realised how different this was from the conventional stage lighting, which is rarely significant and, even worse, bears no relation to what light is in real life. This also made me realise that light is largely under-explored in theatre, its poetic role in performance still undefined.

As a student and, later, as an architect, I focused on the problems of territorial planning and the environment. I worked for a long time with a grassroots group in Sicily, where I come from, leading investigative reports and fighting against the interests of power cliques and the local mafia. During my reporting activity on a giant petrochemical plant north of Syracuse, I discovered the extent of the violence with which people had been forced off their land. Their principal business now and the main source of employment lie in importing raw materials and exporting the end product. For the local community, the plant produced nothing but pollution. I saw too that the locals’ aspirations and desires were still fuelled by their land, by the places they called their own, no matter how transformed; and that their ties to their place of origin consisted of fantastical as well as real elements. Discussions over the petrochemical plant entwined with tales of the Siren Ligeia. Sometime after this, I worked for a few years as an urban planner, believing that it would be in the collective interest, until I gradually found out that, in Italy, for a number of reasons, it was largely ineffective. That’s when I began to think that any project addressing a specific territory, if it is to succeed, has to count on the energies, desires and collective imaginary of the people who live there, and that every effort should be made to try to bring all these energies together and make them productive, rather than imposing abstract plans drawn up on paper. I know that this experience in urban planning helped forge in me the idea of a “theatre of places.”

In the ’eighties, when I took up theatre again and began my personal research, I started out by studying light, which I considered, as I said, as the element of theatre whose poetical possibilities had been least explored. I started by focusing on what seemed to me, in current practice, the strong inconsistency
between stage lights and real light. In reality, light is primary, generative, strongly energetic, lying at the origin of things. Its primal and substantial quality is not true only in nature, but in our contemporary world as well, where light is the basis for much of our technology. Light is, moreover, a basic element of our thought process; it is central to philosophy, aesthetics, mythology and religion. It is the “origin” in all myths of creation... In theatre, on the contrary, as it is very often used today, light is a secondary element, tacked on at the end, hurriedly set up in the last days of rehearsal. Another aspect of its underestimation lies in the fact that it is commonly considered exclusively as a technical and visual element. Most of light’s substantial qualities are paradoxically left aside – those same qualities that led Adolphe Appia to compare light to music: it can shape time, it can become structure, composition, dramaturgy, it can perform “actions” and generate meaning, poetry and discourse. These properties are no less important than those more widely attributed to light, such as the creation of images and the morphing of space.

In the early ’eighties, I began teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in Catania, the city where I was born. This gave me the opportunity for hands-on research on light that I continued throughout later assignments at different academies and in other contexts as well. Workshops with my students have brought to the stage, every year, one or more performances centred on light as the main structural element of their work. In these performances, light is the prime poetical element, working with the help of objects, space and sound, without any written text or actors; upending, that is, the conventional elements on which theatre and dramaturgy are based. In these experiments my intent is always to attribute to light the highest responsibility in building the dramaturgy. Of course, this doesn’t mean that actors and text are thereby excluded from the stage: I work constantly, within my theatre company, with performers and the spoken word. Still, I feel the urge to seek an autonomous role for light, in relation to the other elements of theatre. To achieve this, I had to research light by itself, just as a musician would do in his studio with sound. I have verified, through these workshops, that light is capable, on stage, of becoming structure, of bringing forth its dramatic and poetical power, of being a driving force. It can stimulate and perform articulate “actions” as well as arrange itself in meaningful sequences.
In the course of my teaching experience I have learned that technical elements and their interactions hold a potential for poetical expression that is almost always lost in conventional theatrical practice. This is also true of the “theatre of places”, because it springs from things and concrete relationships. A group of students involved in a project is a segment of reality constituting in their collective work a new “place”, of actions, relationships, movements and space. Working with meagre resources, as always with these workshops, has other implications as well. It leads you to attribute higher importance to what you have. So you pay greater attention to whatever is there, and technical devices – equipment, tools, the elements of the stage – can take up a life of their own. They can become bearers of meaning and poetry; symbolic and evocative elements that stimulate our fantasy; they may bring back memories, even memories tied to the history of theatre performance and its techniques. That is how the stage itself, generally considered as a merely neutral and technical device, can thus acquire the identity features of a “place”.

It may seem odd, but the idea of a “theatre of places” struck me for the first time as I was working on stage. It is not linked to the space where one is working. It has less to do with the choice of working in non-theatrical spaces or in proper venues than with the notion of ‘place’ itself, and the ways in which we relate to the site we are in.

The discoveries made during those workshops – regarding light, the notion of space, the relationship between the participants, as well as technical aspects – continue to have a great influence on my work with the theatre company that I founded in 1991. They still impact the way I direct, the way I work with actors, and how I try to define the initial conditions for an artistic creation. They also shape this project of a “theatre of places”. It is on the methodological plan, as I will explain later, that these influences are most evident. This research is founded on a doubt I have always entertained: the idea that space, objects, light, sound and, in general, everything that lies “outside” the actor, should be defined on stage starting from the actor himself. This doubt is supported by the fact that, in real life, we live in a universe we know very little about, where we are hardly in control of anything at all, whereas we are influenced and conditioned by everything around us. Our influence over the universe we inhabit is, at best, minimal. I therefore believe that, on stage, no reference to real life can be credible, no matter how poetical or metaphorical it
may be, if it doesn't reflect man's true status, which is anything but central in the universe.

As to method, the workshops I have held and my experience have brought me to attribute to the “place” where we set up the company’s work a generative role within our creative process. This is true for works produced for the stage as well as for other sites. In the first case, the situation from which the creation begins consists of elements sifted from various materials. These may include a written text (taken from literature, poetry, philosophy or science: we haven’t so far used any theatrical text); by more general reference to the poetical world of an author or a visual artist; by a vision, by objects, by a situation with strong physical connotations. In the majority of cases, it is a combination of all these. It is, at the same time, a mental space, made up of spirit, ideas, poetics, images and abstract relations; and also a concrete place – in many ways linked to the former – comprising spaces, objects, lights: a physical “world” with its initial configuration and its potential for relationships.

At the beginning of each new work, I invite the actors and other members of the company to relate to this “place” in all its aspects, to enter and become a part of it, following the “rules” it implies, which I try to clarify during the process. Each of them follows his or her personality and inclinations in relation to this context. And I try to ensure that everyone is constantly aware of where he or she is. Through this approach, performers are not working to become characters in a story. They are all “at play” in a given situation, with its own rules, in which they are asked gradually to define their role and identity according to their personal attitude. It is a poetical rather than a narrative approach, through which I learn a lot from the people involved, from their sensibility, their experience and knowledge, from their reactions to given conditions. Gradually, a new territory for exchange is created, where everyone's presence, including my own, is continually revealed and reconfigured. Each personal contribution makes the situation evolve towards a new “place” until, step by step, we reach the final “place” that constitutes the performance.

For works created in non-theatrical spaces the procedure is similar, yet there are important specifics, tied mainly to a vast and complex pre-existence that needs to be reckoned with, with its independent power, the life going on there, its forces and its memories. In such conditions and without the mediation
of a written text, the participants find themselves in immediate, physical and interior intimacy with the very existence of the place. The relational attitude of each participant becomes particularly active, and each place has a huge impact on each action. Such a situation is familiar to us as humans, our behaviour defined in relation to the environment.

As stated above, the “place” is taken as a generative element of the work itself, just as a written “text” would be. Through a process of elaboration and transfiguration of the elements involved – people, function, memory, architecture, space, sound – it finally becomes a substantial part of the dramaturgical fabric, and of the meaning of the work.

This approach has made me question conventional notions of theatrical work and its operative settings. First of all, direction. I remember that, as a child, I used to think of a director as someone wearing boots and a big hat, yelling orders through a megaphone: an image from films, no doubt. I saw directors as authoritarian figures telling everyone precisely what they should do. The way I operate moves in the opposite direction. I have learned through my work that the fundamental and most productive attitude in this job is to listen. To observe the different personalities, movements, relationships and situations that come about as our work procedures unfold. Rejecting pre-determined solutions or overbearing opinions, the director who listens and learns from others, from the relationships, from momentary situations that he himself brings about, finds himself facing a shifting “place”, whose evolution cannot be precisely predicted: a terrain for discoveries that need to be organised, given direction, and transformed into a play. The performer's actions are not abstractly planned. They “come” from the “place” and tend to transform it. My job is also to ensure that the participants are constantly aware of everything that is around them, to make them more receptive to what the place is “trying to say”, transposing those relations into movements, gestures, and words. The actor is not “performing a task” in this type of work: he is “conducting” energies from “outside”, as well as from within himself. Movement is not abstractly assertive, nor virtuosistic. It is tension and suspension, even before becoming action. Words come not from a written text, chosen in advance, but are defined through the work, gradually taking life from the “place” and from within the performer. The performance creates the text, not vice-versa.
Another aspect of theatre work I question is set design. It's clear that, in the type of work I have described, we can't speak of set design as commonly understood, as the conception of an expert working from his drawing table, following the director's idea of the show. The space and objects are indeed brought on stage as a partially pre-determined set of conditions, or found on site in dealing with non-theatrical spaces, but in both cases they influence the action and are simultaneously transformed by it, achieving their configuration only in the last phase of the work. The space and the objects reach this stage through a gradual, collective process, taking on substance in rehearsal. Rather than a stage set, they are the physical component of the “place” of relationships; a living component that influences the creative process and, at the same time, is transformed by it.

Our work is not to tell stories, or to convey themes or instances. Not directly, that is. My attempt is to bring out and activate something that is already within the spectator, something that belongs to us all. In this connexion, in non-theatrical venues, we often find specific conditions, where the audience is made up of people who live and work in those places and know them well. Their knowledge of local reality and its stories, as well as their emotional ties to the place, act as a medium between the performance and the spectators, stimulating their imagination, curiosity and sense of belonging.

Here too, I believe, may lie the need for this type of work. The spread of new media and global communication, together with the new opportunities they bring, produce within us a loss of awareness of the surrounding world. The desire to bring our focus back to real places and local realities also springs from these issues. In ancient times, the building of a city, a theatre, or a temple was always conceived in strict relation to its site. The city’s raison d’être lay in its possibilities of defence, communication and exchange: hilltops or riversides were chosen as sites for such purposes. Productive activities were linked to local resources that could be extracted, reaped or transformed. As James Hillman explains, “imagination corresponded to the place”. The architect, the builder, felt “the call” of the site. Temples were built for Aphrodite close to a water course. Art also had precise ties to the conditions of the place, its climate, local materials, its natural light. In our globalised society such connexion to real places is, generally speaking, no longer possible. A nostalgic attitude makes no
sense. Yet it is possible, and therefore necessary, to find other connexions, responding to reality as we find it today.

* Lectio Magistralis delivered by the author on September 21st, 2015, on the occasion of the Doctorate Degree Honoris Causa conferred on him by Roskilde University (Denmark) for his theatrical research. Crisafulli’s lecture was introduced by Prof. Hanne Leth Andersen, the Rector of Roskilde University.

** Fragments from Fabrizio Crisafulli’s works can be seen on YouTube. See also the documentary film “Luogo. Corpo, Luce: il teatro di Fabrizio Crisafulli” (2016) by Enzo Cillo and Federico Francioni, at www.artdigilandcom/documentaries. [Ed.n.]

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