**La Biennale di Venezia**

**53rd International Theatre Festival**

***Theater is Body – Body is Poetry***

**Director Willem Dafoe**

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With the support of the Regione del Veneto

Introduction by Willem Dafoe

Director of the Theatre Department of La Biennale di Venezia

***Theater is Body – Body is Poetry***

When President Pietrangelo Buttafuoco proposed the position of artistic director of the Biennale Theater Festival I was honored, excited and I accepted immediately. My next thought was what in particular can I contribute.

**People may know me as a film actor but may not know that I have been working in theatre for 50 years** – most notably 27 years with the Wooster Group and later with Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and Romeo Castellucci.

**The Wooster Group in NYC** started out as a group – not of trained theater people necessarily but more a collection of artists from different disciplines that came together to make theater. Those years working daily creating pieces and touring internationally formed me- exposed me to theater works from all around the world that was typically not held hostage by inflexible institutional theatre traditions steeped in the play.

**I decided the program for this year will be personal and I try to reflect the uniqueness power and essence of what theater is to me.**

I made a specific decision not to go shopping for work to present but rather to express what I know. I wanted to present people I worked with, I have admired or whose work I return to. There are some artists I was educated about organically and I did not know but basically my impulse is to present pieces that express what is powerful in the theatre.

The body, the poetry, the ritual.

**The body**, its presence, its intelligence beyond our control, is the beating heart of the theater. It drives the meeting of the people on stage and the public, to create an instantaneous community with a commitment to attention and a possibility to wonder even in this age of virtual experiences.

**Poetry**. I am using the word loosely, I mean to recognize the quality of expression that is possible in the theater – beyond narrative, storytelling or putting literature on its feet. Theater is total and has all the arts at its disposal – including new technologies. Theater can create a feeling, a sense beyond logic or psychology that goes straight to your heart, challenges your chosen reality and frees you to imagine what is possible.

**Ritual**. The action and repeated gestures that reflect origins and beliefs, a sense of common belonging that creates connection. An abstract mirror to see ourselves and our community. Ritual is not only the genesis of theatre but also the healing power.

These are the elements that are important to me. Theatre is Body. Body is Poetry.

I am excited to bring the work of people I have already worked with, the **Wooster Group, Evangelia Randou, Romeo Castellucci** and **Richard Foreman**. Also, people I have admired like **Thomas Ostermeier, Milo Rau** and **Bob Holman**. Theater makers that have had an influence on me indirectly: **Thomas Richards** and **Odin Teatret** or artists newly encountered like **Davide Iodice** whose *Pinocchio* I saw in Napoli, and I was moved from the first moment to the last. We will also be presenting the collective **Industria Indipendente**, the clown **Gardi Hutter**, the **Istanbul Historical Turkish Music Ensemble** and the musician **Daniela Pes**. And finally, we will have emerging artists: **Princess Bangura, Anthony Nikolchev** and **Yana Eva Thönnes**.

Also, I will be doing a performance experiment with the Italian actress **Simonetta Solder** in homage to Richard Foreman who passed away in January of this year.

Beyond the theater pieces we will have the **Biennale College** for young directors and dramaturgs, talks and workshops.

We will also trace influences on the theatre makers today – specifically highlighting the historical **Theatre Biennale of 1975** directed by Luca Ronconi that had so many great artists presenting their work.

I would like to thank the President Pietrangelo Buttafuoco, the general director Andrea Del Mercato and the vice-director Debora Rossi, Francesca Benvenuti, Flavia Fossa Margutti, and the whole staff of the Biennale for their support and I especially thank the two that have helped me navigate some aspects new to me and have worked tirelessly for a strong program: Valentina Alferj and Andrea Porcheddu.