

Dante the Everyman

Marco Martinelli

Translated by Thomas Haskell Simpson

It all began at our city high school, in Ravenna: Ermanna and I read the *Divine Comedy* and it enchanted us. It was hard, yes, but thrilling, as hard and thrilling as climbing a high mountain.

Then, when we were twenty, Ermanna and I got married. It was 1977, and we began doing theatre, living on theatre, making life into theatre by creating a company of our own—Teatro delle Albe—weaving life and theatre together. We didn't want to wait around for a call from some director or other; we became the architects of our own destiny, in shame and honor, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Life and theatre from morning to night; a perfumed wreath of flowers, and we dreamt that theatre could be at one and the same time a battle, a daily prayer, and a contemplation on *what is*, not only for human beings but for all living things—plants, animals, oceans—including our rage at the evils brutalizing the planet. Struggle against the injustices that wound existence: that's what we wanted our combination of theatre and life to be. The stage, small as it was, had to contain the whole world. In that gamble, Dante continued to be our number one "partner in vigil," during those hours when you can't sleep and force yourself to keep on writing, when you keep on rehearsing late into the night in the deserted hall. In the same way, Dante went sleepless laying out the *immeasurable* poem he tossed everything into, like an immense alchemical forge: almost five hundred figures of popes and emperors, merchants and saints and artists, corrupt leaders and prostitutes, and hundreds of real figures otherwise unknown. He drew from recent news and pagan mythology, from politics, science, and economics, combining his scorn for money—which was just beginning to pollute the world—with the most sublime theology, his desire for the Absolute, and Love Love Love; the Love scorned in Hell, searched for in Purgatory, and enjoyed with festive gladness in Paradise.

We wrote our own scripts, we staged Aristophanes or Shakespeare, but Dante was always there close by, and we started describing our theatre as a "staging in life."

I'm not sure I can render this concept, so crucial to us, precisely in English: Italian has the expression *mesa in scena* to indicate theatrical staging, the mounting of a text *in scena*, on stage. But for us it wasn't enough just to put the play *on stage*; we wanted to put it *in vita*—in life—because the words of a text, written today or twenty centuries ago, are nothing until they become flesh, the nervous system of those who speak or listen to those words. Only then do the words become memory and utopia, inferno and paradise, spirit and world. It takes resolute audacity to spark the short circuit that makes the stage burn with the flame of life.

Over forty years, we too have tossed a lot of "life" into the alchemical forge of our creations; especially our own lives and those of our actors. We begin every work day by telling each other our dreams and anguish, our anger and desires, so that it all fuels the art on stage. And we always open up the walls of our theatre to "other worlds," bringing on stage segments of reality we're unfamiliar with. We started working with African immigrants toward the end of the eighties, when immigration into Italy was a new phenomenon, and those actors went on to become supporting columns of our company. We went into schools all over Italy and the world, from Ravenna to the crime-ridden neighborhoods in Naples, as far as Dakar and Nairobi and Chicago, working with hundreds, even thousands of children and teens, making stages shake and shine with the "wildness" of those surprising "non-actors," summoned not to "play a role" but to *be themselves* through improvisation, a process of autonomous creation built on a given text. We put them face-to-face with the insight of Ermanna, for whom the term "actress" is insufficient, because she has never "played a role"; rather, she brings incandescent *figures* to life by combining the primal matter of her subconscious with the provocations in classic plays or the texts I create expressly for her. We have mixed together languages and dialects from all over the world, because each language has its own music, and they all combine to form the planet's magnificent symphony.

In Europe today, you hear about "post-dramatic" theatre, "theatre of reality," and such. That's what we've been doing for over thirty years now, calling it "staging in life." Even recounting a dream is a "theatre of reality," just like what drove Dante to plunge into the "dark wood" at the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*.

Pursuing that drive, desire growing year by year, our teenage enchantment flowered into a "staging in life" of Dante's great work. The Ravenna Festival asked us to mount the *Inferno* in 2017, *Purgatory* in 2019, and *Paradise* in 2021, the year of the seven-hundredth anniversary of the poet's death. We accepted the proposal, asking ourselves, "But how?" How to bring onto a stage the 14,233 verses that compose the three canticles? As a first step, we expanded the stage to encompass the entire city of Ravenna. We published a "public summons" inviting every citizen, without distinction as to age, social class, language or ethnicity,

to “create” the poet’s voyage along with us, the voyage of every mortal from the darkness of fear to the light of happiness. Highlighting the poem’s universality, Ezra Pound calls Dante “the everyman,” so we challenged ourselves to start from that definition. We hoped that maybe a hundred people would respond to our appeal. A thousand showed up, and we realized it was inevitable: if you open a door, the whole world will come through it.

As models, we were thinking of the Medieval mystery plays or Mayakovsky’s revolutionary theatre of the masses: two totally different eras, but they shared the principle that the “people” were not passive witnesses. Instead, together with the artists, they brought a theatre to life that incarnated the vision of an entire society. We worked with the “thousand” by dividing them into groups and chorally recreating the Dantean figures we had chosen, composing a montage that privileged certain episodes over others. For example, the lovers Paolo and Francesca were made “incarnate” in fifteen couples of teenagers holding hands in the face of a whipping sonic storm. Soon we conceived a performance that would not be limited to the four walls of a theatre but would wend through the city like a religious procession or political march, starting from the tomb of Dante Alighieri himself. Because Dante, the exile from his native Florence, actually died in Ravenna, and it was probably in Ravenna that he wrote most of *Paradise*. For seven centuries, his tomb in Ravenna has been a pilgrimage site for Italians and foreigners who come to honor the “poet most high.” Like the poem that sparked their genesis, our productions of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* were both *immeasurable* events. They drew in, thrilled, and moved thousands of spectators and *non-actors*: men and women, children and the elderly, workers of every kind, migrants. Every evening ended with a celebration open to all.

But we didn’t stop there. Due to their nature as a collective celebration, our versions of Dante’s canticles are events that cannot be transported; you can’t take a thousand people on tour. The desire arose in Ermanna and me to create a small jewel for the stage, a sign of the decades we’ve spent with Dante’s work; a work for Dante, starting from Dante. Thus was born the text that follows here, *fedeli d’Amore* [Love’s faithful]. It is a play for Ermanna’s voice, for Ermanna’s thousand voices. A narrative polyptych divided into seven panels, it is set on the nights of September 13 and 14, 1321, when Dante was dying of malaria in Ravenna, encircled by the people dearest to him and the esteem of the whole city. His exile was political: he had been engaged in action for the “public good” of his dear Florence, but the corruption and violence of his adversaries had overwhelmed him. Condemned to death and compelled to flee, Dante wandered across the peninsula, reduced to begging for hospitality in Italy’s various courts. Ravenna finally welcomed him with all honor, recognizing in the refugee the “quill of the

Holy Spirit.” More than a poet, he was a shaman who intended his work to heal mortals from their state of spiritual misery and lead them toward happiness. An exaggeration? Perhaps. But what use are artists, if not to set their gaze on high, toward the peak of the unreachable mountain?

Note: Marco Martinelli’s text *fedeli d’Amore* was first presented in English in New York by the Italian and American Playwright’s Project, under the guidance of Valeria Orani (Umanism) and Frank Hentschker (Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, Graduate Center CUNY), who dedicated a series to Martinelli’s dramaturgy and Ermanna Montanari’s alchemical creation. Conceived and directed by Martinelli and Montanari, the performance will be presented along with a phase of their work on the *Divine Comedy* during the 2020–2021 season, 700th anniversary of the poet’s death, in Philadelphia (produced by the University of Pennsylvania Center for Italian Studies) and in New York (produced by the Italian and American Playwright’s Project and numerous partners, including the Dante Society of America and New York University).

MARCO MARTINELLI, playwright and director, and Ermanna Montanari, actress, author, and set designer, founded the Teatro delle Albe (1983) in Ravenna, Italy, and share its artistic direction. Martinelli’s texts have been staged in several European countries, South America, Africa, and the U.S. and translated into French, German, and English. He has received several awards, including: seven Ubu Prizes, the Prize for Career Achievement-Festival Journées théâtrales (Carthage, Tunisia), the Vereinigung Deutsch-Italienischer Kultur Gesellschaften cultural award 2018. **MONTANARI**, the recipient of the Eleonora Duse Prize, among many others, is known for her vocal and musical research. Her virtuosic work with the voice is the subject of several books and essays in multiple languages. In 2017, the artists premiered their first movie, *Aung San Suu Kyi’s Life Under Arrest*, written and directed by Martinelli, with Montanari in the title role. Their film *The Sky over Kibera*, takes as its subject the *Divine Comedy*, brought to life in Nairobi with one-hundred and fifty children and adolescents. In 1991, Martinelli and Montanari founded Ravenna Teatro, at the Teatro Rasi in Ravenna. (teatrodellealbe.com)

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