# *Songs*: When Ancient Songs Rise, We Meet Again in Silence and Vulnerability

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The 13th Wuzhen Theatre Festival

“After Theatre No Theatre was founded, I wanted to return to the very core of the research I began with Grotowski: ancient songs, action, focus and presence,” says director Thomas Richards. But no one can truly “return.” Circumstances have changed, and the world is not what it was. And so the same source inevitably opens onto a new path.

Through *The Living Room*, *The Inanna Project* and years of teaching practice, we have already encountered different facets of this creative system. This year, Thomas Richards has decided to bring its “beating heart,” *Songs*, to a new stage in Wuzhen. It is a pure encounter, stripped of conventional narrative and dialogue, and a courageous practice of searching inward through sound.

## Following Afro-Caribbean melodies, awakening a life experience we all share

The material of *Songs* is remarkably pure: all of it comes from the Afro-Caribbean songs of the African diaspora. For Richards this is more than an artistic exploration; it carries a deep personal resonance, as his father’s family comes from the Caribbean. His teacher, Jerzy Grotowski, spent seven years in deep study of Haitian traditions, and some of these songs have been with Richards ever since he became Grotowski’s apprentice.

Yet Richards does not see these songs as static folk heritage. They are highly potent “living tools,” through which one can work on the voice, the body, the inner life and the connection between people. He does not presuppose what the songs of these different civilizations have in common. He sings them, refines them and listens to the force they bring. Through sustained practice, shared qualities and inner tensions surface of their own accord, because the songs all awaken strikingly similar inner dimensions of human experience.

## Stripping away lines and narrative, the body rides the wave through the “rests”

In *Songs*, the body is neither a substitute for dialogue nor a means of “explaining” the songs. Its movement springs from the performer’s truest inner impulse, which becomes

action directed toward others and the space, or follows an inner need. “When this force is truly alive, the body does not narrate emotion; it reveals a process as it happens.”

This process is especially moving in the brief silences between songs. For Richards, what passes through the mind in that soundless space does not matter; what matters is to stay in action, continuing to listen to and follow what is taking place. The performers feel this deeply. Kei Franklin says that when the voice stops, the song has not ended. It rests on a current, a wave, and she keeps her body and attention flowing with that current until it passes into the life force of the next piece.

Jessica Losilla-Hébrail feels that when a song has been sung in full, it awakens a power deep within the singer, which expands outward to reach the others present. This vitality seems to have a life of its own, and all she can do is rest her attention on the crest of the wave and wait quietly for it to carry her forward. Ettore Brocca recalls that when he studied music as a young man, his teacher reminded him that “rests must be counted just as notes are; silence itself is part of the music.”

## Together, facing our truest vulnerability

Whether in song or in silence, *Songs* ultimately leads performers and audience to face together the vulnerability within. In modern life we are used to building seemingly impregnable walls out of opinions, identities, images and all manner of screens. But beneath these heavy defenses lies a fact as simple as it is frightening: we need others, and others can wound us.

Richards sees theatre as a place that protects this encounter. It allows us to lay down part of our defenses and face what is real, rather than escape from reality.

This sincere encounter flows between performers and audience. Kei Franklin’s favorite moments are when spectators give themselves wholly to being witnesses, no longer minding how others see them, their social masks set aside. When audience members let go of their restraint, the expressions and emotions on their faces enter the performer’s world of associations and shape the singing of the next moment. Ettore Brocca calls this exchange of energy an “encounter”; on some nights, meeting the audience’s gaze changes his inner state.

Alejandro Linares senses that most spectators are unfamiliar with these cultural traditions, yet they discover, to their surprise and delight, that they can form a deep bond with a tradition not originally their own.

As Jessica Losilla-Hébrail puts it, the audience is not a collective that must decode one shared story, but a gathering of individuals who have come to share a special moment. As they witness the singers sinking into a profound inner process, a memory, an association, or a state of complete ease in the present arises naturally in the theatre.

## Exclusive conversation with *Songs* director Thomas Richards and the performers

**_Songs_ continues the earlier form of performing through ancient songs and the body. If you were to describe it in three words, what would they be, and why those three?**

**Thomas Richards:** Focus, connection, joy.

Focus: without focus, everything loses its life.

Connection: every song, every action exists through an encounter with one another.

Joy: not the pleasure that entertainment brings, but the singular joy that wells up when something within us begins to reawaken.

**Does this performance have a "beginning" or an "end"? Or is it more like a loop with no starting point, one that could go on and on?**

**Thomas Richards:** It has a precise starting point; otherwise the audience might miss dinner. But the work itself began long before the audience came in, and it will continue after everyone has left. What the audience sees is only one slice of this ongoing practice.

**If spectators feel confused or even uneasy during the performance, what would you want them to do with that feeling? Is it something to be removed, or exactly what the work wants to leave with them?**

**Thomas Richards:** First, allow them to feel inward and to accept whatever arises in them. They may be moved, uneasy, confused or amused, or they may feel nothing at all in the moment. No particular reaction is required. *Songs* conveys its force through sound, vibration, rhythm, action and music, things a person can perceive before understanding them. If your thoughts drift, you can close your eyes, breathe deeply, and return to the live event happening before you. There is no need to look for answers. Everything that rises within you is itself part of this encounter.

**In your own cultural tradition, is there also an "ancient song"? Has it entered your work in _Songs_?**

**Ettore Brocca:** Rather than "ancient songs," I prefer to call them songs of the community. I was born in a village on the Po plain, which was once at "the edge of the world," where folk beliefs and songs that accompanied work in the fields were preserved. My grandmother first took me to hear these songs. That world has now almost vanished, but in *Songs* I do not try to reproduce them. Instead, I rediscover the inner impulse that moved that community to raise their voices in song. When echoes of those voices enter the work, it is not by deliberate choice. They arise naturally, from memories of the past resurfacing within me.

**Kei Franklin:** There are no songs from my own cultural heritage in *Songs*, but one ancient text matters greatly to me: a litany of prayer to Mary, mother of Jesus, written in Gaelic in Ireland in the 8th century. What it speaks of is not a dogmatic figure but the feminine principle itself, with a universality that transcends religion. I found this text while exploring the roots of my Irish ancestors' culture, and I decided to bring it into my performance of *Songs*.

**Alejandro Linares:** Most of the songs chosen for this work relate to my cultural roots. My father is from Cuba and my mother from Spain. I grew up in Spain without direct contact with this part of my heritage, and I always yearned for it. Taking part in *Songs* has helped me reconnect with this forgotten root. The first time I sang an old Cuban song, it felt as if, after many years, I was finally singing again. Something fell into place; I could feel it in my bones.

**Jessica Losilla-Hébrail:** You may remember *The Inanna Project*, which we performed in Wuzhen two years ago. In that work, each performer used melodies drawn from their own cultural tradition. The melody I sang was inspired by the singing traditions of southern Spain, from the Spanish line on my father's side.

*Songs* is entirely different. It stems from the practical research Thomas Richards began forty years ago with his teacher, Jerzy Grotowski, in which I have been immersed for more than eighteen years. At the core of this practice are traditional songs from Africa and the Afro-Caribbean. For many years I have studied and steeped myself in these songs almost daily, and in a sense they have become a "tradition" that belongs to me, not because they were part of my heritage to begin with, but because of the deep lived experience between them and me.