

Teatro Delle Albe

Staging Dante in Ravenna and Matera

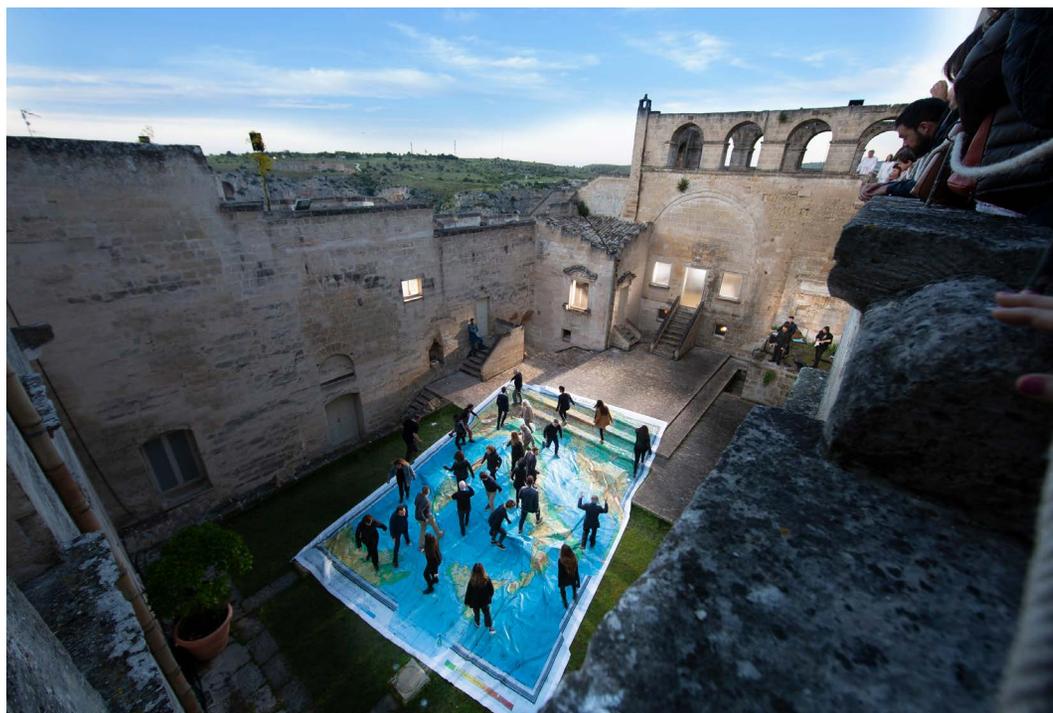
Ron Jenkins

As a preamble to their epic production of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Ermanna Montanari and Marco Martinelli, directors of the Italian theatre company Teatro delle Albe, cite the eighteenth-century writer Giambattista Battista Brocchi, who wrote: "Dante would have been the equal of Aeschylus or Shakespeare if in his day the art of theatre had been in vogue in Italy and he had wished to cultivate it." [*Letters on Dante*, Venice, 1797]

In their innovative staging of Dante's poem, Montanari and Martinelli both confirm and transcend Brocchi's hypothesis. In the summer of 2019, their theatre presented a dynamic version of *Purgatorio* that revealed the inherent theatricality of Dante's work at the same time that it illuminated surprisingly modern aspects of the poem that contemporary audiences might identify as cinematic. In the second part of their projected triptych, which began in 2017 with *Inferno* and will conclude in 2021 with *Paradiso*, Teatro delle Albe brings *Purgatorio* to life with a provocative montage of long shots, close-ups, and cross-cuts. It is a theatrical action movie in which the audience is part of the action and the cities in which it was staged (Ravenna and Matera) become the film set.

Ravenna is the place where Dante spent the last years of his life. One can still visit the churches adorned with the medieval Byzantine mosaics of angels, saints, and stars that fired the poet's imagination as he was writing *Paradiso*. Teatro delle Albe's theatre is based in Ravenna. It is in the deconsecrated church where Dante once prayed, and their itinerant production of *Purgatorio* brings the text to life by leading its audience through forgotten parts of the northern Italian city that is often called the exiled poet's "last refuge."

In Matera, the production exploits that city's history in a different but equally compelling manner. One of the world's oldest cities, Matera is carved out of a mountainside in southern Italy. Its elaborate network of ancient cave dwellings



Purgatorio in Matera: The Terrace of the Wrathful—citizens of Matera and African migrants are beating the map of Italy and shouting Dante's verses, mixed with contemporary language about political corruption. 2019. Photo: Marco Caselli Nirmal.



Purgatorio in Matera: The Garden of Eden. 2019. Photo: Marco Caselli Nirmal.

and temples has been so deftly preserved and integrated into the modern life of the city that UNESCO designated Matera as a world heritage site. There is no evidence that Dante ever visited the city, but climbing with Montanari and Martinelli through the labyrinth of a former monastery on Via Riscatto [Redemption Road] to a rooftop view of towering cliffs that gave birth to civilization, it is easy to imagine that one has arrived in Dante's "Garden of Eden" on the top of Mount Purgatory.

In Ravenna, the performance begins with the spectators gathered in front of Dante's tomb. Montanari and Martinelli open the iron gates of the monument as if to release the spirit of the poet into the twenty-first century, or perhaps to invite the twenty-first century into Dante's world. In this production time travel goes in both directions, as it does in *La Divina Commedia*, where historical and mythical figures co-exist with Dante's contemporaries. The trumpeting of a conch shell suggests that the audience is on the beach of Purgatory Island, an illusion enhanced by the marsh reeds held by dozens of performers who stand in front of the tomb, almost indistinguishable from the audience. The reeds blow in the wind as Montanari performs excerpts from the opening canto with a commanding clarity that transports the audience to the afterlife while maintaining an earthy connection to the here and now. The reeds, for instance, play an important role in the symbolic landscape of the poem as emblems of humility, but the audience in Ravenna can see and touch the reeds as a concrete manifestation of Dante's imagery.

When Montanari comes to the lines spoken by Virgil to Dante, "follow my steps," the audience follows her and Martinelli to the location of the next scene. Dressed in white, the two of them become Virgil-like guides who lead the audience through the terraces of Purgatory, while the spectators collectively play the role of Dante. The first transition could be experienced as a long tracking shot through the streets of Ravenna with a soundtrack of sacred music that wafts through the air from the rooftops and balconies of the city, where choruses and soloists have been strategically placed to echo the music Dante's pilgrim heard in the poem. Traffic has been rerouted to enhance the impression that the quotidian streets have become otherworldly.

Montanari and Martinelli lead the audience to another iron gate a few blocks away from Dante's tomb. This one opens onto a complex of buildings and courtyards that Teatro delle Albe shares with an old-age home. It is the gate to Purgatory and in order to enter each spectator must have the letter "P" for *peccato* [sin] traced on their forehead, just as Dante does when he ascends to *Purgatorio's* first terrace. The tracing is done by children playing angels. In this way another abstract

concept in Dante's poem is made concrete for the audience by the physical touch of a finger on the flesh.

Inside the gates of Purgatory the audience encounters a fire escape filled with women who seem to be on their way up the mountain. "Remember me," they implore, until one of them breaks out of the chorus to tell her story. She is Pia, who was murdered by her husband. Dante gave her only six heartbreaking lines in his poem, but in this production the universality of her experience is highlighted by the other women on the fire escape who recount their own experiences of twenty-first century domestic violence. The women answered Teatro delle Albe's public call for performers and participated in a workshop in which they shared true stories of violence. The stories were distilled into short evocative phrases, that, like Pia's terse narrative, express a lifetime of pain in just a few words.

"I screamed. I screamed. But no one heard me."

"It was the death of my childhood."

"A black hole. The pain left a black hole in my body."

The devastating impact of this scene is heightened by the unsettling shifts from intimacy to epic distance that characterize the theatrical range of this performance. The audience comes to a world of suffering women after an intensely personal encounter with a child/angel tracing a symbol of sin on their foreheads. Then they zoom in to individual women's voices without losing sight of the collective scope of their experiences. Next a lone man emerges from an alley and laments the humiliating exhumation of his bones after he died in battle. He is Manfred, King of Sicily, but his disheveled, barefooted appearance makes him look like a homeless person anyone might meet on the street today, robbed of dignity long before his death.

Dante's *Purgatorio* is full of art and artists. The pilgrim meets many painters, poets, and musicians on his way up the mountain. Teatro delle Albe honor this fact by integrating modern artists into their staging. In the terrace of pride, the medieval miniaturist Oderisi da Gubbio is performed by the same actor playing the German avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys, who proclaims that all humans are artists with the responsibility to keep art alive as an expression of our unity with the natural world. "Protect the flame," he urges the audience.

As if in response to Beuys's exhortations, Montanari and Martinelli added an extra terrace to Purgatory in which dozens of men, women, and children recite fragments of poetry by Vladimir Mayakovsky, John Donne, Walt Whitman, and others in a collective effort to "protect the flame" of art. The name of this terrace,



Purgatorio in Ravenna: The Procession. 2019. Photo: Silvia Lelli.



Purgatorio in Ravenna: The Terrace of Worms and Butterflies—a classroom, where the citizens of any age, ethnicity, and language recite verses from Dante and other poets who sang of love and rebellion, including Mayakovsky, Whitman, Donne, and Hillesum. 2019. Photo: Silvia Lelli.

"worms and butterflies," is taken from one of Dante's most memorable definitions of the human condition:

*"Don't you realize that we are all worms
Born to form angelic butterflies" [Purgatorio, canto 10, 124–125]*

The children are particularly enthusiastic. The youngest ones climb up onto their desktops to recite their poems, as if hoping to metamorphose from worms to butterflies before our eyes.

The audience is then led across the courtyard to another fire escape which represents the terrace of the "hot-tempered." The stairs are filled with shouting men and women making violent gestures. A giant map of Italy is hung upside down on the wall beside them, signifying a world upended by corruption. It is a split-screen perspective with hot-tempered citizens on one side and a long-shot of their country beside them. The image foreshadows canto 22 of *Paradiso* where Dante looks down at the earth from the eighth sphere of heaven and sees it as a "little threshing floor that makes us so ferocious." When the play was staged in Matera, this effect was heightened by placing the audience on the rooftop of a convent looking down onto a courtyard where the hot-tempered chorus was standing on a giant map of Italy, as if they were watching a crane shot from a mountain top.

The roof of the convent in Matera became the setting for the final scene at the summit of Mount Purgatory. Matera's mountain landscape made it easy for the audience to imagine themselves in Dante's "Terrestrial Paradise," but in Ravenna, Montanari and Martinelli decided to set the Garden of Eden in a parking lot. The inspired choice challenged the audience to see the scene through the contemporary lens of environmental issues. In the poem Dante walks through a wall of fire only to be chastised by Beatrice for a multitude of unnamed sins. The audience in Ravenna also walks through a corridor of flaming torches to get to the Garden of Eden, but when they arrive they are confronted not only by an angry Beatrice, but also by a quartet of angry young women portraying the Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg. "You have no more excuses," they shout accusingly, "and we are out of time." Meanwhile, Montanari performs Dante's text with a voice that blends fiery passion and icy precision. The young women have made it clear that we all share responsibility for the planet's destruction, but Montanari artfully compresses our complicity into a single syllable. In response to Beatrice's demand that he accepts responsibility for his mistakes, Dante writes that "confusion and fear forced a 'yes' out of my mouth." [*Purgatorio*, canto 31, line 13] Montanari imbues that "yes" with a depth of meaning that lingers as the spectators wait for a final benediction from the four young women, transformed

into the angels who remove the "P" from Dante's forehead. One at a time they come to each spectator to "erase" the stain with a touch and recite the final line in Dante's *Purgatorio* that pronounces them "pure and ready to climb to the stars."

Note: The words in quotes are my translations of Italian phrases used in the play, either from Dante's text or from the play's narrative.

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