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## Subverting hierarchies in Italian productions of ancient drama

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## SUBVERTING HIERARCHIES IN ITALIAN PRODUCTIONS OF ANCIENT DRAMA

### LA SUBVERSIÓN DE LAS JERARQUÍAS EN LAS ADAPTACIONES ITALIANAS DEL TEATRO CLÁSICO

A través de tres ejemplos voy a mostrar cómo la abolición de las jerarquías es una característica común a varias producciones italianas recientes de obras del teatro clásico. Es un fenómeno general, que, alterando clasificaciones y axiologías, se nota con particular evidencia en las adaptaciones de tragedias. “Fedra risita a tranci” (2011), dirigido por Andrea Cosentino, actor y director, constituye un ejemplo de abolición de la jerarquía de los personajes. El protagonista ya no es el pivote de lo que pasa en la escena, pues su papel pasa a las manos de varios personajes, todos al mismo nivel, cuya identidad es proporcionada a través de una estructura fragmentaria. Al mismo tiempo, el acto trágico en sí pierde su predominancia: en el teatro moderno hay varios eventos dramáticos, que se suceden a lo largo del espectáculo. Es el caso de *La Madre* (2010), peculiar adaptación de *Medea* a cargo de Mimmo Borrelli, joven actor y dramaturgo. Con *Edipo*, tragedia dei sensi (1996), de Massimo Munaro, un espectáculo dirigido a una sola persona que comparte las experiencias del protagonista a través de los cinco sentidos, me concentraré en la abolición de roles distintos para actores y espectadores: estos dos papeles se han ido mezclando y los espectadores han sido progresivamente implicados en la acción escénica. Finalmente, con la adaptación de *Las Troyanas* de Eurípides por la joven compañía *Muta Imago* (2011) daré un ejemplo de espectáculo basado casi exclusivamente en sugerencias verbales, que rompe la axiología según la cual la palabra prevalece sobre los gestos.

### Introduction

The ways of ancient theatre on the contemporary scene are various and diverse. A common feature, however, is a deep discontinuity between two incomparable theatrical practices<sup>1</sup>. In this perspective, I will focus on the abolition of hierarchies

<sup>1</sup> Among the most remarkable Italian contributions worth mentioning are: D. Del Corno, *La tragedia dal testo alla scena moderna*, “Dioniso” LXIII, 2 (1993), p. 35–42; A. Cascetta ed.,

as a characteristic of Italian stagings of classical plays<sup>2</sup>. On the contemporary scene all the specific features of ancient theatre are bound to be discarded; and classifications, as well as axiologies, are no exception. Such a phenomenon is particularly evident in adaptations from tragedies; I obviously refer to directors and groups more experiment-oriented, who actually abandon the aim (still pursued by many, at least in Italy) of staging the ‘original version’ of a classical text.

The first hierarchies to be made away with are the ones concerning characters; the protagonist is no more the pivot of what happens on stage. His role is taken over by a number of characters set on the same level, whose identity is conveyed through a fragmentary structure. At the same time, the tragic act in itself loses its predominance; in modern drama there are many dramatic events taking place all through the play. Further, directors and playwrights usually eliminate the strict division between actor and audience; there is no more hierarchy between what is happening on the stage and what the audience is experiencing, doing or feeling.

Secondly – and this is a very recent trend in performing theatre – verbal dramaturgy is losing its predominance; tragedy is represented through gestures, non-verbal texts, suggestions coming from images. I would now like to show you some examples of these developments.

### 1. Characters: Andrea Cosentino’s *Fedra rivista a tranci*

The first issue I would like to focus on is the lack of a definite protagonist, which is typical of modern adaptations of tragedy. The actor and director, Andrea Cosentino<sup>3</sup>, has recently worked (in 2011) on the Euripidean *Hippolytus*. The textual adaptation, by Valentina Rosati, is very far from the original text (as the title – which could be translated as “Fedra in flitters” – clearly shows) and plays on the role of media in this kind of events.

The first scene is a sort of press-conference where Theseus announces his imminent departure; the audience is about to see something fictional, represented *ad hoc*. Also, the sorrow that the characters feel is artificial, just like in reality shows.

The audience perceives a sense of alienation and finds itself in a position of emotional detachment from the story; the characters also, though, seem to watch themselves from afar. This kind of distance is first of all metatheatrical: Phaedra

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*Introduzione*, in: Ead., *Sulle orme dell’antico. La tragedia greca e la scena contemporanea*, Milano 1991; M. Treu, *Cosmopolitico. Il teatro greco sulla scena italiana contemporanea*, Milano 2005.

<sup>2</sup> I discussed this subject during the 12th Annual Postgraduate Symposium on Ancient Drama organized by APGRD, Oxford 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C. R. Antolini, *Andrea Cosentino. L’apocalisse comica*, Roma 2008.

declaims in a typical tragic style and, further, she emphasizes the quality of her *performance*, taking over, in some way, the critical function of the Chorus. She tidies herself up before committing suicide, and just before hitching up, she addresses the audience wishing them fun when they'll be watching her death. More generally, the actor plays open-face, and never pretends that the audience is not there, or that a fourth wall arises between them and the actors; they include the audience in the reality of the performance, thus influencing the communication process.

In this metatheatrical perspective, the received idea of characters, and that of the hierarchy between them, is bound to change. Hippolytus, the Euripidean protagonist, loses his central role: just like Phaedra, he is only someone playing a written part lacking heroic features. Remarkable, in this sense, is the dramaturgical role of puppets and dolls. A big male puppet takes over Hippolytus's role in the most dramatic points: the stepmother's sexual instinct is lavished on it and it is that same inanimate counter figure that crushes during a joyride. In the same way, the real Phaedra takes turns with a Barbie, little enough to fit into the TV screen, her death is announced by a reporter, as if it were in the middle of a cooking show or as if the reporter went interviewing the neighbours of the victim. The partition represented by television is only imaginary; the device has only a frame, but there is nothing inside it, as to underline how the filter of media affects our mind rather than reality.

On the contrary, Theseus – not by chance played by Andrea Cosentino himself – represents the *deus ex machina* of the story. When he leaves the stage – and Athens – he forces the other characters to act the Euripidean tragedy; he says: “relax, and think that you cannot save yourselves from doing everything you do”.

His role as manipulator – a real puppet master, we may say – becomes evident in the last scene: Phaedra is dead and she looks like a little puppet – a Barbie – in Theseus' hands. She begs her husband to let her go; but Phaedra is destined to a bitter ending. She crashes on the floor, punished for not having realized her lack of freedom. “I have said it to you, it was me who was holding you right from the start”, says Theseus.

Therefore, the hierarchy between characters – as it existed in the original text – disappears. A new structure of relationships emerges following the main ideas of the director. More generally, we can say that in *théâtre d'auteur* characters act sticking to the director's interpretation.

## 2. Tragic act vs. whole lives: Mimmo Borrelli's *La madre*

Another feature which is often discarded in Italian contemporary theatre is the leading role of the tragic act. Tragic events never evolve on a length of time; the action

is punctual and lacks any diachronic development. On the contrary, contemporary adaptations are often characterized by a biographical perspective<sup>4</sup>.

The dramatic *acme* is no more so easily identifiable; the focus is all on behaviours, dispositions, old wounds. Often it is up to one of the characters to tell the entire story, to go through past events adopting an intimate tone and lingering over everyday life details.

This is the case of Mimmo Borrelli, a young and successful actor and playwright, in his peculiar *Medea*, *La madre* (2010)<sup>5</sup>. The story takes place in southern Italy, in the region of Campania, where the Camorra rages. On stage there is a dark cavern that opens up under the feet of the audience. Its members are seated in circle around the hole, and have to spy, as if they were *voyeurs*, what is happening down there. In Borrelli's adaptation, *Medea* is not the king's daughter, but the descendant of an important member of the Camorra. *Medea*, alias Maria Sibilla Ascione, falls in love with a young delinquent, Francesco Schiavone; she helps him work his way up to the highest ranks in the gangs. Maria/*Medea* kills her brother and betrays the father for Francesco/Jason. She hides away in a dirty bunker to put herself out of danger, and begins her clandestine life. During captivity, she gives birth to two sons doomed to a double death. First of all, the mother feeds the babies wine, causing them acute mental retardation. *Medea's* monologue – which the audience overhears – is addressed to them, her only interlocutors in a sea of loneliness. She speaks in a subdued tone about her painful love story and the controversial motherhood.

The second death that the sons encounter – which is closer to the Euripidean story-surprises them on the day of Jason's wedding; as ambassadors of mourning they bring the bride a poisoned dish, which kills her and all her guests. The two guys fall to the ground, hit by the gun of their father, who is unaware of their identity.

In this complicated plot, composed along intricate timelines – a present that evolves in the eyes of the audience, and, in the meantime, a past constantly evoked – there is no real *acme*, and identifying a single tragic act is not so easy; deaths are several, and reiterated, sorrow is continuous and diffuse, the *genos* succumbs almost from the very beginning. Also, the desertion by Jason is blurred. He begins to neglect *Medea* from the moment in which she starts to live in the cavern. In a short one-act play we find more action, and a barbaric one, than in a trilogy by Aeschylus.

<sup>4</sup> Dario del Corno identifies in it the deeper discontinuity between the two theatrical practices: cf. D. Del Corno, *I narcisi di Colono. Drammaturgia del mito nella tragedia greca*, Milano 1998, in particular the chapter *Forma della tragedia e idea tragica*, p. 7–19.

<sup>5</sup> The show was incredibly successful: Mimmo Borrelli won the Riccione Prize (the most important for Italian playwrights: [www.riccione teatro.it](http://www.riccione teatro.it)) and *La madre* was acclaimed by critics.

In ancient tragedy characters exist only in the moment of action; our contemporary age, oppressed as it is by psychology, is bound to deal with the whole duration of one's biography.

### 3. Actors and audience: Munaro's *Tragedia dei sensi per uno spettatore*.

Contemporary theatre has also transformed the relationship with the audience. Dario Del Corno defined this shift as one of the more significant element of discontinuity between ancient and modern theatre: "we have a shift not only from an open to a close space, but also from an extended to an elitist audience"<sup>6</sup>.

While ancient Greek drama – also because of the physical structure of the theatre – defined the relationship between actors and audience in hierarchical terms, the contemporary scene resorts to different devices<sup>7</sup>. The space where the performance takes place is often reduced, which is not of secondary importance since it has practical consequences, as well as the physical distance between actors and audience. Such closeness and emotional sharing call into question the definition of the audience as a group of *spectators*, that is, someone that is just watching. This involvement progressively merges the two different roles, and the audience often ends up being co-opted in the action taking place on stage.

In 1996 Massimo Munaro – a director working in the Venice area – performed some experiments in this direction. His *Edipo, tragedia dei sensi* is a play addressed to a single person who shares the protagonist's experiences through his five senses<sup>8</sup>. Eight actors guide him, bandaged and barefooted, in a cognitive trail: through fragments from the Sophoclean text he has to find himself and gain self-knowledge.

People, events, things from *Oedipus Rex* are evoked with noise, body contact, and emotional suggestions. The spectator really experiences the killing of Laius. Urged by the actors' voices to grab a knife, he penetrates the surface of a watermelon. Just like the human body, upon contact with the knife the watermelon appears hard on top and soft in the middle. The directors worked to create effects of surprise through the senses, in order to keep emotional attention awake.

<sup>6</sup> D. Del Corno 1993, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P. Francastel, *Guardare il teatro*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1987; *Tra memoria e presente. Breve storia del teatro di ricerca in Italia nel racconto dei protagonisti*, ed. P. di Marca, Roma, Artemide Edizioni, 1998; S. Chinzari e P. Ruffini, *Nuova Scena Italiana. Il teatro dell'ultima generazione* Castelvechchi, Roma, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> For some information about group and director: <http://www.teatrodellemming.it>. About *Edipo*, cfr. M. Munaro, *Tragedia dei sensi per uno spettatore*, Titivillus, 2011.

Soon after, the spectator experiences an ambiguous contact with a female, wrapping body (Jocasta, obviously). At the end, bandages are removed from his eyes; he finds himself in front of a mirror. And we get a surprising and shocking *anagnorisis*, exactly as it happens to Oedipus: that experience can be strongly impressive. Munaro specifically asks the audience not to reveal what happens during the performance; the scene is an *abaton* where not everybody can enter. The sense of disorientation that the audience may feel is, according to the director, not only justified but actually desirable. The experiment, which Massimo Munaro also carried out with other classical texts,<sup>9</sup> is aimed exactly at defusing a critical and intellectual fruition. Munaro wants to rebuild a sacred space, in its etymological sense of ‘detached from everyday reality’, in order to foster a kind of ritual commitment<sup>10</sup>.

Boundaries between places have also been blurred; no more do we have action taking place on the one side, and the audience enjoying it on the other. With a reversal of hierarchy, what is happening to the audience becomes the pivot of representation.

Munaro’s production was incredibly successful. In 2010 he celebrated 14 years of uninterrupted rehearsals, adding up to 3500 spectators. The company is now working on a new step of the project, named *Thousand Oedipus*. The show will be performed in the same time in several locations of Venice. Not surprisingly, the format works wonderfully: in contemporary theatre – and especially in our 2.0 age – the audience strongly demands to be more involved in stage action instead of being considered as a passive agent.

#### 4. Text and visual elements: Muta Imago’s *La rabbia rossa*.

Now, let us move to the last instance of hierarchy subversion. In a famous essay entitled *Scena e parola*, Dario del Corno wrote: “We will never stop emphasizing the verbal character of Greek drama”<sup>11</sup>. *Opsis* – what is visible, as Aristotle teaches us – indeed mattered, but the text was an indispensable, central element of ancient theatrical practice; the verbal component was an essential part of the constant mixture of different media and expressive form. This unique balance is very hard to recreate. Traditionally, in Western theatre, the text had a leading (often disproportionate) role, but now something is changing.

<sup>9</sup> Massimo Munaro created a *Tetralogy* on classical texts: other than *Edipo*, he directed *Dioniso* (1998), *Amore e Psiche* (1999), *Odisseo* (2000/2001). More recently, he came back to Greek tragedy with *Antigone* (2009). For details about the shows, cf. <http://www.teatrodellemming.it/lemming/teatrografia.html>.

<sup>10</sup> About the religious meaning of the theatrical event, cf. M. Massenzio, *Dioniso e il teatro di Atene*, Roma 1995.

<sup>11</sup> D. Del Corno, *Scena e parola nelle Rane di Aristofane*, in: E. Corsini (ed.), *La polis e il suo teatro*, Padova 1986, p. 205–14, cf. p. 211.

The most successful dramaturgies on the contemporary Italian scene are becoming increasingly essential; as far as classical theatre is concerned, this implies the choice of less verbose translations and of concise adaptations. Authors often tend to reduce amplifications and explicative repetitions in order to make things easier for the audience: in the age of short ‘twits’, ‘sms’ and ‘status messages’ we are no more used to long-time listening.

This often happens at the expenses of the chorus, especially in our Western culture which seems to have lost the ‘choral attitude’; not seldom, however, directors and playwrights pay attention to themes and passages that are more in keeping with a modern way of feeling, and tend to cut the others.

Recently, however, this tendency has become more radical. In many contemporary stagings, the visual aspect has increasingly gained importance. The text appears minimal, if at all, and visual suggestions take up its role, with a reversal of hierarchy between *opsis* and words<sup>12</sup>.

In this perspective, I would like to focus on a play which has been presented in its complete form during the last edition of the RomaEuropa Festival – a very important festival with a strong international character, which sets the trends for experimental theatre in Italy<sup>13</sup>. On that occasion, a play entitled “La rabbia rossa” [Red Wrath] was presented by the Rome based company Muta Imago<sup>14</sup>. Never satisfied with traditional solutions, the group is in constant search of experimental theatrical forms. This does not always turn out to be a quite complete form, but is always impressive.

The main source of inspiration for the play is Euripides’ *Trojan Women*<sup>15</sup>. And yet the dramaturgy, resorting to sound and lights in no hierarchical relation whatsoever, is only in the least verbal.

The scene represents the remains of a town after war. No ruins in sight, no ashes or rubble are used to build the scenery: all we see is a geometric grid of light. Four women are running away along those evanescent urban lines, they seem to be about to disappear. We soon understand that those four women are the only survivors of the war, just like in Euripides’ play.

Movement is the only way of expression left to survivors; it is no more a time for a collective dirge, nor for reflections – be them empathetic or leading to a confrontation; for a dirge able to get the audience involved. The four survivors are all

<sup>12</sup> The trend in dramaturgy more oriented in visual aspects than in words is analyzed in: P. Ruffini, *Ipercorpo. Spaesamenti nella creazione contemporanea*, Editoria&Spettacolo, Roma 2005.

<sup>13</sup> <http://romaeuropa.net/festival>. Last edition took place from 7/10 to 30/11 2011.

<sup>14</sup> For information about the group, cf. <http://www.mutaimago.com/>. For details about the play, cf. <http://www.mutaimago.com/displace/>

<sup>15</sup> For a comparison with other stagings of the *Trojan Women*, cf. M. Giovannelli, *Sulle macerie della città (e di Euripide): le Troiane del contemporaneo*, “Stratagemmi” 16 (2011), p. 103–124.



alike, they are anonymous; dressed in a sort of post-modern suit of armour (knee-pads, headband, and sneakers), they do not talk nor do they introduce themselves to the audience, and they provide no clue as to their lost existence. The audience is faced by a closely-knit ensemble, which aims to create a synergy oriented towards a choral effect. In such an approach, there is no room for individuality, and actors change the character they play within the performance. This works surprisingly well on the function of the Chorus, which has always been one of the trickiest issues to be dealt with.

The impossibility to express suffering through words hints at a further stage of coercion. The only language the survivors can resort to is body language. With its insistence on gestures and physical conditions,<sup>16</sup> the Euripidean text turned out to be a guide for *Muta Imago*. Hecuba's body, the pain she feels in the act of getting up, coupled with her strong will to do it, convey a striking image of human condition.

The text, therefore, remains in the background, as if it were just a mine from which the director extracts the elements which eventually help him make away with the text itself. In this particular case, the Euripidean legacy appears most clearly in the space allotted to defeated women, not only to those who lost the war, but also – and especially – to those who never chose to fight. And still, visual elements take the lead, conveying the claims of the text.

For *Muta Imago* – and for many other contemporary performing companies – this constant work of subtraction in the dramaturgical phase represents a quest for the truth; words on stage are perceived as false. One can get back to them only once existing hierarchies have been subverted.

#### 4. Conclusion

We notice, therefore, that contemporary theatre seems to have systematically explored and emphasized the very aspects that mark the distance between ancient and modern theatre. This is: the horizontal plurality of personalities, characters and points of view as opposed to the predominance of the protagonist in ancient drama; tragic events following one after the other as opposed to the punctuality of the hero's action in tragedy; the abolition of a rigid separation between actors and audience, which, in some cases, has led to a «sprawling scene», with no hierarchy between what happens on stage and what goes on in the audience; the gradual shift to a predominance of performing and visual elements on verbal ones. Well then, while ancient drama is sometimes viewed by directors as an «unapproachable cas-

<sup>16</sup> Cf. M. Telò, *Per una grammatica dei gesti nella tragedia greca (I): cadere a terra, alzarsi, coprirsi, scoprirsi il volto*, in: "Materiale e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici" 48, 2002, p. 9–75.

tle» (I am quoting Massimo Castri, one of Italy's most celebrated directors)<sup>17</sup>, it is precisely in the subversion of hierarchies that contemporary theatre seems to find a key to that forbidden palace.

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<sup>17</sup> M. Castri, *La responsabilità del regista*, in: "Dioniso" 63 II (1993), p. 155–162: 156.