

# MIGRATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY MEDITERRANEAN

Shifting Cultures in  
Twenty-First-Century  
Italy and Beyond

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## 15 The circle of 'I am us': The dreams of Mandiaye N'Diaye, griot by vocation<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the work of playwright and actor Mandiaye N'Diaye with innovation theatre and Teatro delle Albe. Since the 1980s, when the presence of migrants had not yet been perceived in Italy, playwrights Marco Martinelli and Mandiaye N'Diaye produced a pioneering series of hybrid plays which drew on Greek classical tradition, on the Mali epic of Sundiata and on the rural traditions of Ravenna (Italy) and Diol Kadd (Senegal) in order to construct polyphonic and dialogic plays that spoke of the movements and encounters that were taking place in Italy. N'Diaye's knowledge of Senegalese oral tradition and his proficiency in narration well adapted to the political and social concerns that animated the production of Teatro delle Albe. The two flourishing dramatic forms that constitute the dreams of intercultural dialogue and human welcoming are: the art of the griot which flows from the individual-artist towards the public-chorus, and the circle of *sabar* which flows from the chorus to the women, who individually take turns in the centre of the circle. Both types of performance are expressions of communion and sharing, of 'I am us'.

### Shifting cultures: *Albe afro-romagnole*<sup>2</sup>

I luoghi comuni non valgono sempre.<sup>3</sup> [Communal places are not always 'reliable'.]  
Valgono spesso. [They often are.]

- 1 Translated from the Italian by Giuseppina Rizzi.
- 2 Geographically, Romagna is part of the region Emilia Romagna in north east Italy. Romagna is located in the Po valley facing the Adriatic. The name *Albe afro-romagnole* may be roughly translated as 'African dawns of Romagna'.
- 3 In Italian 'luoghi comuni' means both common beliefs or stereotypes and communal places.

I luoghi comuni mi piacciono. [I like communal places.]  
 Sono popolati. [They are crowded.]  
 E per forza ... [Of course ...]  
 Sono in comune! [They are in common!]  
 Sono il regno dei molti. [They are the kingdom of the 'many'.]  
 Sono il regno dell'io con te. [They are the kingdom of 'me and you'.]  
 Sono il regno dell'io con molti. [They are the kingdom of 'me and the many'.]<sup>4</sup>

This chapter is dedicated to the inspiring Mandiaye N'Diaye, actor and playwright of the *Albe afro-romagnole*, an innovative experiment of dramaturgy that the Teatro delle Albe of Ravenna accomplished with Senegalese migrant actors. Without Mandiaye, the *Albe afro-romagnole* would not exist. The company of Teatro delle Albe might have perhaps put on a show about African Romagna, but then would have moved on to something else. Instead, with the powerful presence and inspiration of Mandiaye, a twenty-five-year-long adventure began when we met in 1989. Mandiaye was a *maestro dei sogni* [teacher of dreams] for Teatro delle Albe and dreams are so important in the Serere culture he came from. Though Mandiaye died in June 2016, we – Teatro delle Albe – continue to communicate with him, because he speaks to us about the invisible. Death *gli ha fatto lo sgambetto* [tricked him], to use his expression, but that does not mean he has disappeared. There is more to the world than what philosophy and literature tell us. Mandiaye did not need Shakespeare to know this: he knew this from his childhood spent in Diol Kadd, a village in the Senegalese savannah. At Diol Kadd the dead speak to the living and vice versa. In western society, philosophers are often more realistic than reality, but in Diol Kadd reality is much more inclusive. It embraces infinity.

Years ago we asked Eugenio Barba why the theatre anthropology of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA), which is so attentive to the relationship between east and west, had never studied African theatre and dramaturgy. Eugenio replied: 'Because in Africa everything is covered in dust'. Then he invited us to Holsebro to present *Nessuno può coprire l'ombra* [Nobody can cover shadows] (1991). In that work, only our three Senegalese actors were on stage: Mandiaye N'Diaye, Mor Awa Niang

and El Hadji Niang. Together we reinvented the tales of the Senegalese tradition, drawing on the art of the griot. At the end of the show, Barba enthusiastically suggested that we bring the play to Africa to 'teach African people how to remain African, without mimicking the Comédie Française'. There is no contrast between dust and enthusiasm, if you think about it.

Let us now focus on the end of the 1980s and the adventure of the *Albe afro-romagnole*. It started in 1987 with the welcoming of Alfred Jarry's notion of 'pataphysique' (Brotchie 2011, Corbyn 2005, Moorcock 2012) and its application to the scientific theory of Pangea. In the light of pataphysics as the science of imaginary solutions, we incorporated the mesmerizing theory of African Romagna, which believes that a piece of African land had broken away from the original supercontinent and drifted to where the Po Valley is today. This idea produced the intriguing view that Romagna is a fragment of Africa. The relationship between Teatro delle Albe and the group of mixed Senegalese actors existed for more than twenty years, during which Italian and Senegalese griot-actors worked together. In these two decades, the *Albe afro-romagnole* were never interested in exploring their cultural mix according to the principles of theatre anthropology, as Barba had been in the same decades and before with his innovative and ambitious work of theatre anthropology at Odin Teatret.<sup>5</sup> Is it perhaps because African theatre and dramaturgy do not have traditions scrupulously handed down from generation to generation as in the Orient? Perhaps.

## Anarchy and resistance

For years we, Teatro delle Albe, have spoken about Dionysus. We evoke Dionysus. It is the key word for the work of Teatro delle Albe, together with the idea of 'staging' – the *mise-en-scène* [in Italian: *messa in scena*] – as a way of 'bringing to life' the performance [*messa in vita*]. To evoke Dionysus

4 From 'Canzone dei luoghi comuni' by Marco Martinelli (2012).

5 See <<http://www.odinteatret.dk/about-us/eugenio-barba.aspx>>.

makes sense because intuitively he liberates energy thanks to the presence and spirit of the actors and also the presence and spirit of the spectators. Dionysus is in fact the actor, the spectator and the context: he is the space and the scene where the encounter takes place.

Dionysus gives life to the characters, he brings the actors from the background to the foreground to let them be seen, and transfigures them. Dionysus is something that 'happens', it does not depend on the will and the effort of the actors, it is something that 'comes' on to the stage. Without perceiving and revealing Dionysus, there is no drama. Dionysus is a perennial, suspended question mark, a question that establishes action on the stage. Dionysus is a name 'borrowed from the Greeks', as the young Friedrich Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1999 [1872]). In those pages, Dionysus reveals himself as the 'gospel of universal harmony', however still not 'the antichrist' of the later Nietzsche. They are contradictory pages, both revealing and marred by serious misunderstandings (you only need to think about the treatment reserved to Euripides) that could be interpreted as the origin of all theatrical revolutions of the century which followed. Therefore, Dionysus is the god who presides over the origins of the western theatre, not the 'persecutor' of archaic rituals, but the clown of Aristophanes; he is Saint Dionysus, as he was later renamed in the villages of ancient Greece that had become Christian. We call him in this way, we continue to call him in this way, even though we know he has thousands of names. He is elusive.

Dionysus has always fascinated us because of his anarchic feature, his turbulent, wild manner, estranged from the rules of society. Animals, children, teenagers, the poorest, the excluded all represent him for their instinctive energy. We perceive Dionysus's anarchy as a form of resistance, of rebellion, of ironic and clownish transformation, of creative and original re-composition. Dionysus makes us aware of something indefinable that is taking place in the performance. Every play is an adventure that is constructed, dismantled and reassembled according to Dionysus's inspiration. All over the world and in Africa they call him by other names. In Brazil he is called Axé, in Bali Taksu, literally 'the place that receives light', in Japan Iki iki, 'the bright light': the actor may be technically perfect, but if he lacks iki iki he cannot 'blind with light' the spectator. We can well continue to

give the name of Dionysus, the *sfalenante*,<sup>6</sup> to this elusive becoming, to this vibrating borderline where colours are born, where primordial ideas are generated by colorless light and by its opposite, darkness.

When we asked Mandiaye how to translate in Wolof this epiphany of life in dramatic performances, namely the manifestation of a god with Dionysian characteristics, we could not find a word. In fact, not even the word 'theatre' exists in Wolof. Yet, as Mandiaye always maintained, both words do exist. The twenty-year-long African experience of Teatro delle Albe basically consists in the meeting with Mandiaye and the Senegalese culture, which is not intended to be exhaustive of all of Africa, that is a complex and multifaceted continent. You only need to think of the Nigerian mythology of the Yorubas, its ritual and epic wealth, his great interpreter Wole Soyinka, and how this writer identifies in Ogun – a god among the hundreds that make up the Yoruba religion – the one who fell into an abyss, was sliced into pieces, then put himself together again and re-emerged: he is a kind of African Dionysus.

As regards the relationship of Teatro delle Albe with the theatrical culture of Senegal, namely the contamination of imagery and cultural traditions, the Albe, together with Mandiaye, have drawn inspiration from Dionysus who is the backbone of two vibrant stage 'games' we encountered during repeated trips to Senegal, but which seem to be common, with variants, to all black Africa: the 'game' of narration and the 'game' of *sabàr*.

## Narration

The narrative is carried out by a griot, the 'professional' narrator, or by an elderly member of the family. With viewers in a circle around a tree, the narrator tells the stories of ancient myths and traditional fables, where

6 Translator's note: *sfalenante* may be translated as 'uncanny'. 'Dioniso è il dio "sphalèn", *sfalenante*, alla lettera "colui che turba"' (Montanino 2006: 16) ['Dionysus is the *sphalèn* god, literally "he who perturbs"' (Martinelli 2010: 15)].

he can change, to his liking, experiences drawn from the present. While narrating, he embodies different *personae* in the etymological sense of 'masks', and alternates the third-person narrator with the first-person of the individual protagonists of the story. He can describe masks in his own way: in the stories of the hyena (*bouki* in Wolof) and the hare (*leuk*), the two grotesque comic heroes are not characters with psychological depth, but archetypes which mirror a human trait. To describe them the narrator does not only use different voices, but also a different way of moving his face, lips and eyes. They are living masks to indicate how polarities – the obscene hunger and the stupid greed of the hyena, on the one side, and the attentive listening to the signs of the world on the part of the hare, on the other side – are two visions in the mind of the narrator and of the audience.

*De te fabula narratur!* A good narrator knows how to use his techniques, different registers, and he also knows how to dare: he does not only trust his technical ability, but accepts the challenge on the stage. The stage is the crowded space, where viewers are not simply spectators. The space is the circle of spectators who do not only listen to the story, but intervene, talk to the narrator, provoke him and criticize his way of telling the story. Those in the audience who take the floor do so because they believe they can do better, they 'add a pinch of salt to the soup' (Valgimigli 1994: 130). The griot-narrator, *maestro della parola* [teacher and master of words], must invent responses and counter-provocations for his audience. According to strictly western logic, there are no spectators in this kind of drama: everyone who is present 'acts out' the story, the narrator is the fuse that lights the fire, but the fire is fuelled by everyone. The narrator is the key figure who keeps the story vibrant and alive. The wisdom of the narrator and his art, which is capable of turning on the vitality of those present, embodies the Dionysian rule of the game: it allows and evokes the irregular and the unexpected.

In Africa the narrator has children, women, men and the elderly in front of him. They are the 'many'. The 'many' are part of the scene, they make up the space and trigger responses, they are the performance; the 'many' open up to anarchy, to a happy game, to diversions and change. You cannot ignore this common contribution. If Dionysus is epidemic, you need to reveal the

etymology of the word: epidemic means 'the arrival (of god)'. You need a god, but what if there is nowhere to welcome him?

### *Sabàr*

The *sabàr* is also in a circle. It is a festive occasion of the women, generally animated by a few percussionists who are men. The women, including children and the elderly, form a circle and, one at a time, stand in the middle and dance just enough time to create a *figura*, a character, or just to stimulate, seduce and provoke, then they rejoin the circle to clapping, shouting, laughter, and call different people to perform. The red dust rises. A strong erotic current is present, which has nothing trivial and vulgar about it, even with the salacious jokes, perhaps from some of the men who are being provoked to dance. In this situation, people celebrate joyously, they form a chorus in which everyone is a protagonist, in which the 'many', one at a time, channel a collective energy. There is the body language that is almost the expression of being possessed: bare feet and their incessant hopping, a head that begins to circle furiously, it almost seems as if it should come off and fly away. It is the exhilaration of a dance rooted and in flight.

Both scenic 'games' – narration and *sabàr* – have an energetic and interactive language. If the narrator and musicians do not create an energy that emotionally involves the spectators, they will not interact. Not only will they not join the *sabàr* circle, they will neither respond nor provoke. In Africa this is almost impossible. For both types of 'games' a Senegalese proverb is not only valid but Dionysian: 'I am us'. In both scenic 'games', the distinction between the professional, the clever narrator or musician, and the spectator is never a separation or a wall: it could be the downfall of the game. In both forms, the people are exemplified by the circle shape. It is a moving circle, fluid, not static, flowing like water: a chorus that dances, bodies and words that form a unit. It is evident that the artists need to be talented, they must be able to ignite the flame, to elicit the art and the vitality of the spectator, but it is the context that puts them in this



condition. Not only do the artists have to be full of Dionysus, but the circle in which they are together with the spectators must recreate Dionysus's communicative energy.

That circle is the theatre because it makes the *presence* sacred, where each person is a bearer: a body that faces the world every day, the theatre-world. Drama coincides with birth, with *coming into the world* like *going on stage* and exposing the body, at that moment, childlike and alive. Drama is a journey within the body-matter and matter is vision. It is that same circle that we find as an invisible matrix in ancient Greek drama, in the unrestrained pact that Aristophanes and the ancient comedians agreed to with their public, in the turmoil caused by classic Greek tragedy. The Greek drama of origins is an amazing editing of epic narrative (of which Homer is the best example) and of coral dance capable of causing *mania*,<sup>7</sup> the Dionysian mysteries that precede the performance. Greek drama is a magic and bold composition that captures the god, transforms him into 'language' and 'makes him visible'. It is all in music, because we are blind without music. Classic Greek drama of the origins is wholeheartedly African.

## Reversal and transgression

To be clear, when we, Teatro delle Albe, refer to Dionysus, we do not mean the violent god of archaic rites, the one that urges human sacrifice, as revealed through the illuminating rigorous anthropology of René Girard, whose ideas on 'mimetic desire' has always influenced the Albe (Girard 1965, Palaver 2013). We mean the Dionysius of the theatre, who distances himself from his namesake that shows his violent nature, as in *The Bacchae* of Euripides, from which the analysis of the anthropologist-playwright Girard began. For the dramaturgy of the Albe, the thoughts of Giuseppe Fornari in *Da Dioniso a Cristo* (2006) seemed decisive. Following Girard's analysis,

7 The etymology is from the Greek 'madness', 'enthusiasm'.

Fornari enriches and exceeds the perspective of his master, highlighting with wisdom the role of the theatre in the long history of Dionysus. If it is true that the archaic circle of origins is the site of the massacre in which the sacrificial victim is in the centre, the scapegoat, the 'next' theatrical circle hints at a possible inversion, a possible communion, it is the circle where the feverish and violent exaltation becomes a song, a dance, a wise reflection on the destiny of man. And if the role of the tragedy is in this sense fundamental, the subversive role of the ancient comedy of Aristophanes, an implacable enemy of war and violence, able to laugh and mitigate bloody horror, may not yet have been narrated enough.

It is true that the oldest traces are surprisingly the newest: they are tricks of history and of its irregular movement which is not circular, but in spirals, with sudden returns and peremptory ignitions when everything seems dead. Buried in the individual psyche and in the collective imaginary, Dionysus may seem a matter for philologists. But the definition the Greeks gave to actors as 'technicians of Dionysus' is always innovative: that is, actors are as skilled as plumbers and carpenters, attentive and knowledgeable as priests, scrupulous guardians of a god of rapture, of the ecstasy of drums, wine, and eroticism. Dionysus is a god out of his head and out of text. This definition paradoxically exposes the polarity of opposites, ice and fire, technique and ecstasy, mastery and presence, as is found expressed and persecuted in the movement of theatrical culture that from the late nineteenth century, with the introduction of the director's role, continues to the present day. It is the movement of the reformers of twentieth-century theatre: Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, Jacques Copeau, Konstantin Seergevič Stanislavskij, Vsevolod Ėmil'evič Mejerchol'd, Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba. There are also Carmelo Bene and Leo de Bernardinis, the Italian authors-actors who are so important for these European reformers, since Stanislavskij drew inspiration from the observation of Eleonora Duse, and Mejerchol'd confessed to 'having discovered several laws of biomechanics after seeing the Sicilian actor Giovanni Grasso' act. (Grasso in Mejerchol'd 1962: 240). The West has no codified theatrical traditions and re-emerges from its dust, similar to African drama, it resorts to ghosts. The Commedia dell'arte, the great invented myth, resurfaces in mysterious ways in circumstances which no one thinks about, as in Totò, Karl Valentin and the Marx Brothers'

works. How could these masters of comedy have continued that tradition if not through Dionysian inspiration? They draw from the invisible, that is mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the invisible which Mandiaye taught us about, where artists and mystics venture.

### The 'many'

Among the tricks in Madiaye history of not travelling in a straight line, I now wish to explore another curve. We never know what is going on with the 'many'. In the *non-scuola*<sup>8</sup> [non-school] and in its diverse adaptations,<sup>9</sup> we always compare ourselves to the many, the children and the adolescents. The 'many' are a sort of exhilaration, a freedom that the theatre seldom has today. The 'many' are a possible unexpected anarchy, the surprise that breaks the director's plan. The 'many' are as many colours as possible, because colour is life, because a colourless world would be a sad lifeless world. Above all, in those bodies full of grace, or crooked and touching, you can find the blazing joy of Dionysus. Children and adolescents do not introduce themselves to the world as 'technicians of Dionysus'; they ignore what theatre, dramatic technique and Dionysus are, but they are

8 In 1992, in Ravenna, Teatro delle Albe created the 'non-school' for children and youth. The experiment was based on game-playing and discipline without rules in order to liberate the creative energy of youth, first by generating a dramatic 'short circuit' in the act of reading classical and established texts, then manipulating them to create dramatic action. As a non-academic drama school, the project expanded throughout Italy and abroad to include Belgium, Brazil, the United States and Senegal. One of its basic principles is to create a worldwide community sensitive to the language of drama and capable of fostering ideas of common humanism. See <<http://www.teatrodellealbe.com/eng/pre.php?link=contenuto.php?id=4&img=nonscuola.jpg&bg=FFFFFF>>.

9 They are *Arrevuoto* in Scampia, a district of Naples, *Capusutta* in Lamezia Terme, in the region of Calabria, and the sicilian-tunisian adaptation of Mazara del Vallo in Sicily (Martinelli and Montanari 2008).

'bearers' of Dionysus because they are not 'domesticated'. Life flows and burns in their gestures, dreams, desires and unbelievable voices. The non-school is a sort of a travelling *sabàr* theatre, the circle of origin reinvented in the heart of a modern city. The non-school pays attention (it cannot do otherwise) to the *sabàr* of modernity, to places where Dionysus is possible, to rap music, hip-hop, sports, football and not only, to the meeting places where youngsters create life and language. Working in the metaphorical gym of the non-school we took Africa with us.

In *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (2017) Gilbert Keith Chesterton writes: 'there are *no words* to express the abyss between isolation and having one ally. It may be conceded to the mathematicians that four is twice two. But two is not twice one; two is two thousand times one'. The Albe's longing for Africa flourished with narration and *sabàr*, but they were personified in the name and face of Mandiaye N'Diaye.

### Mandiaye N'Diaye, Senegalese immigrant and griot by vocation

We did not meet Mandiaye at any art centre in Dakar. We met this twenty-year-old immigrant on the beach. Mandiaye was not from a griot family, and since in Senegal the griot descends from a family of griot, this explains Mandiaye's embarrassment when he began to work with Teatro delle Albe in 1989. Stanislavskij and Molière were children of merchants, too. Their fathers were not part of the theatrical world and did not approve of it. In the Albe Mandiaye became an actor and griot by 'vocation', he made a choice, against everything and everyone, against the will of his father, who wanted him to be a tailor at home and a salesman along the beaches of Romagna in Italy.

There would not be many performances at the Albe without his contribution. His memory, his African childhood has inspired many theatrical works: *Lunga vita all'albero*, *Nessuno può coprire l'ombra*, *I ventidue infortuni di Mor Arlecchino* and *Padre Ubu*, rewritten by myself, and based on Alfred

Jarry's masterpiece (Jarry 1896, Martinelli 2006). For years Mandiaye was also the director of the Takku Ligey Théâtre, a theatre company (and a place for a theatre) which he founded in the heart of Senegal. Thus, Mandiaye managed to become a griot in his own country. He remained a pillar of the Albe, although in his last years he spent most the time at Diol Kadd, his village in Senegal.

For more than twenty years, through *drammetti edificanti* [edifying little plays] – that are a rewriting of ancient scripts in the light of the present, which result from a sort of *electrical shock* in the encounter between past and present – through these performances, the Albe have created a collection of *figuras*. In this collection, the pataphysical couple par excellence were Father and Mother Ubu, the cannibal and the witch. Ermanna Montanari and Mandiaye N'Diaye acted many times together<sup>10</sup> and played the part of the explosive couple (Father and Mother Ubu) that threw their 'Merdranza!' (in French *merde*, in Jarry's *Ubu Roi* 'merdre') to their audiences all over the world, from Iran to the United States. They quarrelled continuously, each using his/her own language as a blunt weapon (the dialect of Romagna and Wolof, languages of iron and earth), understanding without understanding in front of spectators who did not understand yet understood everything. The couple continues to represent a mocking icon in our inner consciousness: two monsters emerging from the darkest fables, from the underground world where fears and ghosts, which are paradoxically ridiculous and ferocious but also fascinating, reside. How else can you explain the fact that the world continues to give birth to dictator-jokers?

After *Mor Arlecchino* of the 1990s (Picarazzi and Feinstein 1997), the ubu couple travelled the world in the first decade of the third millennium. Masks and dreams were exchanged, this is what fed that scenic skirmish: the mythology of the peasant childhood of Ermanna Montanari, in a Romagna far cruder and harsher than that represented by Federico Fellini's filmic imagination, and the importance of dreams in Mandiaye's Serere culture. They also exchanged the donkeys: the white donkey of Ermanna's childhood and the talking, wise donkeys of the Senegalese fairytales. It was as

10 See *I Refrattari, Sogno di una notte di mezza estate. Riscrittura in giù da William Shakespeare and Siamo asini o pedanti?* (Martinelli 2006).

if the world continued to exchange dumb alphabets in our lives, which we can still call mythical, if we remove the blanket of advertising and the opacity from this plastic life. The technicians of Dionysus reappear as the bearers of a profound experience in which human beings and nature communicate with each other. With Mandiaye we exchanged Christianity and Islam, the madness of our *santi giullari*, jesters, saints like Saint Francis and Cheik Ibra Fall, 'crazy about god', about singing and dancing. In this case Saint Dionysus.

In 1996, we realized *All'inferno!*, my own 'fresco based on Aristophanes' together with the Kismet in Bari and the Tam in Padua. This was where Mandiaye fell in love with Aristophanes. It was on that occasion that he thought about using those ancient western fables to found his theatre in Senegal for the first time. In *All'inferno!*, Mandiaye played the role of Chremylus, the farmer from Athens in *Plutus* who wonders why wealth continues to reward 'the sacrilegious, the demagogues, the informers, indeed every sort of rascal', while for those who want to live and work honestly there is only poverty and misery. In the play, Chremylus was Moussa, while his servant Cario took the name of Dara (Martinelli 1996). In the Albe's rewriting of *Plutus*, there are two Senegalese farmers of our day that ask the same questions as their Greek ancestors. In the prologue, they wonder where the god of gold lives. Fari, a wise donkey to whom they ask explanations, is with them: at the beginning Fari does not want to reveal where the god of gold is hidden, but then she indicates the 'gate of hell' and abandons them. It is a revolving metal door. The two go through it and, as in a dream, they find themselves in a highway café in Fer-Nord. Ohne Pausen, the Swiss lady owner, hires them to work twenty-four hours a day. Meanwhile, Fari has joined them, because she seems unable to keep away from her master Moussa. And as they have a few hours before their infernal shift, the two listen to a series of stories told by shadows and ghosts in the café. The first to speak are Strepsiade and his bullying son, who has been sent to school by the 'new' philosophers of communication ('Etere o non Etere, questo è il problema!').<sup>11</sup> The next to speak are intellectuals, characters

11 Translator's note: In Italian, the sound of language of 'etere' [ether, aether, airwaves] echoes 'essere' [to be]. Hence, 'Etere o non Etere, questo è il problema' rephrases

from Aristophanes's *The Clouds*, followed by corrupt politicians and those who corrupt, the unpunished and vulgar knights (from Aristophanes's *Knights*), and finally, the story in which the same Moussa and Dara act.

It is 'their' story, of their underground descent to find the god of gold. They discover that the god of gold is a blind café toilet-cleaner: 'That's why the money never comes to us, he's blind!'; prophesies Moussa, eager to bring the blind god of gold to a healer in his home village, Diol Kadd, to help him regain his sight. But when he is about to do this, Farì reveals herself for what she is, Poverty, who is ready to fight so as not to leave her master in the hands of Wealth. It's the final clash, extremely contradictory: in Aristophanes's text, Poverty (a woman with a livid and disturbed look, and dressed shabbily) makes paradoxical justifications which confuse Chremylus and ruin his project. I am not to be confused with Misery, says Farì, I am the symbol of a life that looks at the essential, which does not corrupt you like that dishonest god you want to concede to. With me, your life will have real value, based on honesty and work, while where there is Wealth there is always waste and corruption. In her anti-consumer and prophetic discourse, Farì nullifies Moussa's reasons, who tells Farì to go to hell and shouts: 'Enough! You can't persuade me ... not even if you persuade me!' And he leaves for Diol Kadd with the god of gold, while Farì hovers on a circus swing, laughing and mocking, high on the stage.

After the riots in Guediawaye in the mid 1990s, roughly in the same period of the first failed attempt of the Albe to open a theatre in the banlieue of Dakar, Mandiaye arrived at Diol Kadd, his native village, in the heart of Senegal. It was the beginning of the third millennium. Like Moussa-Chremylus of *All'inferno!*, he returned to the village but did not bring the

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'Essere o non essere, questo è il problema', the incipit of Hamlet's famous soliloquy 'To be, or not to be, this is the question'. Also, 'Etere' in capital letters may refer to Aether, the Greek primordial deity of pure upper air, only breathed by gods. In the play *All'inferno!*, however, the sentence has a contextual meaning related to the Italian political situation of the second half of the 1990s, when Berlusconi rose to power in the political scene and used his monopoly of private broadcasting channels to manipulate public information. Therefore, the sentence expresses a condemnation of the vacuity of TV information and of its paradoxical function of non-communication.

god of gold, consumerism and petit-bourgeois desires. Instead, he brought Aristophanes and the passion for the theatre, born and nurtured in Italy. He followed his dreams and his sense of responsibility, his stubbornness typical of a Gramscian intellectual. Mandiaye and his people: they are Senegal, Africa strangled by neocolonialism of the banks and multinationals, but, first of all, they are the place of his theatre, Diol Kadd, four-hundred souls in the savannah. There, the young actors he trained were farmers, too, in the morning they tilled the land and in the evening they rehearsed. By founding Takku Ligey Théâtre, which means 'working together', he brought water, solar panels and the theatre. The theatre at Diol Kadd is not made of bricks. The bricks of the theatre are the people: the living and the dead, those who apparently disappeared, the ancestors, and those who are not yet born. Today, work at Diol Kadd is carried out primarily by Moussa, Mandiaye's eldest son.

### The *polis*: The planet

Nowadays a *polis* is *also* a planet. It is the world made smaller by communications. Dionysus evokes the city and a people: without these he does not know where to reappear or where to go. He needs a place: Ravenna or Diol Kadd, or any group of people. It is the ability of the theatre 'to be a place'. Aristophanes had the place – Athens – which was at the same time State, people, and 'almost' a world. We must invent it, the place, in the era of non-places: that is where the difference lies. At that time, the place was the *polis*; the *polis* gave life to drama, which was one of its cornerstones, as important as the agora where the entire community practiced politics. Today, in such tragic times signalled by a nausea for politics, artistic and political responsibilities rest joyfully upon the shoulders of drama. It is the responsibility to 'become a place', both to give physical visibility to the 'many' and to be politically effective. 'Becoming a place' also means to be more inclusive, to widen the place so that the 'many' can inhabit it. This expanded space is similar to the Senegalese savannah, where time



flows differently from the big cities. This expansion can take place between four walls, indoors, in basements of urban suburbs, and in Ravenna's early Christian basilicas, visionary theatres still shining with mosaics. It is the expansion where the Other becomes visible, the 'you' that confronts 'me', which takes up my space, that is the measure of my freedom, which is the amazing 'horizontal transcendence' theorized by Jean Soldini (2005). Are these ethical questions? Politics? Nonsense? Certainly, not nonsense. They are the only issues that matter, because they allow an opportunity to be together, to be able to be together without drowning or stabbing your neighbour, it all comes together. An aesthetics that is not open to confrontation and only clashes with ethics is e-constipated, e-static, undesirable and empty, worthless like the plastic-time in which we are immersed, an immovable and anguishing time. 'It is worth going to the theatre to see something happening. Do you understand? It is really happening!', wrote Paul Claudel in *Lo scambio* (1919). It is still worthwhile.

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