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## Review: Act before you Speak

Hail to the Silence. Fiamma Mazzocchi Alemanni watches a play inspired by Shakespeare's Hamlet

Fiamma Mazzocchi Alemanni on Monday 30th May 2011

What do we do when we speak? Are the words that we use faithful ambassadors to our mysterious inner world? What is the point of theatre, a dimension constructed primarily of words, at all? As Nietzsche once said, Art is discovering the mystery within us and this mystery can unfold in different ways. *Act before you Speak* certainly uses a very different way to unlock the mystery. The play, inspired by Shakespeare's Hamlet, exploits the power of nonverbal communication: what would it feel like to have to tell a story without words? Through silence and the projection of some excerpts from the original text, the actors unveil their own mystery and catapult the audience into an unexpected world of introspection. Silence becomes the only means of expression for the two actresses who physically interact and live through different scenes, alternately pushing and pulling towards each other, maintaining a palpable tension on stage. The well known scenes go by, the two character's bodies moving.



Photograph: Lauri Saksa



One may remember the image of the Shakespearian character wearing his famous white shirt while the ghostly figure, who plays the violin, accompanies the stories but it is not the story itself that I wish to relate, as it is well known and all stories have a habit of eventually blurring into the universal. It is the

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Fiamma Mazzocchi Alemanni

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attempt to live the story that matters here; it is the strong impression of the actors' bodies breathing before the spectators like open doors to a world of unspeakable feelings. As they move around the space, their open hands and eyes are ready to pull you back to your own emotion. Therefore there is no simple explanation for this play, and putting a word before it would be as reductive as labelling silence. In fact, words can get so heavy, narration turns into meaningless signs; the only solution is to erase it all. Try to unlearn the generally expected premise of theatre, try for once not to understand, but get into the raw intimacy of your feelings. Finally you will sunbathe in silence, swim through it, thanks to the bodies of those actors who enact the visceral experience of fulfilment and emptiness which in many ways is more true, more lifelike, more integral to the human experience.



This is a type of theatre that makes a strong statement and whether you wish to respond to it or not is up to you. The actors go through what could nearly be seen as immolation, a religious act towards the audience, each movement is as precise and meaningful as the lifting of a finger from an Indian traditional dancer. In his book *Towards a poor Theatre*, published in 1968, Jerzy Grotowsky, a famous Polish theorist and playwright, questioned theatre and what made it an art exquisitely superior to other medias such as television and film. The answer seems as simple as every great truth is and is entirely contained in this play: there is a power in human exchange that only the concrete presence of an actor's body on stage can bring to the public. It is a journey through life's emotions, from madness to revenge, from suffering to the beauty and scent of a lavender bouquet. Entering the world of *Act before you Speak* you should be ready to experience an intense simplicity of a feeling. Nothing that you have experienced in the Oxford-based theatre life will come close to this new piece of writing by Alexandra Zelman-Doring written in collaboration with Ada Gafter-O'Higgins. Break the walls of words, forget about tiresome narrations, mute all those sounds that relentlessly surround us, plunge into the incredibly meaningful sound of silence.

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