

Ermanna Montanari

Politttttttical Theatre

The politttttttical was not a theatre of answers. Those who were on stage did not have solutions to offer, only wounds to show, infections which concerned the psyche and the polis at the same time. The politttttttical was this incurable relation, and exactly there lay its stubborn, donkey-like reason for existence.

1. I am restoring the old country cottage where I was born, it is in Campiano, a village of a few hundred inhabitants, twenty kilometres from Ravenna. It is where my parents, brothers, nephews and many old people live. In a few years the cottage will be habitable. Twenty years ago I ran away from Campiano, I got married to Marco Martinelli, and with him I created the Teatro delle Albe. Together we started to wander around, keeping Ravenna, a capital provincial town of 130,000 inhabitants, as our base.

2. In July 1987 we were invited to the meeting *Theatre and Politics* at Narni, organised by Giuseppe Bartolucci. Marco and I wrote our own definition of "political", thinking over what had been for us, in those first ten years, the relation between the stage and the world. We had just made our debut with a work inspired by a tale from Lu Hsun on cannibalism, the eternal law of human relationships. Marco had rewritten it and set it in *fin-de-siècle* Ravenna. Was ours a political theatre? No, we said to each other, ours was a politttttttical theatre, with seven ts, without measure.

Following is a fragment of the talk we gave in Narni.

Our group, the Albe, produces politttttttical theatre. Why politttttttical? Why with seven ts? Let's look at seven possible answers.

1. The polyptych¹ is a sacred object, architecturally subdivided into several panels, intended for the temple altar. The etymology of the term is enlightening: "Of several foldings". And this is the polyptych, with a double t-sound, imagine if it had seven ts!

Even more exalted are the numberless foldings of reality. Fervid people are not in need of ideologies, but of strong, complex, politttttttical thought.

2. It is the mistake of a typographer gone mad.

3. It is poetic licence.

4. It is the grinding of the cry on teeth and tongues, on the ts like swords, it is a child getting stuck, an irreducible, a guerrilla fighter from the Third World.

5. It is being aware of the fact that we cannot change the world (read *Revolution*), but something, in some corner, something of us, of someone else, scattered on a small planet turning round a suburban sun, in a galaxy amongst many, we can stop a tear, heal some wounds, survive, be hateful to somebody, be able to say no, plant the apple-tree even if tomorrow bombs will explode, be lost in a Schiele painting, take care of friends, write some letters instead of others (read *Revolution*).

6. It is thinking that "being poetic is a desperate battle".

7. It is black humour.

While Marco was reading the text, I was standing near him in a speaker's position: I wore a green jacket, from my latest work, onto which we had stuck some forks which seemed to pierce the skin. That is how we went to the meeting: Eaten.

3. We - Marco and I, our comrades of the Albe - never liked political theatre. At least that dark political theatre we had known in our youth, during the seventies. It was arrogant, it gave easy answers to the horrors of the polis and it exacted the spectator's approval. It took no heed of the abyss of the psyche, of its "infinite desires" (Saint Theresa from Avila), it knew everything in advance, it gave lessons to us like a pedantic schoolmaster, reducing the stage to a political podium. On the contrary, during the eighties, the years during which our theatre was growing, it seemed that one could no longer speak of politics. In Italy the eighties were years of collective amnesia, of shelter in stupidity and bank accounts. We did not like this either; the horrors, the knots of the polis were still there, under our noses, inside our brains, unsolved, they did not disappear if one pretended to forget them.

From this double refusal, slowly, the politttttttical was born, a thought which took conscious shape at Narni.

To bear the horror, not to set it aside, even if one has no answers or cure, even if one risks madness; to look at the polis, which can no longer be just the village where we live, but is the polis-planet, that television brings into our homes every day, where everything is linked, and the destruction of a forest a thousand miles away concerns us; to bear our impotence, in an immeasurable world, where individual actions seem to get lost and vanish like a drop of water in the desert.

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4. Did we think about the Living Theatre? About Pasolini? Maybe. We went backwards, back in time, to Dionysius and Aristophanes. Within those reflections on the politttttttical, the urgency of a confrontation with Tradition took more and more space. Marco and I built our own paths, interlaced and distinct, as an alchemical couple. Marco started to work as a playwright-director, telling theatrical stories. What had Aristophanes, Molière and Shakespeare done, if not tell stories? They had not done it at a desk, but on the stage, writing together with the actors, on their bodies, mixing writing and actors' work, they were not men of letters, their writing was impure, inseparable from the actors' live limbs. They had had the ambition of taking on that *Wooden O*, the plays from History and the soul's storms.

We felt that there was much that was politttttttical in that Tradition. It contained a "secret" that many of those who staged Aristophanes, Molière and Shakespeare as monuments, had betrayed and forgotten.



Ermanna Montanari and Stefano Cortesi in *Lus*. Photo: Corelli and Fiorentini

They were not to be staged, it was necessary to live their founding actions, to resurrect them. We should write stories with flesh and pen, stories which had to do with the *polis*. Were not Athens, Paris or London the boiling melting pots into which our forefathers had plunged their hands to mould their tales? Well, for us there was Ravenna, the Romagna region, Italy, the *polis*-planet. Had not those authors written making use of the dialect-language of their community? Well, we too started to propose a multilingual stage, on which the playwright-director could use the Romagna

dialect together with the Italian language, and together with the other languages spoken in the *polis*-planet, like the several instruments of an orchestra. While Marco proceeded along this path, I looked at a ghost-theory which had shown on the stage the body-wound from Rosvita, nun-actress-author of the tenth century, to little Clairon ("How much study to stop being oneself!"), to Eleonora Duse, burning Theatre-Figure. So I contributed to the polittttttical, not from the storyteller's point of view, but from the actor's body which inspires him or her. The puppets we created - Daura, a coria-

ceous mother from Romagna; Spinetta, an androgynous taxi-driver; Fatima, a female magic rope-dancer donkey; and many others - were born from a common magma. Within the polittttttical, the person on stage is the Muse for whom the texts composed off stage are written. The playwright does not work with abstract concepts, but with the living matter offered by us, the actors. The actors inspire and betray the playwright at the same time, because the actors must not reduce themselves (pain of death!) to be functional to the story told, as often happens to actors of much institutional theatre. The actors are themselves a story, a glare, voice and nerves, the *black hole* hinting at something else, preceding narration, the organism preceding language.

I work there where I know Marco cannot reach with his pen: a soil often barren, which cannot be narrated. There lies the well of my scenic art, the well from which to draw inspiration, so as to later present myself shining to the appointment with narration, in a similar way to how Marco has his holes in his head, the preserves from which he fishes out the stories that will come to life on stage. This still seems to us the only possible alchemy between the playwright's technique and that of actors, busy with loving and betraying each other, jealous of their own specific quality and ready to offer it to the common work.

5. It is necessary to avoid one of the traps set by the *polis*-planet: the illusion that everything is the same, an easy cosmopolitanism, the loss of differences, the "Fashion, sister of Death"; a dizziness which seizes us when we travel along the motorways and the service stations, feeling the Emptiness-Full-Of-Goods, the Everywhere-the-Same that flattens all differences.

When, in 1991, the Ravenna Town Council offered us the artistic direction and care-taking of both theatres in our town, we

accepted on impulse, taking upon ourselves a burden and a great responsibility, because we felt in this a challenge both ethical and artistic, which is to say, polittttttical. To penetrate more and more that which makes the ancestors illuminating for us, in other words the roots, the loving and critical dialogue with the town that expresses us, the piece of land we have under our feet, which, in an immeasurable world, nevertheless remains the place where we can undertake something. Aristophanes insulted and entertained the Athenians, he proposed queer and fantastic stories, Athens was in the stalls and on the stage, there was no separation. Nowadays, when theatre is in a corner, we can only reinvent that fertile condition as a paradox, as opposed to then, and in other golden ages, when theatre maintained a central position within the city. In this western world doomed to sterility, fertility is a paradox. Just like having children: it is not the norm anymore, it is an artistic gesture! In this dialogue with the town, for five years I have taken upon myself the responsibility of a project: *The Language of the Goddess*. I stole the title from a book by the Lithuanian archaeologist Maria Gimbutas and also from the idea of the existence of a pre-Indo-European Gilanic society, a balanced social structure, pacific, neither patriarchal nor matriarchal, highly developed and devoted to manufactured art. In those years, through performances, meetings and workshops open to the public, with women theatre-scholars such as Laura Mariani, Cristina Valenti and Cristina Ventrucchi, with women playwrights like Renata Molinari, with women organisers like Marcella Nonni, with women philosophers like Lea Melandri, actresses like Susanna Costaglione, Piera Degli Esposti, with women directors like Judith Malina, Pierangela Allegro, Chiara Guidi, we have woven a possible alchemical

way and a possible relationship within the *polis*.

6. If fertility is the *artistic* condition of the *politittttttical*, it was perhaps inevitable that our path should cross that of people born in other civilisations. Since 1987, a few months after the meeting in Narni, the Albe have become Afro-Romagnole, enriched by the contribution of actors, musicians, dancers from Senegal. The meeting with the black Albe has strengthened us in our desires. Did we search for a theatre in touch with those torn apart by terrible undefined realities, that are today the "roots" and the "people"? Were we searching a local, epic, ethnic stage, the being-in-life or Tradition? There lay something resembling it, maybe faintly, but resembling it. Looking at the bestial and archaic comicality of Mor we could imagine an original pre-Goldonian Harlequin; listening to and observing the fury of Has's drum playing we could ask ourselves about the nature of shamans; my dialect from Campiano met with Mandiaye's Wolof, the ballad singers of the Apennines with the narration in a circle of Senegal villages, with the *fulèr*, the barn story-tellers from Romagna with the African griots. And so on, mixing languages and identities, and at the same time preserving them, and at the same time creating a new way of being for the group, *half-breed*, doing a work of memory and resistance to homology.

We did not meet the black Albe at Dakar's Conservatoire, we met them on the beach, on the Ravenna seashore. They were there as simple immigrants, selling T-shirts and small elephants. Their families were griot, the artist story-tellers present in the whole of French-speaking Africa. As for some decades it was not possible to earn a living as a griot, the new generations had got a kick in the backside and had been sent to Europe to sell small elephants to

tourists. This happens in the *polis*-planet: griot are to be found on the beach. Entire populations, compelled by the political and economical rationale of History, are emigrating from the South, changing the face of old Europe, turning our towns "black", and this, *politittttttically*, concerns us. Mor, Mandiaye and Has were "eaten" people like us, in a different way from us: the jacket with the little forks stuck in it, fitted them perfectly. To do theatre together during these ten years has been, for them, to live something *unthinkable* in the beginning, and at the same time to find again the roots of a family art. It has been a bold and new choice (their companions from Senegal made fun of them at first, because they did not earn much!) and at the same time the reviving of a tradition.

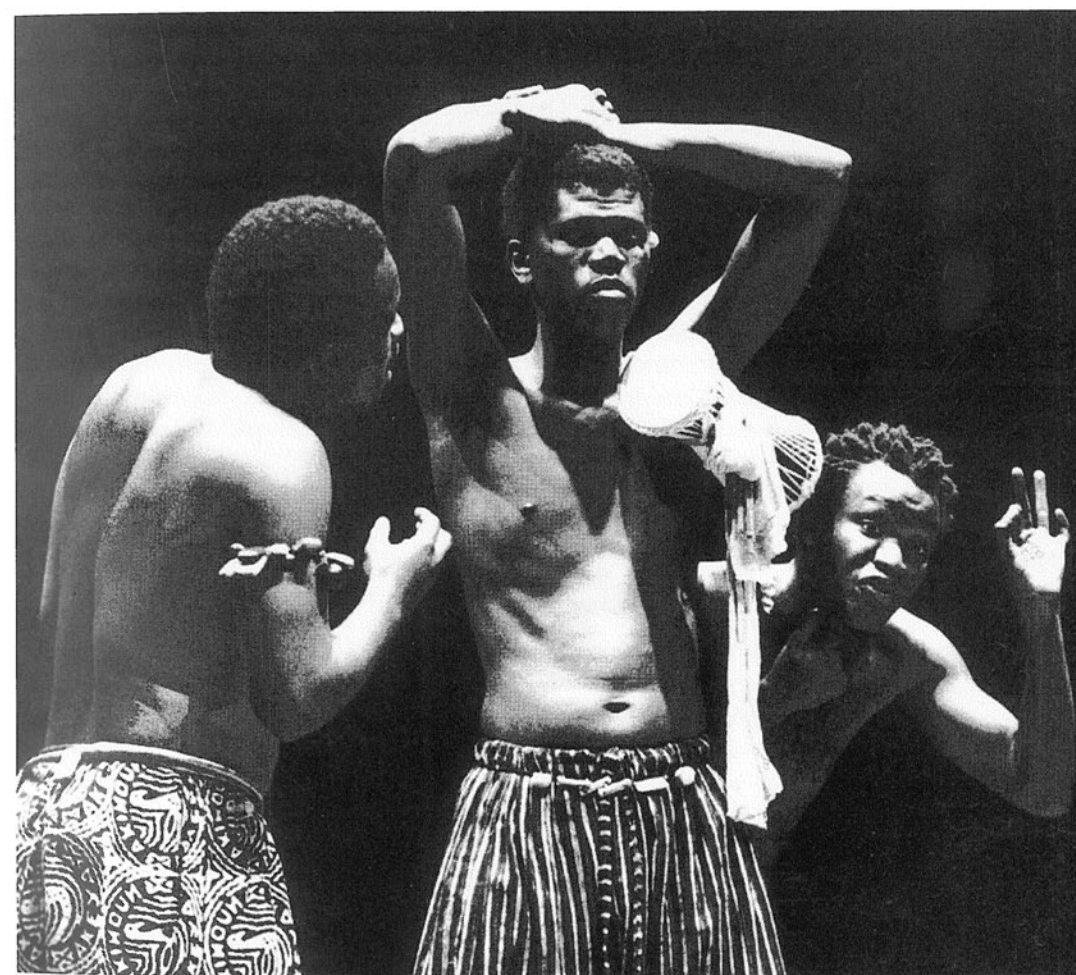
7. While I am restoring the old country cottage in Campiano, our comrades from Senegal are in Guediawaye, a suburban village of Dakar. There they are building a "house for theatre" that will have the name of the village where they live: Guediawaye Theatre. A house in which to invent a stage immersed in African theatricality and at the same time open to the best European theatre, as Mandiaye, who will be the artistic director, well knows who Odin Teatret and Peter Brook are. The Teatro delle Albe is among the founders and supporters of Guediawaye Theatre. No separation then, but a new phase of the half-breed adventure, six months in Senegal and six with the Albe in Europe, to break the destiny which made Mandiaye and his companions immigrants. We will make ourselves immigrants in our turn, from artistic necessity, as we will often join them and we will work in their world as they have done in ours. There new stories will be born. The people of Senegal are children, the average age is sixteen, there is so much Dionysius around the streets, hunger for life

mingled with poverty. While I am scraping the paint off the old doors of the country cottage, I think of the songs that Mandiaye will be listening to at this moment, and I guard them jealously in my ears.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

1. In Italian polyptych is spelt *politico*, and political *politico*.

ERMANNA MONTANARI (Italy) was born in Campiano in 1956. She is co-founder of the Teatro delle Albe and, since 1983, has worked with the company as an actress, writer and set designer. She has organised five of the events of *Il linguaggio della dea* (The Language of the Goddess), a meeting on female discourse.



Mandiaye N'Diaye, El Hadji Niang and Mor Awa Niang in *No-one Can Cover Up the Shadow*.
Photo: Corelli and Fiorentini