



press review

“Luş”

BY RENATE KLETT

It's a true story, the story of Bêlda who lived in a village in Romagna, Italy, in the late twentieth century; the story of an outcast and derided woman held to be a witch. But at night the villagers came to her surreptitiously, seeking help and remedies against stomach aches and the pains of love, headache and malaria. Because she knew all about herbs and spells. She was a healer and, the people said, could cure you “better than the pharmacist”. But when they crossed her path by day they spat thrice behind her back. This went on for years: on the street they showed disdain but in their homes they were grateful, and nobody found anything strange in this behaviour. Except her, but she seemed to be resigned to her fate. Until something happened one day that changed everything.

A rumour was spread that Bêlda's mother, now dead, had been a prostitute, so the priest had her coffin disinterred from the cemetery and buried elsewhere. Bêlda wants to avenge her mother. The hatred and humiliation of a lifetime is transmuted into murderous energy. She resorts to black magic for the first time and casts a curse, pronouncing the magic spell in mangled Latin. She gets the priest's footprints from the field, rolls them into a ball which she wraps in vine leaves fixed with three thorns. With three thorns she impales a frog and, pronouncing the magic formula, lays it under a stone. If the frog dies, so will the cursed person. (Among other things, this same ritual has been handed down from west Africa, with the difference that the footprints are wrapped not in vine but in palm leaves).

In 1995 the writer Nevio Spadoni told the story of Belda in a proem in Romagnol dialect, on which the concert-play “Luş” is based, staged by Marco Martinelli for the Teatro delle Albe of Ravenna, a production by Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione.

I saw the show in Cesena, hometown of Romeo Castellucci, another figure of modern mystical in Italian theatre. (A brief parenthesis on the well known theme of the prophet in his own country: Castellucci is a world famous director, it's only at home that nobody seems to know him. Seeking his workplace in this little town deserves an article to itself, so absurd it was. Not even the students at the adjacent Conservatory knew his name, not to speak of the people in Via di Serraglio where the Societas Raffaello Sanzio is headquartered – and the building is a big one!!)

On the stage of the Teatro Bonci (which is not Castellucci's theatre) there are three people: the actress Ermanna Montanari, the double-bassist Daniele Roccato and the composer Luigi Ceccarelli who for each show creates the live electro-acoustic soundscape of voices and sounds. The mixture is explosive – because these three incite one another, they develop and succumb reciprocally. But the evening obviously belongs to Montanari, one of the greatest Italian actresses. Having herself grown up in a Romagna village she sucks the soul of this dialect, incomprehensible even to Italians from other regions, she throws it into disorder, goes through it with a fine toothcomb, smoothes it, licks it and raises it, taking your breath away. No one else possesses such power and madness to draw into her own body every inspiration and danger, knowing how to transform them into voice. Her accomplice, the mournful double-bass, wraps her in an atmosphere of obtuseness and superstition which, being rational and enlightened folk, at once repels and fascinates us.

Ermanna Montanari is at the back of the stage, her feet well planted on the ground, enveloped in electrical cables that terminate in a sickle. She holds it up proudly like a coat-of-arms and advances front stage as if she were Mistress Death. She's wearing a dress soaked in (real) blood, she swings her hips and, throwing her arms upwards, emits these incomprehensible words similar to seagulls' screeches or archaic battle cries. Then she calms down, complains about her fate, jeers at the "filthy priest" whose domestic servant her mother had been. Montanari shifts from the innocence of a frightened child to the power of cruelty – that hatred seeks death and that love in this world is in vain, this we understand at once. Although the Italian subtitles do not say so, one comes to imagine that Belda could be the parish priest's secret daughter and for that reason was raised by relations living far from civilization.

Then the unheard-of happens. The actress does what is forbidden, she goes beyond the threshold of evil. Reality changes, theatre ceases to be theatre. Something Absolute takes its place, something which won't be named but which is perhaps the lost original power of the theatre. Perhaps catharsis came about in this way: the protagonist and 6 thousand spectators go through evil to become pure.

The curse over, the terrible woman once more becomes the mistreated creature who howls, invokes the light in order to continue living and to live better. The spell is broken, we are back in the fine old Teatro Bonci, built some decades before Belda was born – a monument to bourgeois pride and optimism. In our superficial years of technological pride and pessimism, the inexplicable transgression we have witnessed is the great shock, perhaps the ultimate, that theatre can still give. We rub our eyes and wonder what we have seen. Great theatre in any case, but what was this 'altered state',* this diabolical grace, so scary and so audacious? I experienced the phenomenon many years ago, when Thomas Thieme as Richard III in Perceval's "Battles!" achieved a state which was no longer of this world. What causes this state and what it elicits we prefer not to know too well. It may be no accident that after the first performances Ermanna Montanari was struck by an unusually strong nosebleed, almost unstoppable, in which she lost three litres of blood.

*English in original

[german version: www.teatrodellealbe.com/archivio/LUS-Klett.pdf]

The blood of the witch

BY RENATO PALAZZI

The empty space surmounted by a screen on which appears the word *Luş*, written in (real) blood by visual artist Margherita Manzelli who also did the watercolours projected onto it and created the protagonist's disturbing costume, is subdivided into three platforms: on the first, to the audience's right, the double-bassist Daniele Roccato will take his place while composer Luigi Ceccarelli will occupy the third, on the left, with the computer through which he transforms in real time sounds and voice into piercing electronic sequences. On the central platform, in the emblematic form of a piano, blinding white like the other two and underscoring the strictly musical substance of the actress's work, Ermanna Montanari will appear. But not immediately. Only after a long preparatory interval punctuated by Roccato's overwhelming solo overture, a crescendo of ardour and emotive tension of impressive force, which she listens to in statuesque immobility, as if to gather her strength, with a long rope attached to her arm, partly umbilical cord, partly a leash for an animal, in a white dress with great dark prints, also drawn in blood by Manzelli. And the figure of *Bêlda* seems to be moulded in the blood and in a sort of primordial matter, the village clairvoyant and healer who lived in the early 20th century and is at the centre of *Luş*, a powerful work in Romagnol dialect by the Ravenna poet Nevio Spadoni. Montanari first tackled this text in '95, a memorable interpretive exploit in that it marked, if I remember well, a sort of turning point, the springboard for research into vocality as an expressive tool in the pure state, linked to the language of places, to the land, to the actress's country roots. And she has returned to *Luş* in a different version, this time directed by Marco Martinelli. Why, in the journey of an actress who has played characters of very high stature, from Ariosto's Alcina, vigorously reinterpreted by Spadoni himself, to the refined and rebellious nun Rosvita, does *Bêlda* occupy such an important place? Daughter of a prostitute and perhaps willing to prostitute herself in turn, victim of hypocrisy and scorn in her surroundings – which she revenges by damning the priest, guilty of having disinterred her mother – she embodies a rare concentration of primary impulses, a mixture of sex, atavistic beliefs, pagan religiosity, a presence overbearingly resurfacing from an obscure ancestral past. With her furore, with her barbaric language, Spadoni's witch, armed with a sickle, seems almost a Testori creation, snatched from the Brianza highways and precipitated into the Romagna countryside. The very form of her witchcraft, which fires and agitates her soliloquy, in itself recalls a primordial ritual. And precisely this sort of irrepressible interior impulse appears to seize the actress in what is an actual verbal concerto where her voice accommodates a thousand different registers, it ripples, it hoarsens, it runs the whole gamut of states of mind, from rage to pride and ferocious irony. Above all the litanies, the urgent listings of ailments she has cured, or the saints invoked in variegated dialect mispronunciations, prepare the ideal ground for high rhythmic variations and striking tonal chiaroscuros. At all times the acting is one with the body, with the music, with the images of tormented faces that appear on the screen. Lucidly orchestrated by Martinelli, it is an extraordinary performance from all three, capable of enflaming the Teatro delle Passioni in Modena where it was put on for just a few evenings. A performance is envisaged for the "Vie" festival in autumn, but it would be a pity not to see it sooner, maybe outside the normal theatre circuits, in opera houses like Carmelo Bene's great recitals.

[italian version: www.teatrodellealbe.com/archivio/LUS-Palazzi.pdf]

The voice of “Luş”, ecstatic music from the heart of darkness

An action of sound beyond the frontiers of music and theatre, orchestrated by Marco Martinelli

BY MARIO GAMBA

If a stage performance is defined as a “concerto” there should be no doubts: it’s a musical event. But things aren’t so simple. The new version of *Luş*, a show that the Teatro delle Albe first performed in the 90’s, involves the reciting voice of Albe “prima donna” Ermanna Montanari amid a rich electronic sound fabric elaborated by Luigi Ceccarelli (live) and Daniele Roccato on double-bass. Reciting voice? Here too the definition is hazarded: it belongs integrally to the vocabulary of music and not to that of theatre. And then, is Montanari’s infernal/extreme/ecstatic monologue of Nevio Spadoni’s text in Romagnol theatre or music? The answer is debatable but we’ll give it anyway: it is music because its acting performance autonomy is at once maintained and cancelled in the proceeding of the sound actions. It is enveloped, in turn it determines the deviations, the unforeseen passages. But it sets its “specific” in common with the musical one of Ermanna’s two fellow performers who are on stage with her at the Teatro delle Passioni in Modena.

The beginning is a ground bass in continuous crescendo by Roccato, reprised, modified, transformed by Ceccarelli’s “virtuous machines”. Music from the heart of darkness which gradually becomes materic-impassioned. This is how it will be throughout the show. Roccato sets out as ethereal and becomes dense, imminent like a presage of lacerations and conflicts. Ceccarelli straight off the mark captures the sounds of the double-bass (which is also amplified and technologically modified) and draws forth highly dramatic barrages of sound, metallic glimmers, lightning bolts laden with tragedy. Unlike the improvised duo performances which have become classic on today’s music scene, the sounds of Roccato and Ceccarelli join together, they form a mass. This perhaps reduces the spatialization which is generally so much desired in contemporary music, but it gives the whole a very strong emotional concentration.

The entrance of Montanari, the Belda of Spadoni’s poem, is special, adapted to an earthly trance, and the music of Ceccarelli and Roccato ceases for a few minutes. A clairvoyant, a healer, a witch, vengeful daughter of Armida who, in the early 20th century, was disinterred in the Romagna countryside on the orders of a wicked priest and reburied in non-consecrated ground because she was a “whore”. Torn white dress stained with red stripes (real blood, by visual artist Margherita Manzelli). A small sickle in her hand, a somewhat ambiguous prop to tell the truth, because Belda is capable of summoning death, and in fact with her curse she brings about the excruciating death of the hideous priest, but she is also a rebel against hypocrisy and respectability who, quite uselessly, asks the God-who-is-dead for a possible exit into the light, the *Luş*, a deliverance, a rebirth of those damned by power.

“This dress has gotten tight on me, / gotten tight, / the more time passes / this skein tangles, / then the day comes / you get tired of it / lace up your shoes / and go, / run through the streets / fog wipes down the streets / looking for a light / a whirl”. If you don’t come from several generations of Romagnols you’ll hardly understand a word of the poem. The subtitles in Italian solve this problem. But this arcane language, material of a vernacular, of a shouting, of a lost whispering that dialogues with the instruments, acoustic and synthetic, which dictate certain curvatures, is the language-type of radical music, it sounds like a language made up of phonemes; this is what results from listening to Spadoni’s verses set to music in this singular “concerto” for three performers, orchestrated by director Marco

Martinelli.

Ermanna Montanari is like an Artaud heroine perhaps, but she is also an Albert Ayler, a Peter Brötzmann, from the scream of invectives to the restless, lyrical quiver. The musical marvels are many. When for example the two musicians (strictly speaking Ermanna is one electively) emerge from a long episode of demoniacal chaos with a modulating, suffused, spellbinding continuum.

[italian version: www.teatrodellealbe.com/archivio/LUS-Gamba.pdf]

BÊLDA AND EVIL

Luş, the Teatro delle Albe's theatre concerto

BY MASSIMO MARINO

Evil. What makes us burn with fever, suffer mumps, falling sickness, backache, asthma, rheumatism, gonorrhoea, scabies, impotence, and the deep evil in the disdainful looks cast at those who are different, in nastiness, in backbiting, in hatred. Bêlda takes them all upon herself like a burden, Bêlda the village sorceress, Bêlda the healer, Bêlda the ancient fairy who lives on the margins, questioning herbs and metals, who receives the mayor, the lawyer and the farmer by night, who assuages the evils of love, Bêlda whom everyone steers clear of by day; and this shunning seems to have twisted her body, her hands, her legs. Bêlda, "the daughter of poor Armida", the old housekeeper of the village priest, in the Sette Ville area where the Ravenna dialect gets guttural and the earth seems to tremble, shocked by the fury that runs in the veins. Bêlda curses the priest who had her mother disinterred from consecrated ground because they said she had been a whore. Vestal of a more ancient cult, she waits for him one night: with a sickle she cuts his footprint, pierces the earth, and causes him die by witchcraft, makes him pay for his inhumanity. With *Vita agli arresti di Aung San Suu Kyi* Marco Martinelli, Ermanna Montanari and their Teatro delle Albe told of the difficult art of doing good, keeping evil spirits at bay, even when you raise your voice against oppression. In *Luş* they make a journey into evil by means of the actress's native dialect.

Nevio Spadoni's poetic writing – words like stones, clods of earth, voices from a pit – finds in Ermanna Montanari the poetry of a body in descent towards the most seething strata, ready to transform into invective, into incantatory formula, into desperation for a "normal" world that evil knows mercilessly how to make. And throughout this show directed by Martinelli, disdain, suffering, the body itself become voice: slashed voice, buried voice, infernal voice, earthquake, the search for herbs, for sweetness. *Luş* is a concerto: the actress dialogues with Daniele Roccato's double-bass, roar, chthonic friction, tremor of lavas, distilled and overturned and multiplied by Luigi Ceccarelli's live electronics. It becomes percussion, tingle, obsession, halo, fist, dream, nightmare. The voice and the sounds dialogue with Margherita Manzelli's images, clots of coagulated blood, tangled masses, pupils that observe our evil eyes, noses and eyes rough-hewn from faces as if whitened by bandages. This formidable show enraptures, overwhelms, towards the final doleful spreading out of the double-bass in sweet melody, scarcely threatened by electronic echoes; and Bêlda, against blue backlighting, takes the ills of everyone upon herself; she, the last, in search of morning dew to rub on her eyes before they go blind. In search of light. Abandoned. *Luş* premièred at the Teatro delle Passioni in Modena.

[italian version: www.teatrodellealbe.com/archivio/LUS-Marino.pdf]

Witches, magic and village rumours

BY GIORDANO MONTECCHI

Many of us remember the traumatic and exalting experience of *L'isola di Alcina*, the *Concerto for horn and Romagnol voice* based on a text by Nevio Spadoni which, in 2000 at Venice, overwhelmingly drew attention to that portentous *mezcla* centred on the art of **Ermanna Montanari**, with her “verbal sculpture”, which goes beyond mere acting, inseparably fused with the sound inventions of **Luigi Ceccarelli** and the imaginative directing of **Marco Martinelli**.

That prodigious alchemical alloy returns today, and once more that magnetism is released, nailing spectators to their seats, while the voice, the music and the set bring to life an overpowering dramaturgy in which you hardly have to understand the words: musical theatre in the pure state, quintessential, which communicates, impassions, strikes in its entirety. The new chapter is entitled *Lus*, which is Romagnol for *Light*.

Ermanna Montanari and Luigi Ceccarelli, with Spadoni's words, find one of their favoured dimensions in this burning synergy. Over everything the incessant mesmeric power of the female creature: magical, demoniacal and outcast, sculpted by means of an inexhaustible modulation of vocal and discursive tones and registers, from the intimate to the furious, from the quivering to the ferocious, from the tormented to the sulphurous. Yesterday Alcina, today Bêlda “*the daughter of poor Armida*” and therefore of a line of sorceresses and magic, between mythology and village rumours, allegorical metamorphosis of the dramas of violence and isolation of which the culture (and life) of common people is full.

Ermanna Montanari's voice moulds, transfigures verbal material into an authentic score of ineffable agogic dynamics and variegations. And it is on this invisible, irresistible score that Luigi Ceccarelli grafts and interweaves his sounds, indeed his music – because this is what we are dealing with – exalting it in an authentic coupling in which the music does not exhibit itself narcissistically (how many music-word associations, today as yesterday, fall into this worse than sterile display: deleterious!) but penetrates, bestows, empowers, illuminates with total dedication.

In *Alcina* Ceccarelli's raw material was the sound of a horn processed electronically, whereas in *Lus* there is an added value: the great Daniele Roccato, on stage with his double-bass whose instrumental excellence enters into the diabolical alembic of the live electronics masterfully handled by Ceccarelli, amalgamating with the material of the pre-recorded soundtrack.

Bêlda, daughter of poor Armida, sorceress, witch, prostitute, assassin, madwoman, but above all victim of prejudice and the most abject respectability, recounts, recounts like a torrent now dried up, now foaming revenge. In the embrace between this ancestral vocal score and the bewitching, technological virtuosity of the musical power of Ceccarelli and Roccato, musical theatre has written a new and admirable chapter.