A dramatic black and white photograph of a woman singing. She has dark hair pulled back and is wearing a dark, high-collared garment. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is open as if she is singing. A single white flower, possibly a lily, is held in her right hand near her chest. The lighting is low, creating strong highlights on her face and the flower, while the background is dark.

Ermanna Montanari

To the voice for  
the north face

Ermanna Montanari  
**To the voice for  
the north face**

The north face is the part of the mountain covered in shadow, the desert-like part, the most difficult to climb, the steepest, that requires a daily practice in order to be touched and explored, to become a vocation.

## ERMANNA MONTANARI



**Ermanna Montanari**, actress, author and set designer, founded the Teatro delle Albe (1983) with Marco Martinelli, sharing its artistic direction. Loved by great artists and writers, including Susan Sontag and Gianni Celati, for her work as actress-author, and for an extraordinary itinerary of vocal research, she has received prestigious acknowledgements: four Ubu Prizes (the Oscars of Italian theatre) as “best actress” and “best curatorial project” for *Inferno*; the Golden Laurel at the international Festival Mess in Sarajevo; the Lo straniero Prize “dedicated to the memory of Carmelo Bene”; the Eleonora Duse Prize; the Prize of the Associazione Nazionale Critici di Teatro and the Vereinigung Deutsch-Italienischer Kultur Gesel- Ischaften cultural award. In 2011 she took over artistic direction of the international Festival of Santarcangelo. She writes for national and international magazines. In 2017 she published a book of short stories *Miniature Campionesi* by Oblomov Editore. In 2012 Titivillus published the artistic biography by Laura Mariani, *Ermanna Montanari: fare disfare rifare nel Teatro delle Albe* (in 2017 also an English edition *Do, undo, do over. Ermanna Montanari in Teatro delle Albe*). In the same year Quodlibet published a book edited by Enrico Pitzo titled *Acusma Figura e voce nel teatro sonoro di Ermanna Montanari* (Italian/English edition). In relation to her vocal research, CDs are available of *L'isola di Alcina* and *Ouverture Alcina* (Ravenna Teatro), *La Mano* and *Rosvita* (Luca Sossella Editore).

“Seeing Ermanna Montanari recite is something that anyone with an attraction towards the arts (or towards a bodily mysticism) should do at least once in their life. It’s a bit like seeing Maradona or Federer play; perhaps something like what it must have been like to watch Rudolf Nureyev perform. But I never had the chance to see Nureyev. I did see Maradona: out of this world. With Ermanna Montanari, something similar happened. She is one of the greatest actress of our time, not only in Italy. There’s something magical about her partnership with Marco Martinelli, who for years has been inventing, writing and directing the performances in which she plays the leading role.”

**Nicola Lagioia**, Internazionale, December 7, 2014

## ERMANNA MONTANARI

*Campionesi Miniatures*, Oblomov Edizioni, 2016, pp. 96 - 98

In the farmhouse I lived in as a child there was a room on the ground floor, always kept closed, called "la câmbra da rizévar", the receiving room. To furnish it, my grandfather had to sell the finest milk cow in his barn. The room was opened only twice a year, at Easter and Christmas, to welcome our relatives, all gotten up in their clumsy Sunday finery. We sat on chairs still covered in their original plastic and kept our eyes low to avoid seeing ourselves in the mirrors. The receiving room was stubbornly blind and fantastically seductive to my infantile curiosity. It was the resonating chamber where all the voices of nature eddied: the sing-song of the laborers in the fields, the lowing of the cattle in the barns, and the continuous stirring of food cooking. Inside that room, all the day's crossings were transformed into night. The receiving room became my hiding place. Without being seen, I could entrust it with all my vocal adventures and all the disguises that began to take shape within that place. A dark place, dense with lurking dangers. My mother caught me talking to myself and asked me, "Mo' cs'a fét a lè, da par te?" "What are you doing in there all by yourself?" "Va fura a' e sôl, va a zughêr" "Go out in the sun and play!". I now think that all the varied characters in my repertoire as an actor must have been born there; that room was their cradle.

When I was twenty I married Marco Martinelli, left Campiano and started doing theatre. I said goodbye to my large patriarchal family, my childhood as a girl with a boy's name, and their idea of beauty. Or rather, nothing could be more untrue. I thought I abandoned all of that. Campiano still gripped me powerfully, every time I breathed out a word or made a gesture, and my works began with this annoying feeling. Campiano is the light that devastates me. Even though I'd rather have nothing to do with it, it comes back to life time and time again and finds a hole it can slip into. Mandiaye N'Diaye, a man ready and willing to change the world, with whom Marco and I shared our theatrical adventures for many years, led us to discover his Africa. His village, Diol Kadd, resonated with mine, Campiano. There too, midday ghosts would appear, the ones that come out in daylight. In that light, south of the desert, the colour of our skin became opaque, our sight became dark, our eyes narrowed. I spoke with Mandiaye about this unbelievably magnetic irradiation, and he told me about the first day of the Muslim year: people cover their eyelids with a coloured dust, and then when the sun is high in the sky and starts to become incandescent, they look at it. Inside the sun, the figure of a woman appears, Fatima, who washes the clothes and hangs them up to dry, then goes back to washing, and hanging up, and so on, continuously [...]. In Diol Kadd, Mandiaye and I traced a boundary in the sand with a stick, to mark off the place for music and dancing. It was an impromptu theatre, and yet so tangible, so concrete. The locals recognised this, and gathered around it. A place for vision had been created: it was another cradle, an outdoor receiving room, in the heart of the Senegalese savannah. Travelling around the world for all these years, for me, has been a way to rediscover this "room" everywhere: on the precious wood stages in traditional Italian theatres, on the concrete and

cast iron stages in New York warehouses, in the foyer of a white colonial building in Tunisia and in the stables in Mons, among the people's houses in Berlin with their opalescent windows and the catacombs in Monreale, among the decrepit terraces in Cairo and the glaringly white walls of the "royal theatre" in Teheran, in the hall of the Power Station of Art in Shanghai and in the castle of Calitri, in Scampia's Auditorium, in the Rotonda of San Tomè, in the medieval apse in Teatro Rasi, and thousands of yet other places.

## ENRICO PITOZZI

*Akousma - Figure and voice in the acoustic theatre of Ermanna Montanari*, Quodlibet Studio, 2017, pp. 13 - 16

"But what exactly can be revealed on a theatre stage? Nothing but the «nature of things»: this seems to be the answer of Ermanna Montanari. Nature, in this case, is not just the sum of the visible elements and is not something given once and for all. Rather, it is the result of a series of deep and invisible relationships among things, organised according to the principle of *silent transformations* (Jullien 2015, 135-143): small changes operating inside the world, in latency, and whose effect is visible only at the end, when reality and its multiple forms are seen as an event to be perceived [...].

In the work of Ermanna Montanari, the stage is like a point where the infinitely big (i.e. the cosmos) and the infinitely small (i.e. subatomic matter) converge so as to take on a visible and audible form. In this way, theatre presents the things of the world under a different light, according to a deeper sensibility that involves intuitions and ideas typical of philosophy or mysticism, as well as the realm of science. Thus, the «vision» that is etymologically implied by the term "theatre" is more precisely the act of «showing» the hidden side of the world, another face of «nature». In other words, the stage is the place where the spectator can «see» what cannot be perceived otherwise (Sicard 1998, 9-13). This makes «vision» in theatre be a principle of knowledge, exactly as happens with philosophy. The work of Ermanna Montanari - *Ouverture Alcina* and *Luş* are meaningful examples - presents the audience with a modality to approach the perception of the world in a different way. What is *seen* on stage is literally what *cannot usually be seen*, because it presents a slight difference, a sort of discrepancy that rests on a radical «suspension» of what we commonly know. In these theatrical works reality is not simply reproduced, because they investigate the mutable structure of things: in them, nothing is as it seems and nothing can be perceived the way it has always been seen. [...].

But there is also another important aspect of Montanari's work that concerns the relationship between philosophy and theatre: a particular way of dealing with the Sacred. Ritual has always been a key component of theatre, but this won't be discussed in the present study. Instead we will concentrate on an essential quality that links together scenic practice and the sacred in

the works we consider: their common tension towards the *incommensurable*. The idea of *incommensurable* refers to the fact that we can feel some features of the world's entities, we can be seduced, but we are not able to define or describe them completely [...]. In these terms, on the theatre stage, the sacred is conveyed by something *numinous*, and the mystery of *presence* is embodied by «icon-figures» like those of Fatima in *Siamo asini o pedanti?* [Are we asses or pedants?] (1989), Alcina in *L'isola di Alcina* [Alcina's Island] (2000) and *Ouverture Alcina*, or Bélda in *Luş*. On the other hand, *presence* on stage, exactly like the *numinous*, is itself incommensurable. We can experience it, talk about it, but it remains something elusive and impossible to grasp completely. [...].

Ermanna Montanari follows two main directions. The first refers to the visual features of the scene, and concerns the «figure» seen as what remains of the theatrical character, while the second direction refers to the sonic components. The figure represents the passage from the subjectivity of the character's «I» to the multitude of the «we» embodied on stage, as a manifestation of the plurality of things. In this way, it refuses the permanence of personal identity and discloses the "becoming non-human of the human". In other words, the figure reflects the desperation of humanity condemned to a finite existence and offers a glimpse of infinity. In this way, it becomes an «icon», an image that allows the spectator to «see» and perceive another part of the world. As for the sonic elements on stage, the voice of the figure names things in order to give them substance. But in such a voice the sound is predominant over the meaning of the words, over the clarity of the message. So for the figure, the speech is a chant and the voice is mainly a sound. The same applies to the "acousmatic sound" composed by musician Luigi Ceccarelli, where the voice emerges from a constant dialogue with the "organic matter" of the sound itself. [...] This idea of "acousmatic sound" comes from Pythagorean philosophy and plays a very important role in the works under discussion, because it refers to the way in which sound is able to create an immersive ambience for the spectator (Timpanaro Cardini 2010, 897-898). It refers to a precept that is 'heard' and gains value as truth, not only for the unprecedented vision of the world it discloses, but also for the form in which it is expressed, gaining its strength from the sound and the image evoked by the word. Associated with magic formulas, this word is unsettling and creates a state of wonder. The other meaning of the term, in addition to its sense as a precept, concerns the way in which sound and the voice outline an environment in which the spectator is immersed, without being able to say exactly where these sounds come from. According to such idea, Ermanna Montanari conceives the act of composing as a way to extend the visible and the audible world, to trace new linkages between conceptually distant things and create novel constellations of meanings. At the same time, in her practice, theatre is the place where invisible forces are converted into perceptible matter, so as to lead the spectator to an *unknown territory* revealed to the senses. [...] According to this context, Ermanna Montanari's theatre is also a way of producing phantoms: this doesn't mean that she invents new things, but that she is attentive and perceptive to what exists around us in a subtle way. A similar idea rests on a profound attention towards form, seen as the external manifestation of a deep power that operates inside all elements. In fact, no form is ever stable, but is the result of the composition of visual and acoustic elements: in other words, this theatre is based on a musical idea of composition."



*Maryam* - photo Enrico Fedrigoli



Ouverture *Alcina* - photo Marco Caselli Nirmal

*Lus* - photo Luca Del Pia

## DIALOGUE BETWEEN ERMANNA MONTANARI AND ENRICO PITOLINI ON SOME KEY WORDS IN TEATRO DELLE ALBE

from *Akousma - Figure and voice in the acoustic theatre of Ermanna Montanari*, Quodlibet Studio, 2017, pp. 156 and passim

### Ethics (principal of multitude)

*We earlier introduced the theme of becoming. This heading returns to highlight the importance of this theme in your way of conceiving the stage. The chorus, understood as the declension of a multiplicity that a human being inhabits, expands into the form of a community. For me, this is its ethical trait. What role does the chorus play in your lives and stage work?*

**ERMANNA MONTANARI:** In theater, the 'I' plunges into the chorus and the subject encounters its double. The one is a "here I am" of the other. This is the fundamental question. This is where the figure abides. The figure guides us to the multiple, to entry onto the stage. The actor is the other and oneself; the actor cannot help but be both monad and chorus, indissoluble. Purified of everything extra, theater takes place in the relation between self and other, the one with the one-of-a-couple, a contagious micro-community that deprives us of any preliminary certainty. And what happens in life, that which doubles theater? Over the years we have often repeated a phrase of Alfred Jarry: "When a person sees his double, he dies". We have always understood this obscure maxim to mean dying to oneself. It is an extremely demanding statement of love, because in love one dies to oneself. One opens to the other, the love with a capital L, not sentimental mush. Every day you have to choose your own "community", not according to ideology, but so as not to annul yourself in the anonymous collective face, so as not to submit to vicarious destiny. You need to be able to slap your own ego around every morning and sing a "Gloria". It can drive you crazy. It happens to me a lot.

### Space (acousmatic principle)

*Space only exists from the starting point of the figure. It doesn't precede the figure; it follows. Space is not geometry, but rather the way geometry transforms, modifies itself. Space is the way the body and other stage elements, including sound, organize themselves. The word "akousma" speaks of this quality of space. I'd like to dwell on this point: the space of the figure and the space of sound.*

**E.M.:** The space is what you hear. Before any other consideration, the space must be heard. The space is the voices that inhabit it, the voices that impose their presence by plunging into us,

into every fold of our body: the voices of the stones in the churches, the voices of the stones in the theaters, the voices of the walls in our old crumbling houses. This sonic density inhabits me; I am never alone. Often, the figure is the shattering vibration of the word in space, the impact it generates. What is more adventurous than feeling the flow of the sound of our body, our flesh rubbing against the sound of the space we're working in? From this point, we experiment with multiple expressive possibilities: breaths, cries, laughter, to dig to the bottom of the rhythm that moves us and to feel its qualities, its subtle substance. This compels us to operate by subtraction. Often, this space is terrible, it absorbs lots of energy and rankles our nerves, but this is the space we've been called upon to traverse. Isn't that so? The space often makes us uncomfortable, taking a long time to become plausible in terms of a vision of staging. Perhaps because the point of departure is a nucleus of words, the incipit of a story, an obscure intuition that asks to become visible, like an architecture of bodies in empty space. Bodies make demands on the surrounding air, which is often black.

### Voice (pneumatic principle)

*Like sound, the voice allows us to give form to something not yet audible. In this sense the body intercepts a universe of preexistent voices, to be able to give them an audible form. The body converts inaudible voices into an audible voice. The body is a resonator that gathers the voices of the world and grants them expression: that's what phoné means. How does voice become matter?*

**E.M.:** We begin with the figure of the donkey, the ass, the image-guide and "body" of Teatro delle Albe. The ass is the symbol of knowledge, with the shape of a receptive hollow, like the long ears perched on the donkey's head, like a sort of crown. Becoming an ass, becoming voice, is making one's own body into an empty space, to allow it to be made pregnant by the presence of the other. Voice opens up to the space of encounter and mantles it with presence. The drum is another key figure in our work; I'm speaking here of African talking drums, which the Wolof call *tama*. The talking drum has an hourglass shape and is held between the left arm and the body, and is beaten by the right hand holding a curved piece of wood. The left arm pushes against the cords that hold in place the membrane of the drum, made of animal gut. Some musicians can produce sounds that resemble the modulations of the human voice. The *tama* is linked to religious practice and is also used for communicating at a great distance. It calls out, and playing the talking drum is like playing the substance of the forces of nature. These guide figures – the body of the ass, the talking drum – are "luminous haloes" that prepare me to let the voice come out. That's the material part. On stage, to be able to emerge, the voice has to pass through every fold in my flesh. I have to prepare my body for its coming. There is no recipe; every work requires a specific discipline. In *Rosvita*, for example, I use a "double voice" by adopting the Mongolian technique of harmonic song. The song irradiates, the rhythm of my words collides with the Gregorian chant of the three actresses positioned on white rectangular columns. The text of *Rosvita* is so solid that I can dance within the voice and entrust myself to the rhythm dictated by the phrases of text. The words have a medieval aura, but they're put into the mouth

of a figure with the posture of a punk singer. Other times I have to stand still for days; the voice just doesn't know how to come out, it's so off-key that it has to huddle down in its den. In order to emerge, huge spaces have to be crossed, long silences, standing before the sea.

*What is the form of this voice? How does it fend the air to make space for itself?*

**E.M.**: I have often imagined the voice like a column. I don't know whether the voice sprouts from the column or vice versa, but it's a form I can see. My relation to voice is of a visual order. She – my voice – is the guide. She has the grainy air of the River Styx, its base. Ice, roiling, pollution, chaos, which I inhabit like a maenad. The soft organs take the upper hand; our black lungs demand to be sculpted. Then the voice creates statues, impurity.

*The specific territory you are marking out also concerns the register of language. I would formulate it like so: Changing language – adopting Romagnolo dialect or Wolof – so that things happen, so that phoné appears. To be a stranger to one's own language, to go far away in order to be able to touch in an intense, intimate way. Dialect functions this way: adopting another lens through which to look at reality. It's a word that needs you in order to be able to speak all the words that cross through it. Is there an iconic quality in the voice that you follow to give form to figures?*

**E.M.**: For me, dialect has that immediacy, that very beautiful characteristic that it doesn't seem made of words, but of things. The material aspect of dialect is the rhythm, the cadence, so fecund that it pulls language toward call and silence. For me dialect is the maximum expression of phoné as an *affective language*. In our work, I often construct guide images to anchor myself: the rawest of all is the nail in *Cenci* (1993). I see it and hear it; the voice crosses over it, is blocked, then aligns itself. The nail is both inside and outside. It's another way to have a microphone. In *Pantani*, the voice is anchored to a color, every incipit is a red image of the voice, a sphere thrown, the fruit of many superimposed strata. In *Sterminio (Extermination)*, 2006, for the role of Signora Cazzafuoco, the voice is the porosity of our bones. For Alcina and Bèlda, the dialect itself is the vocal icon: an oracular language of flesh that allows continuous variations. The sorceresses are not defined entities, but disquieting figures who subvert the conventional order of society, so that everything begins to slip away, fall away, decompose: one is an assassin while the other "cannot die". Dialect is a foreign language that has been somehow amputated; it doesn't possess the qualities of abstraction that would allow it to become a codified language of power. This is its strength and what makes it different, strange. For me, dialect is what is spoken by peasants and poets, the language spoken by women in church who recite the rosary in Latin with a Romagnolo cadence, a waterfall of consonants that sound like iron.

*There is an aspect here that I'd like to pick up on, which for me marks a special characteristic of your stage figures: the oracular. Alcina, Rosvita and Bèlda are all oracles in different ways. They do not consign a message; rather, they offer an invitation to a journey of metamorphosis.*

**E.M.**: That's right. Each one is a stranger within her own language, each is queen of a subterra-

nean disquiet, each has a feverish body, each is profoundly herself, but also sister. If you look at all the figures I've made, they would compose a completely new work.

*Following on these reflections, I return to the idea contained in works like Siamo asini o pedanti?, the way of thinking of the body as an intercessor for pre-existent voices. Listening to the voices of the world and letting them flow...*

**E.M.**: In *Siamo asini o pedanti?*, at a certain point in the play, Fatima, the hermaphrodite donkey, is spoken. Something runs through her: Fatima reaches out her arms as though to impose silence, and in an invented language she becomes the doorway through which passes a sung litany, whose meaning even she cannot understand. But it's so clear: it's an invocation to cure the ills of the world that afflict her African vendors. It is a flow that is in her but does not fully belong to her, made of Wolof-Romagnolo-Latin sounds enchain together.

*There is a (p)neumatic aspect in vocal practice I would like to bring up in relation to this idea of being spoken by voices. The neuma – νεύμα in Greek – sign, gesture, but also πνεύμα: blowing, breath, or ύμνος: melody, melodic formula – speak to us of the written sign used to mark the respiratory accent of religious song and, in the specific case of Gregorian chant, the neuma sign marks the various notes that join in a single syllable. We speak of monosonic neuma when a syllable corresponds to a single musical note, or of polysonic neuma when multiple notes coincide in a single syllable. Thus my question: do the three levels of voice that you pass through correspond to three particular notes? Do these notes, these vocal levels, implicate a relation with becoming animal?*

**E.M.**: These levels correspond to extremely low notes, a relaxation of the vocal chords to the point that they swoon and are no longer able to emit sound. Unmeasurable notes.

**Zenith** (principle of hope)

*In celestial observation, especially in astronomy, the zenith is the imaginary point directly above the head of the observer. The diametrically opposed point is called the nadir. Zenith and nadir are called the horizon poles. Thus we come around again, in a perfect circle, to alchemy, to the transmutation of things, and to the ultimate meaning of being human: to take account of the infinitely large in the cosmos and the infinitely small of subatomic matter. Is theater a way of taking account of all this?*

**E.M.**: Theater is the invocation of a perfect ear with which to perceive our own vocation, and to answer that call melodiously.



photo Claire Pasquier



photo Claire Pasquier

## LAURA MARIANI

*DO, UNDO, DO OVER - Ermanna Montanari in Teatro delle Albe,*  
Titivillus, 2017, pp. 21 - 51

### An Art couple

I have encountered two particular difficulties while writing this book about Ermanna Montanari. The first concerns the impossibility of separating her experience and history from that of Marco Martinelli, her playwright, director, and partner from the beginning of their shared career. The second derives from the brilliance with which both describe themselves and their theatre work: why add more words to their own, which are so concise and gravid, so animated by the special intelligence born of their work on stage? Between the two there is a clear distinction in their areas of artistic control and responsibility: Marco writes and directs, sometimes designs the lights, and sometimes performs; Ermanna, the actress, designs sets and costumes, and sometimes serves as playwright and director. The formula they use to describe this is "ideation by Marco Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari". This is the foundation and nucleus of that "alchemical process" that characterizes their mode of theatrical creation and storytelling. It is partially mysterious, but we can discern the rational, quotidian and practical rationale behind it. We find this aspect of their relationship discussed in the volume *Dialoghi in cucina* [Kitchen Dialogues], a record of seven dialogues that took place during rehearsals, between September 8 and November 31, 1998, culminating in the debut of their play *I Polacchi* [The Poles, derived from Jarry's *Ubu Roi*] at Teatro Rasi, their home theater in Ravenna.<sup>1</sup> "In that limbo between the late hour of waking and the inevitable setting-out for the restaurant", Ermanna and Marco debate the details of the spectacle they are preparing, comment on rehearsals, examine the obstacles they've run into, imagine solutions, and share mental images. The discussion is very concrete, so much so that the reader could track their dialogues to specific rehearsals, watching each change tried out on stage: does it work or not? Wishing to reconstruct the dialectic between the two of them, each clearly distinct from the other, and avoiding the foolish temptation to attribute reason to one and emotion to the other, on the part of Ermanna we find: deep rurality (her native village of Campiano), dialect, the primacy of the visual, encyclopedic reading, the need for "a room of one's own",<sup>2</sup> progress in leaps, an attraction to the archaic and the mysterious, and verticality. On the part of Marco: an urban

apartment (he was born in the city of Reggio Emilia), Italian language, the primacy of writing, systematic readings, the pleasures of the city square, an artisan's patience, contemporaneity, lightness, and horizontality.

There is a Borges story that Ermanna has pointed out as a key into her world, *Story of the Warrior and the Captive*. Two figures mirror one another: on one side, the medieval barbarian warrior Droctulf who, enchanted by the city of Ravenna which he has come to conquer, abandons the invading army and joins the fray to defend Ravenna's "multiplicity without disorder". The mirror image emerges in a tale Borges presents as autobiographical: His grandmother met an Englishwoman in Buenos Aires who had been kidnapped by Indians and wed to the tribe's chieftain. Rather than seeking to escape back to the city, the Englishwoman assimilated to the tribe so totally that, before the very eyes of Borges' grandmother, she threw herself to the ground to drink the warm blood of a slaughtered lamb. Both characters were driven by "a secret impulse, deeper than reason [...] which they would have been unable to justify". The figure is that of the convert, and seems to evoke Ermanna and her radical separation<sup>3</sup> from Campiano, which nevertheless continues to fuel her vision, and her irresistible attraction to the city and to theater as an instrument for governing disorder and "being one's own time".<sup>4</sup>

Thus with Montanari and Martinelli we find ourselves well outside the mythology of the goddess muse who inspires the artist, or that of the docile actress in the hands of the Demiurge director. "We keep the rubber band in continuous vibration", says Ermanna, "I attribute to Marco a particular predisposition in this sense: a capacity to see. To give vibration a form and sustain it. I don't have this ability, at least not at the same level. I do have it as regards to space, but not as precise, not measurable in millimeters. It's hard for me to envision the stage as though; I'm always dealing with a fracture, an interstices, with something that at first seems a defeat. Everything has to go through rehearsal; a space seems to work in my head, but then it doesn't work at all. From there, from that failure, we start over again".<sup>5</sup> For his part, Martinelli has often declared his debt to Ermanna: "Ermanna has always been a master teacher to me, [...] she has taught me the patient, suffering stage body that displays its wounds and makes you both laugh and cry". As a creator of stage space, he says, she has been "my eyes".<sup>6</sup> Their alchemical process involves every artifice of the spectacle, starting from this first cell, which is why Martinelli defines himself, with anti-authoritarian intent, as a director of directors, a sort of post-director, as against the figure of a playwright-director who prefers the so-called Theater of Words. The two constitute an art couple: no one can doubt Ermanna's autonomy or the quantitative and qualitative weight of her contribution, and the same goes for Marco.<sup>7</sup> She has developed this autonomy thanks to the path she has pursued within Teatro delle Albe, by

1. In «Teatro e Storia», 20-21, 1998-99, 230-244.

2. The expression is borrowed of course from Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own* alludes to the priority, for women who wish to write and think, of having the essential material conditions, specifically a room to write in, which would have been a rare fortune when the book was written, in 1929.

3. The story appears in *Aleph*.

4. The expression comes from actor Erland Josephson, who appeared in numerous films by Ingmar Bergman: "the great actors, the best ones, do not represent their times, they are their times". V. Monaco Westerståhl, ed., *Memorie di un attore*, Bulzoni, Rome, 2002, 157.

5. Enrico Pitzozzi, *Il principio della forma. Conversazione con Marco Martinelli ed Ermanna Montanari*, «art'O», 30, 2011, 51.

6. Gerardo Guccini, *Il pellegrinaggio continua. Conversazione con Marco Martinelli*, in «Prove di drammaturgia», 2, December 1998, 14, 20.

7. Maria Dolores Pesce prefers to speak of "a dyad, in the sense rather of duality that of a couple". M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, M. D. Pesce, "Per un teatro impuro", in *Teatro Akropolis. Testimonianze ricerca azioni*, Edizioni Akropolis Libri e Le Mani, Genoa 2012, 138-155.

not always remaining within Marco's vision. Her complex path entails the conflict between her intimate relation with Campiano and the use Marco makes of that relation. She can be a protagonist alongside other protagonists, without psychological submission and without being put on a pedestal as a Muse-figure. Theater demands an interweaving of minds and bodies, professionalism and vision, into a unity of intention based on difference. The subordination of one gender to another would obstruct her very life, which thrives on encounters and clashes.

My second difficulty, mentioned above, has authorized me to give in to the temptation of citation, following the great example of Benjamin's *Passages*<sup>8</sup>, and in homage to my own craft of exploring documentary sources concerning the actors of the past, while creating new ones. The discovery of Montanari and Martinelli's early writings produces interesting results even beyond the sheer pleasure of reading them. He is unquestionably the writer of the two, and author of many of the texts they have performed, all born in tight contact with stage practice and the actors who incarnate the words he fixes on the page. Rereading the early works today, many years after having first seen them performed on stage, I find that they stand well on their own. Martinelli is also a very capable *raconteur*, whether in written or spoken form, of the story of the Albe. We might say that Martinelli has created a lot of theater in the form of a book.<sup>9</sup> Ermanna has struggled to find words of her own and pronounce them publicly, a common experience of many actresses, for example Nagel Rasmussen, who described the difficulty in *Le mute del passato*.<sup>10</sup> Ermanna learned to speak Italian only at the age of six, when she first began to attend school; her mother tongue is the dialect of Campiano. As a child, she was ashamed of her peasant origins, and refused to acknowledge about herself what she calls "the stink of Campiano". Only later was she able to recognize that origin as a source of nourishment and spark of her own creativity. As an actress, she has experienced the physical difficulty that words suffer to come out of her mouth, a phenomenon familiar to many women but that, for an artist, signals the conquest of an artistic identity, the achievement of a voice that passes consciously through the body before materializing as an efficacious, vibrant theatrical word. The same difficulty exists for the word pronounced outside the stage that must transfer itself onto the written page. Like the other women in her family, Ermanna inherited from her peasant father the command never to speak unless you have something to say and the exact words to express it in.

Her writings sometimes elaborate ideas and phrases worked out together with Marco Martinelli, but the secret rhythm (to cite the expression by the early feminist writer Sibilla Aleramo) is always unmistakably her own. Reading and rereading her pages, one finds they possess the same magnetism that she has on stage, producing that peculiar sensation of wondrous fami-

liarity that one feels reading letters and documents of the great actresses of the past. Most of what she has published has been in answer to the requests of others to describe her work process, to speak about Campiano and dialect, about her voice work, the perception she has of the body, the characters she has created... But in a letter to literary scholar Marco Belpoliti, she complained of being constrained to repeat herself:

I'm so boring. And so easily readable. Always the same things for years, and yet I keep at it. I tire out but keep insisting. I repent and keep on. You know, I'd like to answer you in bold type: I've forgotten everything, I'm somewhere else now. But I have nowhere to run away to, there's no escape, I do not possess the divine art of forgetting. The figures I've given form to in my work are full of the discomfort caused by memory.<sup>11</sup>

Words written as though bitten into her own flesh, the way her character Rosvita does in the 1991 spectacle of that name, a powerful representation of the actress's approach to composition for the stage. The power of her writing comes from the way performers, those who "re-present", are compelled to repeat themselves, and from a metaphorical reference both to painting and sculpture. The marks on the white page take shape in a two-dimensional rectangle, becoming ever more precise but never losing the slight tremble of the writing hand, as the words describe their own space, it too controlled by the hand. Two - and three - dimensionality are both necessary: the first appears to be born from an exquisitely aesthetic choice, while the second comes from theatrical practice, from sensitivity to materials, volumes, passages and the presence of the body itself (on stage just as on the page). The allusion to sculpture recalls, on one hand, an actress who was also a sculptress, Sarah Bernhardt, and, on the other, Louise Bourgeois and her "immobile, indigestible" puppet dolls, "abandoned on small iron stands in large empty museum rooms full of vague gazes".<sup>12</sup> Much more recently, Ermanna seems finally to have given in to the pleasure of telling stories, as in *La piana dei kadd*, an actress's diary of the experience of creating the spectacle entitled *Ubu buur* in Senegal, where the words come to life from a body shaken by the earthquake-encounter with African difference. Her reaction to Africa was similar to Martinelli's, of course, although Martinelli's memoir of the experience dwelt more on painful critical and political reflection, facets of the experience of less interest to Ermanna.<sup>13</sup>

There are several key moments in this artistic dialectic as it has developed and modified over time: in 1977, the couple's decision to do theater; in 1986, the first mature spectacle, *Confine* [Border]; in 1993, the landmark *Cenci* [derived from Artaud's play]; and in 2010 the company's

8. Walter Benjamin, *I 'passages' di Parigi*, R. Tiederman, E. Ganni, eds, Einaudi, Turin 2007.

9. I refer here to the formula proposed by F. Taviani in *Uomini di scena uomini di libro. Introduzione alla letteratura teatrale italiana del Novecento*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1995.

10. I. Nagel Rasmussen, *Le mute del passato*, in *Il cavallo cieco. Dialoghi con Eugenio Barba e altri scritti*, Bulzoni, Roma 2006, pp. 171-180. Iben also described her close, sustained collaboration with "her" director, Eugenio Barba, in their company, Odin Teatret, which she describes as having "a woman's soul".

11. Letter, E. Montanari to M. Belpoliti, January 27 1995, in *Riga*, 8, 1995, 47.

12. E. Montanari, *Un metro cubo d'eternità. «Lo straniero»*, 32, February 2003, 38.

13. E. Montanari, M. Martinelli, *Teatro delle Albe. Suburbia. Molti Ubu in giro per il pianeta*, 1998-2008. Ubilibri, Milan, 2008. See the interview with Ermanna, 69-82, and the one with Martinelli, "Gli occhi del gatto", 17-23.

adaptation of Molière's *The Miser*. Ermanna's theatrical adventure began in a pivotal year of political struggle, when the couple eloped, married, and formed "Teatro dell'Arte Maranathà", which they renamed first "Linea Maginot", in 1981, and then, in '83, the "Albe di Verhaeren", which was when the four founders first came together (Ermanna, Marco, Luigi Dadina and Marcella Nonni). In 1988 they became "Teatro delle Albe", their numbers soon increased by the addition of actors from Senegal.

Ermanna's passion for theater was born at Marco's side, sharing school desks at the Liceo Classico (the public high school centered on Ancient Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies) of the city of Ravenna. The two voracious teenagers nourished one another on reading, sharing artistic infatuations, theater workshops, performances, and experimentation in a decade-long apprenticeship. Their radical, self-guided education defined their reciprocal vocations over time. Over the course of developing four crucial roles, Ermanna came to recognize her vocation for acting: Maria in *Woyzeck*, Raffé in *Confine*, Rosvita in *Rosvita*, and Beatrice in *Cenci*.<sup>14</sup>

The last of these works established a new equilibrium regarding both research and the work process, transforming individual achievements into the shared patrimony of the couple. Marco's writing rose to a new level with *Bonifica [Reclamation]*,<sup>15</sup> while Ermanna's performance in *Confine* signaled the arrival of a significant new presence in the realm of Italian "New Theater". Mutually conceived and directed by Marco (who also performed in it), *Confine* was the first full expression of Ermanna's world, and the testing ground of her autonomy as an actress. A new dialectic took shape in which Marco sought a "plurilingual stage" that would weave languages and dialects together as "different instruments in a single orchestra", including Senegalese Wolof and the teenage slang of the company's *non-scuola* [Non-School] pedagogical projects.<sup>16</sup> As roles, Ermanna took on "a sequence of phantoms who displayed their wounded bodies, from Rosvita [...] to little Clairon ('It takes so much study to cease being oneself!') to Eleonora Duse, the incandescent Figure-Theater", and thus contributed to the flowering of the company's aesthetic principle of the "politttttico, not from the viewpoint of the narrator, but from that of the body of the actor who inspires the telling".<sup>17</sup>

Above all, and more and more, Ermanna followed her own extremely personal path, spreading out from her childhood and the countryside where she was born: places and people, images, sounds and odors, pleasure and anguish, attitudes and memories that constitute the genetic magma from which she forges her own theatrical imaginary and the sonic matter of her voice. This primeval magma was inescapable – as was her need to conceive of herself as an artist rather than a simple actress – and with this molten matter she set to work with implacable professionalism, along with her director and companions in the company. The following passage

recalls her work on *Cenci*, tracing a path in which emotional memory led to the theatrical present and the assumption of an authorial function:

When I did *Confine*, I played Raffé, a famished creature, the lowest of the low, who struggled against invisible angels, shouting out her hunger for love, screaming "like a flying fish at the crest of the waves", on a uterus-stage made of agricultural netting. My maternal grandmother was there: a furious, impassioned woman. Small and frail, with a large nose and dark eyes and hair. Illiterate, she spoke no Italian [...]. She loved to gaze down wells and went around with her hair wet. Raffé in *Confine* had her fury. My other grandmother, on my father's side, [...] was big and fat, sometimes close to a hundred kilos. I stole a certain way of saying words from her, a sort of sing-song. From her I learned how to be on stage, faking height and imposing a presence that is not mine. I have thought of her in almost all the works written by Marco, from the Mother in *Ruh* to the mother-donkey in *Siamo asini o pedanti?* [Are We Asses or Pedants?], to Daura in *Bonifica* and *Refrattari* [The Refractory Ones]. These figures of mothers resemble my grandmother, poetic figures, fantastic animals, [...] *Rosvita* is an orphan work. In that piece, my grandmothers are in my head rather than in my gestures.<sup>18</sup>

Over a year ago I decided to work on the love between father and daughter. The desire to do this work wasn't born casually or suddenly; it was something I'd been carrying for a while, an orgy of sensations that hadn't found an outlet in words and theatrical actions, something too intimate perhaps, that blocked me from seeing; from seeing myself on stage with a slanderous body. The decision to realize a stage composition on this love passion coincided with the death of my paternal grandfather, the great patriarch of my peasant family. His death liberated the images that my body and mind had been carrying inside, wounded, for years. [...]. My grandfather was obsessed with words *that were exactly those*, he scansioned them out, pronounced them slowly, and when they came out they were like millstones; they created a sacred void when he spoke. I have modelled my voice on that sound. [...]. I had no words and I was seeking them. Finally I found them – so I believed – in the story of the *Cenci*.<sup>19</sup>

Ermanna Montanari transported that story of rape and blood in a noble family in the Renaissance into the story of a family of farmers where violence manifests itself as the law of the father and the submission of mother and daughter. Marco Martinelli entered into this creative short-circuit in a double role as director and actor, with a professional manner that displaced

14. See the chronology on the Teatro delle Albe website.

15. *Bonifica, polittico in sette quadri*, Esseggi, Ravenna, 1991, republished in Marco Martinelli, *Teatro impuro*, Danilo Montanari Editore, Ravenna, 1997.

16. After the first two labs conducted in Ravenna high schools by Marco and Maurizio Lupinelli, from 1991 on, this pedagogical activity expands and names itself *non-scuola*, because they do not pretend to teach theater, but to create occasions for play and sweat with adolescents, who are approached as phenomena of non-domesticated nature. Each year 400 students perform on stage with 5000 more to witness and cheer.

17. "Teatro politttttico" was invented by Martinelli and Montanari at the "Teatro e politica" conference organized by Giuseppe Bartolucci in Narni in 1987. The text of the manifesto was first published in M. Martinelli, ed., *Ravenna Africana*, Esseggi, Ravenna, 1988, 35; then in E. Montanari, "Politttttical theatre", in *The Open Page*, 3, 1998, 18-23; and in B. Alfonszetti, D. Quarta, M. Saulini, eds, *Granteatro. Omaggio a Franca Angelini*, Bulzoni, Rome, 2002, 493. The term also appeared in *Il Patalogo* 9, 1986, 238, under the rubric 'Romagna', composed by Renata Molinari.

18. E. Montanari, "Per *Rosvita*", in *Rosvita*, Esseggi, Ravenna, 1992, 17-18.

19. E. Montanari, *Figlia e attrice*, «Lapis», 20, December 1993, 44-46.



Va pensiero - photo Sara Colciago



L'Avaro - photo Tommaso Le Pera

psychological interpretations and private ramifications to re-affirm the primacy of the stage:

No one could play Francesco Cenci but Marco. Marco, who couldn't be more distant from the classic iconography of that character. Marco, husband, writer and director, who had shared with me all that confusion of feelings that comes from ties of love, who had shared both stage and life with me for sixteen years. He wasn't to perform *my* Francesco: he already was that. Skinny and dark just like my grandfather. A short-circuit: father, lover, director, with a loving, ferocious stare and a clear, sure voice that feels like song. We're the same age. In the past, he had been the one to propose characters and stage creatures to me from his texts; this time I was the one to see him as Francesco. I wanted his presence on stage. We directed each other in turn: his Gregorian chant and my stammering, his equilibrium and my imbalance, his firmness and my corrosion. Marco, who so loves words in theater, agreed to test himself in an unaccustomed terrain, to construct a scenic score made principally of silence, of bodies, an atmosphere to breathe in. Few words, *but exactly those*.<sup>20</sup>

*Cenci* was produced not by Teatro delle Albe on its own but by the Ravenna Teatro cooperative, an umbrella organization that oversees a major part of the city's cultural programming. In 1991 Teatro delle Albe had been asked to manage Ravenna Teatro, and thus establish the calendars for both of the city's two most important civic theaters, Teatro Rasi and Teatro Dante Alighieri. The responsibility projected the company into a new dimension, requiring different abilities and perspectives, but also the continuation of their values. Some in the realm of New Theater didn't understand the company's choice to accept the new duties, but the leap demonstrated Martinelli's artistic maturity as well as his and his collaborators' political skills. At the same time, the change raised new questions for Ermanna as actress. She had always required an intimate authenticity, passing through the delicate narrows of a creative process that translated a nearly uncontrollable interior magma into highly formalized, non-autobiographical theatrical forms. To resolve this dilemma, a double path was delineated within the company's unified repertory: a "comic-choral" path and a "tragic-solitary" path, within a "sauna both hot and cold, between chorus and monad".<sup>21</sup> Ermanna participates fully in both these directions, but the second of the two undoubtedly sustains her more.

Ermanna's two-year appointment as Artistic Director of the Santarcangelo Festival, covering the preparatory year of 2010 and the festival in 2011, represented yet another clear turning point. She chose not to include any of her own performances in the festival program, while

Marco was recruited to run his huge *Heresy of Happiness* pedagogical project with 200 adolescents he gathered from previous versions of the company's *non-scuola*. Both have created significant individual work: Ermanna has performed *Ouverture Alcina* from New York to Moscow, and won her third prestigious Premio Ubu award as best actress for her reading-concert, *Rosvita*.<sup>22</sup> Marco has made pedagogy into an art, winning a Premio Ubu and a Hystrio-Altre Muse Award for his three-year Punta Corsara project with teenagers in the Scampia housing project in Naples, while his plays have been produced internationally.<sup>23</sup> Ravenna Teatro, with offices at the company's home theater, Teatro Rasi, is fully staffed with an experienced, long-term team of skilled administrators.

In 2010, a new spectacle marked yet a new turning point, in demonstration of Aristophanes' propitiatory warning that "the game turns heavy": a version of Molière's *The Miser*, with Marco as director and Ermanna in the lead role. The two have declared repeatedly that this work plunged their relationship into crisis. I had underestimated the seriousness of this statement, taking it as the quibble of an indestructible couple, but the anecdote spilled from the merely private into the public sphere. It was the first time Teatro delle Albe had taken on a classic play and performed it to the letter (almost), in the fine translation by Cesare Garboli, and a grand role, whose shadings are certainly subject to interpretation from performer to performer, but a stage character who lives an independent life, one greater than any confusion provoked by a mere shift in sexual identity.

In her personification of Molière's miser, Harpagon, Ermanna ventured far from the roles she had invented, the ones that she refers to not as characters but as "figures", a term taken from Erich Auerbach's studies of Dante, where it evokes the idea that every individual refers back to an original incarnation and fulfills that which was prefigured.<sup>24</sup> Both are real figures, therefore, and prefigurations of something else, which in Ermanna's creations become powerful receptacles, shaped by emotions and stories, who express themselves through paradoxical, carnal abstractions, and in whom the dominant voice bends the mute body to its will; in Renata Molinari's words, "something greater than a character, not of a symbolic but perhaps an archetypal nature, which fully belongs neither to the text nor the actress, but constitutes a terrain of encounter".<sup>25</sup> Further key elements in this production were Martinelli's love for Molière's words and the desire to stage a large-scale spectacle with many characters, and to put both new and familiar actors to the test around the central pole of Ermanna. This sort of relationship between Ermanna and the other actors was not a new one for the company, but in the past it had been put into play only with Marco's own writings or freely adapted classic texts, "brought back to life". In these productions, the process had always been to empty out the text, "becau-

20. *Ibidem*.

21. F. Montanino, ed., *Monade e coro. Conversazioni con Marco Martinelli*, cit., 33.

22. The list of Ermanna and the company's awards can be found on the Teatro delle Albe website at the link "Vanitas Vanitatum", including the Mess 2013 Award in Sarajevo for *I Palacchi*, both for Martinelli as director and Montanari as best actress.

23. *Rumore di acque*, for example, has been translated into English, French, and German, respectively by Thomas Simpson, Jean-Paul Manganaro and Elisabeth Gut.

24. In his classic 1929 work, Auerbach states that "figure" has the same root as the Italian word "fingere" (to pretend), "figulus", "factor" and "effigies", and originally signified, "plastic formation". Terence is the first to use the term, when he describes a young girl as "nova figura oris" (a singular form of face).

25. L. Mariani, *Fili tra teatro e vita. Il laboratorio di Renata Molinari*, «Lapis», 28, December, 1995, 47-49. Molinari's lab, held in Ravenna from May 2-9, 1995, was one of the principal initiatives of "Language of the Goddess", a working space for actresses conceived and curated by Ermanna Montanari. To be further discussed later in this book.

se at first the dialogues are an *authoritarian impediment* to be swept away". Only after having reduced the monument to pieces can the work be rebuilt anew.<sup>26</sup>

In her work on *The Miser*, the text and character provoked a conflict in the actress within herself, a dynamic peculiar to her art: How to conform her own process of creation with the materiality of the character of Harpagon and with his identity within the excruciatingly normal petit-bourgeois society that surrounds him? Certainly, the figure (more even than the character) of Harpagon could be re-activated out of the genetic magma with which the actress develops her work: he could be basically a farmer-patriarch fixated not on his money-box but on his safe/house, a patriarch hostile toward useless words and irritated by noise, as avid and uncontrollable as Jarry's Mère Ubu. But the path leading to the music of the final composition seemed incompatible with the precious cage envisaged by Molière and the clamor he created of family and servants, each moving in their own direction, multiplying the level of distraction. The impasse lasted late into the rehearsal process, involving the entire company;<sup>27</sup> and we shall examine the outcome in the upcoming chapter that discusses cross-dressing. In sum, the spectacle was marked by "diversity", according to photographer Tommaso Le Pera, who included the Albe's *Miser* in a photo book about Molière. Le Pera was as "fascinated" by Ermanna's restrained, elegant Harpagon as by the ensemble of actors, who arranged themselves on stage like "already perfect photographic compositions".<sup>28</sup>

Alchemy: this is the key word used by the protagonists themselves to talk about their work process. The function of directing is not a weaving that "is planned out sitting at a table. It is a living organism that creates itself and transforms over time", as Martinelli described the composition of *La mano*:

Listening to Ermanna's "voices" and suggesting to (composer Luigi) Ceccarelli to take inspiration from her, to "take note", listening to Ceccarelli's compositions and asking Ermanna to orient herself around that imposing music, asking Roberto (Magnani) to exhaust himself on that earthquake of sounds, putting (set and costume designer Edoardo) Sanchi in direct contact with (lighting designer Vincent) Longuemare, because there is no "first the set and then the lights", but only progress together "without envy": the light is space, the space suggests the lights. The task of the alchemist falls to me, asking myself to listen to everyone before I ask the others to, and weaving together not matter, but masteries. People.<sup>29</sup>

Ermanna, for her part, describes her work process, filling notebooks such as the one for *Cenci*

which we will soon examine, in this way:

I proceed following flickering lights, like a diviner. I write everything, in every way, under every form. This matter finds a place in a notebook. I proceed by superimposition, stratification. I write what arrives. The arrival is decisive. Things that arrive are not looked-for. Thus arrive dreams; I write them, I transcribe them; at least what remains of them. Then arrive the visions, lightning bolts, colors! Or images, like a window torn out: I photograph it and put it in the notebook together with other images.<sup>30</sup>

For example, the work on *Rumore di acque* (2010), on the tragedy of the immigrants who perish at sea while attempting to reach the Italian coast, was born from the image of the sea as a cemetery. After the *arrival* comes the excavation: Marco begins writing the text, Ermanna lets herself be guided by "impressions, words or figures, that design traces". This method led to the island of Ferdinandea, a volcanic island that suddenly appears and disappears, evoking an image of boiling seas. From this island image they began constructing the space, which delineated itself when a color *arrived*, and with color came matter (and matter "conducts", as in electricity). The reciprocal elaborations began to react one to another, and with that, alchemy comes into play, "without an architecture of vision that can anticipate what exists", but taking account of "experience in its materiality"<sup>31</sup> an attitude necessary as much to Ermanna the actress as to Ermanna the set and costume designer. The visualization of the space finds its measure in relation to the burden of a body, a body mobilized on stage by words, chromatic and tactile elements, objects, and clothing. In *Rumore di acque*, the body was that of Alessandro Renda, the piece's solo actor (except for the musicians, the Mancuso Brothers). But even without her performance, *Rumore di acque* carries the strong mark of Ermanna: in addition to the original conception (together with Martinelli) and the lights and costumes (together with Enrico Isola), she also designed the set, a marble platform upon which the grotesque, pompous general played by Renda recites his macabre counting of the cadavers of the drowned. Like a plaque in a cemetery.

A further example is yet another piece in which Ermanna does not perform, *Salmagundi* (2004), a "patriotic fable" by Martinelli about human stupidity and a future epidemic that strikes a nation at its weak point, the heart. While Martinelli's words about this spectacle stand as a hymn to theater of and for the *polis*, and a declaration of love for every single performer, Ermanna's description reveals an imagination in which high and low materialize in a shared cage.<sup>32</sup>

The heart in *Salmagundi* is no longer the red-painted wooden heart that the character Rosvi-

26. M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, *Nobalfabeto 21 lettere per la non-scuola*, in Teatro delle Albe, *Abecedario della non-scuola*, Lo Straniero Editions, Naples, 2004. See the heading «Historia universalis», 10.

27. Among the eyewitness accounts I gathered about this spectacle (Teatro Rasi, April 2010), of particular value was that of Luigi Dadina, one of the Albe company's founders ("It was an exhausting journey, going beyond the spectacle itself, and concerned the identity and future of the group") and that of Roberto Magnani, an Albe member of the second generation, who came to the company from the *non-scuola* experience ("a hellish October, after which something clicked and worries were over, but there were ghosts that continued to hover around the stage").

28. Interview with Tommaso Le Pera, September 18, 2012.

29. M. Martinelli, "Cervellini", in Teatro delle Albe, *La mano, de profundis rock*, Luca Sossella Editore, Rome, 2006. Ceccarelli, Magnani and Longuemare will return in this text, while Sanchi's collaboration with the company was more circumscribed.

30. *Il principio della forma*, cit., 48.

31. Ibidem.

32. M. Martinelli, *Domande al presente in forma di lazzi*, and E. Montanari, *Insaccati per bene*, in Teatro delle Albe, *Salmagundi*, Ravenna Teatro Edizioni, Ravenna, 2004, 4-7, 9-11.

ta-Taida "offers for a mystic burial",<sup>33</sup> but *cruor*, blood that gushes from a wound and coagulates: a blood sausage (*sanguinaccio*, as we call it in Umbria) that evokes cannibalism:

The point of departure is often a nucleus of words, the *incipit* of a story, an obscure, imposing intuition that demands to become visible as an architecture of bodies in an empty space. The bodies demand air around them, and the air is often black. Work begins within a pre-established perimeter, without other elements or fixed lights. It's always like that, waiting in a raw space. In exceptional cases, we think about color. Attention turns to what emanates from the bodies; through them we begin to measure what stands around them. The elaboration of the stage space goes step by step with a "story", but not one that Marco hands out already written; rather, he works it out in the course of the rehearsals. [...] The stage space has never been distinguishable from the density of being an actor, "inside". [...] "Why do you see the hearts as blood sausage?", I asked Marco, but he had no answer. "That's what I see", he told me; a licit non-answer. In my mind, the blood sausage became cooked *CRUOR*. [...] It's about a high (the terrible *CRUOR*) and a low (salami, fat laughter, low jokes). Everything that is miraculous is rendered banal. And to think that fat was burned to draw the gods into contact with humans; smoke from the white fat around the gall bladder. The white of lard is light entrapped in matter.<sup>34</sup>

Ermanna imagined a space so mirrored that it prohibited intimacy.

The third and final example of the alchemical work process of Teatro delle Albe concerns the path leading from the spectacle *Perhindérion* to *I Polacchi*, particularly important for the way the two works summarize the vision and methods of the company, whose work on Jarry, his avant-garde classic *Ubu Roi* and his mad philosophy of "pataphysics", constitutes a major thread in their repertory as well as, "a leap in creative quality".<sup>35</sup> *Perhindérion* (the name is of French Breton origin) is a pilgrimage in three stations which debuted on June 25, 1998. A fully-realized labor of great impact, it was planned for more than a year, then staged after two scorching weeks of rehearsals, but later performed only rarely, because it was quickly supplanted by the work on *I Polacchi* and the subsequent world travels of this later spectacle, a free interpretation of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.

Having been invited by Ravenna Festival and Cristina Mazzavillani Muti to develop a work derived from the city's patron saint, and specifically the byzantine bas-relief called the Greek Madonna, which civic mythology holds to have miraculously appeared in Ravenna around the year

1100 (and is now in the church of Santa Maria in Porto), Ermanna and Marco chose to establish a dialectic between this work and the avant-garde world of Alfred Jarry's pataphysics. The idea was to avoid sacrificing one to the other, but to find a way to connect both to a conception of their native province of Romagna. In the piece, Ravenna and Campiano blended together in front of the city's 13<sup>th</sup> century church of Santa Chiara, which had been deconsecrated and re-established as the Albe company's home, christened Teatro Rasi. The alchemical process, which included integrating into the new spectacle elements and images of past productions, resulted in such a level of fusion that the subjective worlds of the two contrasting components - medieval religion and avant-garde theater - could no longer be distinguished one from another. As to the work's composition, Ermanna and Marco seem not to grant much importance to who exactly contributed which element to the final product, and the experience strengthened their bond as an art couple: "the thirst for *zoé* has always inspired our errancy and our errors; it bound us together twenty years ago, en chaining life and theatre to lead us to the beaches of the Marina di Ravenna, where we first met the African immigrants, and into the schools where we met the dionysian power of the teenagers". Beginning as "intoxicated, combative twenty-year olds" who had "scandalously built a theater in the provinces", they sought what was barbarous "to give flesh to the ghosts of Tradition", in their shared adoration for the "Holy, asinine ignorance" they had discovered reading Giordano Bruno. By this time Jarry had entered among their "pole stars of Thought" and has since served as an active point of reference that continues to flower in the work they have developed over the past twenty years.

*Perhindérion* began with a spatial dramaturgy: a public pilgrimage began at dusk in the gardens of the Verdi Musical Institute, guided by an actor impersonating Jarry, dressed in black and on a bicycle, accompanied by four "fireflies" in 18<sup>th</sup> century costume in gaudy colors, with two assistants and four elderly musicians from the city's municipal band. The first station in the pilgrimage took place in front of Teatro Rasi, with the surprising vision of company actor Lugi Dadina on a gold horse that had been fished from the prop warehouse of the city's lyric opera. Above him, Ermanna hovered five meters in the air outside the upper window of the theater's external façade, in a costume made of iron in the form of a wave-dragon whose train reached all the way down to the ground, obstructing the entrance to the theater. As in medieval heraldry, the figures stood out against colored backgrounds, with the frontal two-dimensionality that the actress often prefers in her set designs. The second station of the pilgrimage unfolded inside the theater hall, while the third station returned to the now-dark garden from which the pilgrimage had begun. Spatial architecture determined the dramaturgy of the audience's gaze: their eyes would first look up at the man on the horse and the woman hovering in mid-air, then

33. E. Gulli Grigioni, *Salmagundi: postille 'cardiologiche' e polisensi*, ivi, 19-22.

34. E. Montanari, *Insaccati per bene*, cit. Subsequent citations from *Salmagundi* come from this source.

35. Two books on the company's productions derived from the work of Alfred Jarry have been published: *Jarry 2000* and *Suburbia. Molti Ubu in giro per il pianeta. 1998-2008*. Ubilibri, Milan, 2008. The words of critic Franco Quadri are cited in the first of these two.



Maryam - photo Enrico Fdrigoli



Vita agli arresti di Aung San Suu Kyi  
photo Enrico Fdrigoli

at the stage level in the second station, and finally would gaze downward during the final step, and then repeat the process in a spiral movement.

The dramatic structure of the *Perhindérion* pilgrimage was articulated in three moments around a single theme, "the mother of waters" (recalled by a recurring audio track of sounds of the sea) or, in other terms, the "Absolute and monstrous Love" that connects a mother with her male child and concludes in matricide. This motif recurs in several of the company's spectacles: in *Perhindérion*, the characters Varia (Ermanna) and Emmanuel (Dadina) allude to Jarry's relation with his own mother, which he saw in Christological terms.<sup>36</sup> In Marco's 1989 play *Bonifica*, the Romagnol characters Daura (Ermanna) and Arterio (Dadina) have a similar relation; and in a dialect text by Nevio Spadoni, author of *Luş, Persa* (Ermanna) and her soldier son (Dadina) manifest the same dynamic. All these works emerged in Martinelli's characteristic directorial style, combining paradox with hyper-realism. In *Perhindérion*, the iconic Albe couple was surrounded by young actors from the company's *non-scuola* and local children trained in provincial dance styles and in whip-cracking.

The performance featured unforgettable stage pictures, such as that of the reverse *Pietà*, with Ermanna-mother dead in the arms of her son, a tableau that condensed this key element in the company's theatrical journey into a lasting image. At the end of the first section of the piece, the actor/ fireflies lit Varia's metal costume on fire.<sup>37</sup> "Suspended above the flames, surrounded by the smoke rising up around her, accompanied by the music of the 'Holy Anchorites' of Mahler's 8<sup>th</sup> Symphony, Varia murmured her apocalyptic prophecy, a gloomy monologue in dialect about the dance of life and death and the new evils coming to afflict the world".<sup>38</sup> It would be inevitable to compare this performance to a younger Ermanna's role as the Maid of Orleans and to the little, inflexible martyrs imagined by her character Rosvita, spiritual sisters of Ravenna's Greek Madonna, whose sculptural icon represents her as a young maiden in a fluttering dress. In the piece's third section, Luigi Dadina (costumed in the same heavy military overcoat that would later be worn by Mandiaye N'Diaye, as Pêdar Ubu in *I Polacchi*) dug a grave for his mother. Thus the final moments of *Perhindérion* seem to pre-figure the company's subsequent piece, an adaptation of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, in which Ermanna's Mêdar Ubu appears in a white dress and stark white makeup, as though emerging from a grave. The work on the new spectacle began in September 1998 after a vacation in Greece during which the couple reread Ovid. Certain choices had already been made, such as that of multi-lingualism: dialect in particular would provide the opportunity to embrace "the two opposed characteristics of fidelity to ancient ritual and adherence to concrete facts of contemporary life", in the words of Franco Quadri, who has stressed the company's maniacal attachment to Jarry, both his life and his works. The Albe's

numerous works that vary on themes and characters of Jarry's *Ubu*, "maintain, thanks to the deep roots in an imaginary local setting *odierno e loro* (now and theirs), the same fullness as the original version, which was set in an imaginary Poland that, presenting itself as a nowhere, perfectly represented the author's native Brittany".<sup>39</sup> A chorus of "Palotini", twelve adolescents selected from the *non-scuola*, with their irresistible physicality and Romagnol vocal cadences, would bring their own vitality and jargon into the scenes, along with the fury of their Adriatic nights. At the beginning of the play, the Palotini would find themselves in a "Ubuniversal Museum", and would thus begin to explore Jarry's text, exhuming Pêdar and Mêdar Ubu, who became the protagonists of the spectacle.

The first problem was that of space, the "ark" that would contain all the other signs. Before *Perhindérion*, Martinelli had always imagined his theatre stories taking place on a stage, but after the pilgrimage piece, he could no longer think of his *Ubu* as happening solely on a stage. Instead, everything had to emerge from the chorus of Palotini. "Material location and psychic space go hand in hand, they are the same *thing*, and this had always been evident in Ermanna's works (*Cenci, Luş, Rosvita*), which sought both physical presence and psyche far from the stage-audience solution". This search found in *Perhindérion* "a meeting place deeper than what we had before".<sup>40</sup> In *I Polacchi*, it was as though the audience were besieged, with the space and actors moving around it along a U-shaped platform around the hall and a central platform that cut into the audience like a sword, as in Kabuki theater, hiding the trap-door where the traitor Bordur would hide. At the end, the central platform became a ship the characters boarded to escape. In *I Polacchi*, a light, uniform artificial fog enveloped the proceedings, an effect inspired by the "vertical fog in Japanese painting" and the nitid atmosphere of Rousseau's images. These were the initial sources for Vincent Longuemare's lighting design: transversal cones of light coming from above to bestow fullness on the emptiness below. A giant reflector at the base of the Teatro Rasi's apse, like a dark sun changing color, cast its light directly onto the seating area. Special focus lights, narrow beams from lateral portholes, criss-crossed just above the heads of spectators to illuminate the actors performing in the aisles. Other hidden lights illuminated the actors from below. "We wanted to liberate ourselves from the opaque materiality of the bodies of the actors, dissolving them into ghosts", Marco and Ermanna explained.<sup>41</sup> For the sets and costumes, Ermanna collaborated with Cosetta Gardini, while Enrico Isola, Francesco Catacchio and Gerardo De Vita designed the sets, lights and sound, using music selected by Ermanna and Marco. *Pipeline*, an anonymous piece of techno music, constituted a key musical theme, combined with Bach, Brahms, Monteverdi, Romagnol polka, soccer stadium choruses, and noises produced by stage machines.

36. Cfr. *L'amour absolu*, di Jarry (1899), in which the protagonist, Emmanuel Dieu, is condemned to death for having killed his mother, Varia, Mary, Dame Jocasta, after an incestuous affair.

37. The costume was designed and created by Lorenzo Bazzocchi and Catia Gatelli of Masque Teatro, made in its lower part by long cylinders punctured with holes that contained waxed gauze.

38. M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, *L'Apocalisse del molto comune*, cit., 19-20.

39. F. Quadri, *Jarry 2000 da Rennes a Ravenna*, in *Jarry 2000*, cit., 123-127.

40. M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, *L'Apocalisse del molto comune*, cit., 32.

41. Ivi, 36-37.

The alchemical rehearsal process began with Ermanna working with the chorus of Palotini for two hours a day. This practice was new to Ermanna because heretofore the *non-scuola* and other pedagogical activities of the company had been run exclusively by Marco, who is possessed with the demon of wishing to pass on theatrical knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

No argument was allowed, since the actions to perform were elementary, to keep from ruining the voice, to stop thinking and to remember, to set oneself apart from the psychologically familiar, to be lucid while standing outside oneself, to soften and eroticize their lazy bodies. We focused attention on the cave of the mouth, the palate, the teeth, the hard-soft clash of the tongue in space, the cavity of the throat, the voice, that *resides* in the ear,<sup>43</sup> an essential erotic organ on its own, and thus an element to be made gigantic, to mangle, educate, stun. After the first hour, the voice existed as matter, and we began to sing. [...] On certain days the two hours were also used to study paintings, El Greco and Rousseau, which Marco would later work with. We read Meyerhold, described our dreams, performed memory games about colors and styles of each other's clothing, or by memorizing parts of the script, breaking up the lines' linearity, such as by beginning in the middle and going backwards.

At an initial but no less rigorous level, the concept was introduced of actors as *technitai Dionisou*, thinking of the actor's craft as a mystery based on accumulated experience, forms, and mental *habitus*. Ermanna also bestowed upon the young actors certain secrets she would have preferred to keep to herself, regarding how to be present on stage, and preparations before coming on stage. Ermanna was not an easy presence for the young actors to deal with; she was seen as a mysterious entity ("I am analyzing the character she plays in life", one said), and some feel panic in the face of her severity. Other admire her discipline, hoping to steal from her "a dose of nastiness", and appreciate the opportunity to work on themselves and their own bodies.<sup>44</sup>

The two hours of exercises under her guidance are followed by improvisational work with the director that is designed to "open up empty spaces in the text that can suck in life from outside and put the century-old farce back on its feet, to make it lame and play with it, *on the high wire*, mobilizing on one side the barbarian romagnol dialect, and on the other their lives as Palotini". The director also tells them stories of the life and work of Alfred Jarry.<sup>45</sup> This is Martinelli's method for working on classic texts, subjecting them to a constant process of revision, a practice he describes in these terms: "Take a text and look *under* it: underneath,

under the words, there is something that the words alone don't say. Underneath is all the anguish that generated it". Bringing this disturbance into the world of the adolescents sparks Life: "Improvisation creates a score of phrases, gestures, and music, into which we can later graft the words of the author, but only the ones we find useful", which can then blaze out, never forgetting that the original words were the source, the access point into another world.<sup>46</sup> The figure of Pêdar Ubu was born through a similar process, invented by Mandiaye N'Diaye, one of the company's African actors: "A lightning-bolt image of a self-invented, scheming little dictator with black skin and a mask of joviality", who seems tawdry even when astride a horse, imitating in *I Polacchi* the epic figure played by Luigi Dadina in *Perhindérion*. Alongside him stands Ermanna Montanari as Médar Ubu, "extremely white, from hair down to her tunic, like a miraculous Madonna or a spectral witch, coddled by the young Palotini like an icon or a marionette, but able to make them tremble in fear when she unleashes, harpy-like, her strident falsetto, calculated and mellifluous, and the stentorian scraping of her harsh dialect".<sup>47</sup> Montanari's Mother Ubu is very different from the standard representation of the role. Rather than a sloppy, fat housewife, this Médar Ubu is a refined figure, sometimes infantile, in sharp contrast to the vulgarity of her speech and gluttony, "a calla lily flattened by a hypothetical wind" with a "porcelain voice", both marionette and mask-figure.<sup>48</sup> The long white dress with the narrow neck and bell hem has the form of a calla lily, Ermanna's favorite flower, the most elegant of her native region's wildflowers, often used in portraits as a symbol of feminine purity. The dress is made of rough, ivory-colored silk crepe, simultaneously opaque and translucent, beautiful under stage lights.<sup>49</sup> The geometric cut of the dress, emphasized by the heavy tubular hems and thick padding, turn it into a cage, recalling certain ancient styles of dress for women, although its principal source is a Korean style featuring a flowing tunic and high collar that accentuates the throat and thus the voice. The dress is sculptural, in contrast to the soft, clinging little dress she had worn in *Confine*, in which she was metaphorically nude, without protective armor. Although the two plays are very different, Cosetta Gardini, long-time collaborator with the Albe on set, costume, and graphic design, explains that she always starts from the form of Ermanna's body, slim but structured, with shoulders erect and a long neck. The costume must become "a skin that takes on her form".<sup>50</sup>

For Ermanna, the relationship with her costume, especially with the fabric, can become the means to trigger the secret and initially private movement that leads to the birth of a stage figure. In general, the costume functions as a living partner to the actor, making evident the transformations of the body, actualizing its metamorphosis. In the case of her costume for *I Polacchi*, the restricting costume forced the actress to reduce gesture and emphasize detail,

42. Since 2007 Ermanna has conducted an ongoing laboratory with girls named the *Absidali*.

43. Ermanna uses the noted theory of Alfred Tomaris, which is her reference point for her voice studies, as we shall see. This long citation is from *L'Apocalisse del molto comune*, cit., 33.

44. C. Ventrucci, *Intervista ai Palotini*, in *Jarry 2000*, cit., 135-146.

45. M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, *L'Apocalisse del molto comune*, cit., 35.

46. M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, *Noboalfabeto*, cit., 10.

47. F. Quadri, *Jarry 2000 da Rennes a Ravenna*, cit., 126.

48. The character was inspired also by Pasolini's short film of 1967, *Che cosa sono le nuvole*, with actors Ninetto Davoli and Totò playing marionettes acting the roles, respectively, of Othello and Iago.

49. This principal costume alternates with two others in fine cotton, which Ermanna used on tour and for the performances in Africa. When the silk costume wore out, she had another made in an even finer quality of silk, when then became her favorite.

50. "I start from what I see and hear, the voice, the movements", Gardini says, "and I construct a flat image. Subconsciously, I stage her the way I did with Barbie when I was a little girl. Colors are decided on the basis of the work, always sharply defined". (Interview at Teatro Rasi, October 7, 2011).



Lus - photo Marco Martinelli

Lus - photo Luca Del Pia



contrasting the rigidity of the dress's cut with a frenetic movement of her fingers. When Médar Ubu danced the polka, skipped, or kneeled, spectators could feel her body move inside the dress, which seemed to follow its own separate dramatic score. Her shoes for the role were also different from what she would normally wear on stage: for Médar Ubu, a pair of elegant white Seventies-era moccasins purchased at A.N.G.E.L.O.,<sup>51</sup> with extremely high heels that miniaturized her stride, forcing her to take small steps in a wave movement that emphasized the calla lily aspect of her appearance. The feet determined the form of the body and its movement in space.<sup>52</sup> Ermanna added various accessories to this costume, such as lace gloves and stockings, and an umbrella for performances in Africa.

Her face was so thickly made up as to become a shiny mask, losing individual traits but maintaining its mobility. Ermanna would spread a thick layer of pancake, then pencil in very high eyebrows, trace out an almond shape above and below her eyes, then rouge her lips to narrow them at the sides and raise them vertically, like a geisha. Then she would speckle her face, smearing it almost imperceptibly with an effect of cracks that would become evident only at the end of the play, after Médar Ubu has lost the war. The same was done with the rouged mouth of Mandiaye's Pédar Ubu. Within the cage of the costume, behind the mask-face, the figure became "almost invisible, non-tactile, pure vocality", but the stripping away of the surface amplified the presence of the body, pushing it toward the realm of Butoh. Butoh emphasizes slowness saturated with energy and the intensity of movements, which may include even violence. The Butoh vertebral column is endowed with a tension that pushes the head toward the sky and the coccyx toward the depths, dragged down by gravity. The characters are shadows and ghosts because the dancer's movements emerge from an internal world. The actor's muscles relax to the point of abandoning all focus, so as not to be distracted by the external world ("Your eyes must be holes, like the eyes of the dead", advises Kazuo Ohno).<sup>53</sup> The journey of Butoh is based on the perception of the body from within: this is a deep spring, more than merely aesthetic, for Ermanna Montanari, who has cultivated this mode of perception, making it into a guiding principle (experiencing her body as a swamp, for example), and as a key to the collages and objects she creates for her own use.

Ermanna's Médar Ubu makes miniature gestures with a goldsmith's precision, takes tiny steps in her regal dress, and pronounces words heavy in sound and sense; on stage, she is a white stain among black-dressed figures. Ten years after having created the role, Ermanna observes, "She (the role) doesn't belong to me anymore, if she ever did. She goes on her own, or comes to see me, giving me instructions and asking me questions. What does Mother Ubu need? Very

quick little hands, very quick little feet, and a very skinny body. She is 'immobile', in her own particular eternity".<sup>54</sup> The character exists in dissonance to what happens around her on stage and must conduct a lengthy physical preparation in order to be "in symphonic relation with the outside".<sup>55</sup>

The production of *I Polacchi* went on extended tours, with important performances in Belgrade and Teheran,<sup>56</sup> and versions in Chicago (*Mighty Mighty Ubu*, 2005), in the Senegalese village of Diol Kadd (*Ubu buur*, 2007), and in an inner-city neighborhood of Naples (*Ubu sotto tiro*, 2007, in which Ermanna also performed a support function in the production of the spectacle). The work has been continuously revised and reactivated. Martinelli reconstructed the chorus of Palotini for each new performance site, and thus would necessarily alter the script and direction, adapting it to the African immigrants in Chicago during the Iraq War, to the young villagers of Mandiaye's home village in Senegal, and to teenagers in one of Naples' most notorious neighborhoods. The flowering of the diverse forms of *I Polacchi* has manifested "a theater of extraction before it becomes a theater of construction", which brings to the surface the theatricality implicit in whatever situation it lands in, transforming local energies into festivity and ritual.<sup>57</sup>

Working on space and stage language, Ermanna varied the elements in the successive editions of *I Polacchi* as it toured the world. At Teatro Rasi in Ravenna, the set evoked Jarry's pataphysics, featuring a "machine for de-braining", the golden, papier-maché horse first used in *Perhindérion*, and a stairway in the form of a DNA helix. For the performance at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, the stage was occupied by a large cemetery angel with a gold patina, while for Diol Kadd, Ermanna transformed a sort of corral and gazebo into a theater space by building a trapezoidal platform that "enlarged the spatial vision between interior and exterior", with a fence of sugarcane stalks placed at rhythmic intervals. The gazebo was painted black to become a shadowy throne room. The most intense moment of the Senegalese staging was a "pilgrimage" of the cast through the village accompanied by almost the entire population, with Mother Ubu astride a donkey.<sup>58</sup> The model for Mother Ubu, after all, was the character Varia from *Perhindérion*, whose name means variety, referencing the beauty of transformation and artifice that continually reshapes itself. In Chicago, the young Palotini improvised rap songs and danced with impressive skill, but Ermanna felt "off-key", her vibration different from their energy, so she responded by creating a "vortex-dance", spinning obsessively as the rap singers battled with microphones. The diversity between the wild energy of the Palotini and Ermanna's magnetism, "her theatrical skill at constructing artifice" (R. Klett), was particularly striking

51. A.N.G.E.L.O. is the brand of a museum store founded in Lugo di Romagna by Angelo Carli, who re-works vintage styles into contemporary fashions.

52. Cfr. the headings "Hands", "Eyes", "Face" and "Feet" in *Anatomia del teatro. Un dizionario di antropologia teatrale*, ed., Nicola Savarese, La Casa Usher, Florence, 1983.

53. See Roberta Carreri, *Tracce. Training e storia di un'attrice dell'Odin Teatret*, Il Principe Costante, Milan, 2007, 127-135.

54. G. Guccini, ed., *Le maschere dei "Polacchi" tra pre-esistenza e metamorfosi. Intervista a Ermanna Montanari e Mandiaye N'Diaye in Suburbia*, cit., 31-41.

55. C. Ventrucci, *È nata prima l'Africa o le Albe? Viaggio in un teatro politico, visionario, afro-romagnolo*, in *Suburbia*, cit., 63-68.

56. In Belgrade, there was a lot of tension in audiences because Milosevic had just fallen from power. In Teheran, Ermanna was obliged to wear a veil over her wig and gloves so as not to come in contact with male bodies.

57. P. Giacché, *Quando il teatro sospende la dittatura del mondo*, in *Suburbia*, cit., 99-109.

58. E. Montanari, *La piana dei kadd*, in *Suburbia*, cit., 71.

here: her body moved like a puppet, with a face that seemed to have leapt out of a Modigliani painting. Her fingers drummed like a figure in a cartoon (Y. Cesta Cursach).<sup>59</sup>

The shift from the fog of Ravenna and Chicago to the blinding sun of Diol Kadd was more complex. Minute gestures were no longer visible, the color white displayed its imperfections and became banal when dirty. The heat was hard especially on Mandiaye in his heavy military coat, but the sweat and discomfort became keys to his character. Ermanna substituted her silk dress with a cotton one, easier to wash, but insects were drawn to her wax makeup and the heat wore down her body. The relationship between Mother and Father Ubu became more competitive: Mandiaye's Pêdar Ubu felt the joy and security of having returned home, while Médar Ubu felt foreign and alienated on every level. The conflict revealed itself from the very first scene: the joint entrance to the powerful sound of a tambourine (in substitution of the notes of Bach used in previous versions, transforming a slow, hieratic entrance into a noisy festival) was discovered not to work, so each character entered separately. The black and the white, so grotesquely contrasted one to another under the African sun, were compelled to diversify their languages even more. Father Ubu entered to the tambourine, crowing like a rooster, while Ermanna's entrance and her tiny gestures were accompanied by the metallic tinkling of strips of iron. Against that music, her voice discovered its proper intonation and her body melted into a light dance in dissonance with Mandiaye's very different mask. Her heeled shoes could barely walk on the sandy soil, the sweat produced nervous micro-actions, and her little hands continuously swatted flies, provoking contractions in her face. "I have to dance backwards", wrote Ermanna in her diary of the journey, "and transform the microscopic internal vibrations of Mother Ubu's body and voice into jerking motions, closer to the disruptive qualities of Father Ubu".<sup>60</sup>

The sonic texture changed as well. New instruments and a Babel of languages: Bordur spoke French with a chest-voice, Father Ubu spoke in Romagnol dialect, Mother Ubu spoke Wolof with a foreign accent, and Wolof became extraordinarily soft in the play's rebel chorus. During rehearsals, Ermanna would think in Italian, translate into French, enjoy hearing her native Romagnol, and struggle with Wolof. Mother Ubu, who "in *I Polacchi* pronounces the grossest atrocities with a ceramic voice, at the limits of the audible", labored to master the guttural, vowel-swallowing Wolof. It seemed to her that her voice, "must spring from something hard, an echo to be pulverized", but through practice she picked up a vivacious and rapid percussive rhythm that still stumbled over certain vowels that demanded lengthy emissions.<sup>61</sup>

Today, those who wish to learn more about *I Polacchi* can read the two cited volumes that describe the spectacle's varied incarnations, or see Alessandro Renda's documentary film, whi-

ch is included in the edition of Suburbia. For the purposes of the present study, focused on Ermanna, the image offered in this chapter – of Ermanna as couple and group, set against the backdrop of Jarry – should function to properly introduce what follows, the story of her birth as an actress and the narration of her songbook, her "canzioniere". We have now witnessed the alchemies that underlie her creations and the practices of "bringing to life" and "reactivating". These practices root the stage arts in technique and craft tradition, and poetry springs from this meeting of means. Her theatrical culture has been constructed within the group over the course of thirty years of practice and collaboration, of which each single spectacle and its connected activities constitutes a part. This culture has bound tradition to experimentation, composition and direction to performance, and sounds and images to words.

Around the original core of Ermanna and Luigi Dadina, new actors have joined the company in successive waves. First came Roberto Magnani, Alessandro Argnani, and Alessandro Renda, followed by a still younger generation including Michela Marangoni, Laura Redaelli, and Massimiliano Rassu. Mandiaye N'Diaye left the company officially to dedicate himself fully to his dream of rebuilding his home village of Diol Kadd with theatrical-cultural initiatives, but his life was cut short tragically by a heart attack in 2014, at the age of fifty. Marcella Nonni, one of the founding members of the company, now dedicates herself entirely to administrative duties, while Luca Fagioli concentrates on set design and technical direction. Maurizio Lupinelli, Paola Bigatto, and other actors are not members of the company but have maintained an ongoing collaboration over many years and spectacles.

As we have seen, from the perspective of creation, in the beginning there was the couple, with their parallel, intertwined journey as the source of every Albe spectacle. Martinelli was himself an actor in the early years, and still occasionally performs, undergoing almost of necessity the essential process of every actor to carve out an empty space within himself in order to be filled by an other. As a director, Martinelli has developed a sort of translation of that actor's process into his method as a director, alternately connecting and disconnecting himself from the stage reality he creates. No creation can exist without the surrounding context from which it emerges, or from the contexts it, in turn, establishes. In Martinelli's case, even his pedagogical projects arise from his need to encounter life and its varied humanity in a state not yet hardened into set social roles and their presumed logic. Thus, he plunges into the rural countryside of Campiano, translating it into theatrical language while preserving its refractory essence, and immerses himself into the energy of the teenagers in Naples' Scampia neighborhood, a reality disjointed from political discourse. The challenge remains the same: to shape the raw material into a spectacle without sacrificing the original chaos that gives it life.

59. *Incursione patafisica al Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Conversazione tra Yolanda Cesta Cursach and Raffaele Furno, con un intervento di Renate Klett*, in ivi, 51-59.

60. E. Montanari, *La piana dei kadd*, in ivi, 73.

61. Ivi, 75-77.

In this type of theater, the actor is central: an actor who has inherited a craft tradition of technique, but who embodies the unease of the contemporary world. It was with this spirit that Ermanna presented her vision for the 2011 Santarcangelo Festival:

Since I began thinking about this festival, the figure of the actor has been the guiding image of all my investigations: the actor as a concrete emblem of making-unmaking-re-making, the actor who demands the spectator's involvement, because it's the spectator who makes it theater. Today a skeleton or a stage yardstick, tomorrow a crisis point, a flub, or a marginal figure, the actor for me is a word-abyss, with the anarchic rigor of his voice, a "coming-out", a manifestation of being in its modesty, its indecipherable sexuality. The actor eludes the mania for novelty and, as an expert in emotions, knows how to drag the rest of us into the depths of the psyche.<sup>62</sup>

But since theater carries also that which one is in real life, we might conclude this chapter with an image of the artist couple at work, offered by a witness of rehearsals for the Chicago performances of *I Polacchi*: Ermanna and Marco are, "a species of charismatic-shamanic duo, one with the conduct of a visionary trickster, the other with a face that encloses in a few severe traits an immensity of joy and suffering".<sup>63</sup>

62. From the Santarcangelo Festival program, 2011.

63. *Incursione patafisica al Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago*, cit., 46.



Rosvita - photo Leila Marzocchi



*fedeli d'Amore* - photo Enrico Fedrigoli



*Vita agli arresti di Aung San Suu Kyi* - from the movie

## CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY

"Ermanna Montanari, in the part of the mad sorceress, screams whispers sings her exalted punishment, evolving the vocal acrobatics of her earlier *Luş*, and makes pure sounds of Nevio Spadoni's Campiano dialect poetry. Indeed the words are an essence of contrasting feelings in the fiery and passionate struggle triggered off with the notes of Luigi Ceccarelli's Romagnol horn. [...] It is a unique emotion for the spectator, a shock to be experienced."

**Franco Quadri**, *La Repubblica*, October 19, 2000

"Fifteen or twenty experiences were fundamental for me, plays I've seen and seen again and which led me to get to know the companies and their work methods. The last time I felt this 'fatal attraction' was for Teatro delle Albe. [...] They're one of my favourite companies and there's no way I would miss the chance to see a play of a quality that's become rare in my country."

**Susan Sontag**, from an interview by Antonio Monda, *La Repubblica*, June 24, 2002

"The name Nevio Spadoni is by now inseparably linked with the undertakings of the Teatro delle Albe, and in particular with the staging of his splendid monologue *Luş* performed by actress and director Ermanna Montanari. If I'm not too mistaken due to little knowledge of the language, I should say that Spadoni's poetic machine triggers 'substratum reactions'. The monologue or canto of the clairvoyant played by Ermanna Montanari brings back to life a certain way of perceiving, and corporeal vibrations that we haven't seen for some time. I'm thinking about when Ermanna does the voice of an old woman, of a wicked witch, as if she were in a cavern, but also as if the vibrations of her throat brought down the walls that protect civilised man. And another thing that comes out through Spadoni's poetic machine is the clairvoyant's invective, an invective without compromises. Sometimes the protagonists of *Luş* and *Përsa* bring to mind biblical prophets who speak of the overthrow of Jerusalem."

**Gianni Celati**, in *Teatro in dialetto romagnolo* by Nevio Spadoni, Edizioni Il Girasole, 2003

"I saw an amazing actress the other night, a woman of 1,000 voices - growls, squeals, mine-deep exhortations of woe, birdlike chirps of malicious glee. The American stage debut of Ermanna Montanari wasn't the only reason to see *I Polacchi*, an hour-long Teatro delle Albe adaptation of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu the King* at the Museum of Contemporary Art. But Montanari, longtime artistic and marital partner of writer/director Marco Martinelli, played the power-mad Mother Ubu, desperate for the title of the Queen of Poland. And without unbalancing a very interesting evening, she made it difficult to watch anyone else. In ashen whiteface and an old-lady wig to match, Montanari - who looks like a Modigliani portrait that jumped off the canvas - played countless variations on the theme of comic greed. [...] Teatro della Albe must return, soon. For a production exploring the cyclical ravagements of mankind, *I Polacchi* was a tonic."

**Michael Phillips**, *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 2005

"Montanari opens a rift, and places the body and its materiality once again at the centre of the world: her primitive voice creates a 'wound in the divine' by solemnly glorifying the sounding body, and 'refutes merchandise' by avoiding any kind of reassuring pleasantries. Being made up of nothing but bodily matter, her voice is always caught up in a series of situated physical relations: timbral movements, changes in rhythm, leaps from one octave to another, her particular tendency towards cavernous sounds, her technical skill and habitual scrupulousness, even the awareness with which she uses the space surrounding her: everything about her vocal expression tends to expand into a tangible matter, in the form of a vibrating gesture, here and now. No 'originary breath' materializes in Montanari's voice, no 'merchandise' speaks through her: only the body wells up, in a tense dialectics between desire and limitation. The urgency, or even the necessity, of the way she uses the voice lies entirely in her wish to take on the relation between the body's creative potential and the conventions that limit its capacity. The 'cruelness' of Montanari's vocal art also involves her adoption of pre-existing forms in order to deform, reform and transform them. All voiced speech is a dis-assemblage: an actress who un-says herself, keeping functional discourse at bay. It's like a decision to openly show one's own otherness: the serene affirmation of a different way of conceiving the art of recitation. In so doing, she approaches an Artaudian cruelty, in which cruel 'means absolutely necessary and defined, calculated, controlled, the opposite of spontaneity; it means clear-headed, aware' (A. Ponzi); and in which 'cruel' also implies a critique of theatrical normality."

**Nevio Gambula**, *Teatrica*, May 24, 2006

"*Ouverture Alcina* is a remarkable performance, the script superb, irre-proachable. [...] Ermanna Montanari is capable of amazing vocal variations."

**Muriel Mingau**, *Le Populaire*, September 27, 2010

"Almost like an upside-down mystery play, this staging of Molière's *The Miser* at the Teatro delle Albe revolves around the protagonist, Harpagon, who entirely dominates the representation: a perfectly arid demon, dried out and shrivelled by a lack of earthly nutrition, an insect with a hard black shell. This elimination of the body, with the character now consisting solely in a malign voice, is matched by the choice of a tiny female actor 'en travesti' with a fearsome expressive force. Ermanna Montanari, who has been compared on more than one occasion to Carmelo Bene due to her extraordinary use of vocal devices, makes Harpagon a threatening, purring or piercing 'flautus vocis'; deformed by a microphone and dehumanised [...], the actress's voice is the terrifying centre of the performance."

**Maria Giulia Minetti**, *La Stampa*, January 28, 2011

"Harpagon is played by an extraordinary actress, Montanari. Dressed in black, with a haughty and distant look, like a Noh mask, she uses her voice to probe all of the depths of the soul, from shouts to dark rumbles and laments. Holding a microphone, the sceptre of her command, she pulls the strings of an entourage of marionettes."

**Walter Porcedda**, *La Nuova Sardegna*, February 27, 2011

"Ermanna Montanari speaks, shrieks and growls her Romagnol text, as though it's being clawed directly from her voicebox. Around her screams the tempestuous electronic score by Luigi Cecarelli, a noise so insane it seems to have ripped itself violently away from the libretto. [...] The effort is to divorce every element from every other element, and to make the susceptible among us feel torn apart as well. [...] We're really here to revel in Montanari's extraordinary control, her painted eyes, her full-throttle staginess. In various avant-garde experiments I've seen recently, characters from the great silent movies find themselves spliced into modern work. Here, without any recourse to video trickery, Teatro delle Albe gets the same effect."

**Helen Shaw**, Time Out, January 7, 2011

"With Montanari things become more difficult, because that luminous immobility belongs entirely to her, as does the twofold song that lives in her voice. It's more difficult to get confused, and believe that this woman dressed in red actually is Tonina, Marco Pantani's real mother. Owing to something that still escapes me, Montanari wears this strange oracle's cape, that in the end makes her seem more of an archetype or a vivid symbol than a person. She is a mouthpiece, not only when she repeats the exact words of the conversations. It's difficult for me to say that 'she is Tonina', or even 'she interprets Tonina'. In a certain sense, she brings this Tonina to us, in a way that is completely her own. (And she is always onstage *in her very own way*, even when she's not doing anything, only sitting poised on a sofa as though in a living room not found in her own house, perfectly still, exactly still. For a quarter of an hour at a time she won't act, she won't speak, while the performance keeps moving along; and yet, she always manages to slip into our field of sight. Her onstage presence is so powerful that it is impossible to look at her for very long.)"

**Sara Colciago**, Dialoghi di profughi, November 19, 2012

"Fire Walk With Me. Very rarely, as with Ermanna Montanari's *Rosvita*, are we led to believe that while one is writing, the pages will immediately catch fire. When this does happen, we understand that writing always falls short of itself when imprisoned in its own two-dimensionality; we understand what Nietzsche meant when he wrote that what we grasp best in language are not the words, but the tone, intensity, modulation and rhythm with which a series of words are spoken. Put briefly, this is the music behind the words, and the passion behind this music, the personality behind this passion: anything and everything that cannot be written down. This is why writing is so unimportant if the pages do not immediately turn into the ashes left by memory and become real life: Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim's blood."

**Luca Sossella**, in *Rosvita* by Ermanna Montanari/Teatro delle Albe, Luca Sossella Editore, February 2014

"A reader-spectator who approaches these materials for the first time – above all, Ermanna Montanari's voice and her magnetism; Hrotsvitha's texts, the first by a female European playwright to have come down to us; an idea of theatre that sublimates the word and at the

same time brings it to an utter concreteness; and an unflinching cinematographic eye that exacerbates the image, leading to an apotheosis of the flesh – well, this 'stranger' to theatre, to *this* theatre, will find themselves facing an abyss that will be difficult to forget afterwards, whether they are attracted to it or repulsed by it. [...] In *Rosvita*, scenes and figures spring forth before our eyes as though we were flipping through an illuminated manuscript, one in which the written signs and materials are given by the voice. As though in a 'virtual graphic novel', subjects with far-off sounding names pass by and yet seem to refer to something very close to us. [...] 'A great actor is a writer' [Carmelo Bene] – and the one rewriting, here, is an Artaudian 'carnal heart'. Not one word appears in this work without having penetrated into the depths, into real life and its cruelty. The voice tells no lies – even when driven by an extreme inventiveness – and nor do 'the inimitable intonations of the nerves' deceive us. All of this formulates a question as to what is authentic, and outlines unexplored forms of love."

**Cristina Ventrucci**, in *Rosvita* by Ermanna Montanari/Teatro delle Albe, Luca Sossella Editore, February 2014

"Ermanna Montanari's extraordinary Tonina, with a flaming red dress, an icy heart, austere and as delicate as the white lily on the table onstage; with a numbed grief coming through in her voice and her way of talking, both smooth and acidic. Ermanna doesn't embody Tonina Pantani, but tells her story without imitating her, she identifies her features and transcribes them in a new code, by way of gestures: thin eyes, firmly poised torso, hands wrapped over her belly, the seat of maternal pain. Montanari's recitation does not translate: it transliterates."

**Rossella Menna**, Rumor(s)cena, March 7, 2014

"The first thing that comes to mind when you see Ermanna Montanari is her incredible resemblance to Aung San Suu Kyi. To be sure, the two women have much in common: long black hair, certain facial traits, but also the same determination in wanting to somehow change the world. The political leader and Nobel peace prize follows through on her desires by sacrificing her own life for the Burmese people; the actress, winner of the 2013 Duse prize, 'acts' on people through theatre. But the goal is the same: to transform others."

**Francesca De Sanctis**, Colpo di Scena, November 3, 2014

"Where could she have acquired, or achieved, this fragile grace with glimmers of porcelain, this indestructible serenity that flows through the calm waves of her voice, then suddenly contracts into the iron tones of indignation, laceration and fury before expanding into an embrace of comprehension? [...] Ermanna Montanari dons the clothes of Aung San Suu Kyi and wears her devastating smile, that shakes our certainties and our own laziness, at the centre of the stage but more often at its edges, passing through a few decades of history and internal movements. [...] Martinelli takes up Brecht, one of his youthful loves, and definitively has done with political theatre as we knew it in the 20th century, meaning ideology or [and] turmoil. Politics is a slow and patient way of inlaying good, and it is made of oriental colours and garments, flowers



*La mano* - photo Alessia Contu

worn in the hair, an unrestrained smile, decidedly breaking away from daily life, like the artist's gesture. [...] This is the phantasm akin to a white lily in *Ouverture Alcina*, who seems to walk like the wind without touching the ground, a small and tenacious figure, made of earth and mist. It is the entire constellation of characters belonging to Ermanna Montanari (and to director and author Martinelli's dramaturgy), accumulated in the actor's slender, minute body and transmuted into an aura. This is an artistic maturity that has become mastery (the antique, the archetype renewed in its own epiphanies), that leaps (*natura facit saltus*) into the unpredictable, that becomes a philosopher's stone for illuminating transformations, an oriental Dionysus with alchemical operations."

**Massimo Marino**, Corriere di Bologna, December 6, 2014

"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. [...] 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."

**Mario Gamba**, Il manifesto, January 28, 2015

"I went into town, to go to the theatre for the first time in years, because I wanted to see Ermanna Montanari live. A theatrical body, a shadowy presence but sparkling with a voice and words. Immobile, slightly off balance, coarse, husky and slurred, piqued as only an old woman can be while deprecating mankind's cowardice and lassitude, this voice then becomes thin and willowy, ethereal, like a little girl singing. A girl who may be ill, embellished with blood and lead, but is enchanted and enchanting, waiting for the light. *Luş*."

**Giovanni Lindo Ferretti**, Avvenire.it, February 3, 2015

"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, impasses, strikes in its entirety. The new chapter is entitled *Luş*, which is Romagnol for Light."

**Giordano Montecchi**, Amadeus, May 22, 2015

"I went to the Teatro Due where Ermanna Montanari, with her *La camera da ricevere*, inaugurated the season directed by Francesca De Sanctis. *La camera da ricevere*, i.e. the *Cambra da rizèvar* [The receiving room], as the actress tells us, is a room where she went to hide as a child: this is where her 'singsong adventures and disguises' began, 'in a dark place, full of hidden dangers'. Put briefly, this was the origin, the place that formed the character of the performer that Ermanna Montanari now truly is. I say performer, not actress, not because I wish to belittle her ability to change her attire, to transit from one role to another, from one mindset, one imagination, one world to another. I prefer, however, to think of her as an heir of Perla Peragallo. I watched her more closely the other evening, and it seemed as though I could grasp some personality traits that were as carefully hidden, almost buried (in that dark place, full of dangers), as they are inexplicable, not related to anything other than what they are. Ermanna Montanari was always different, introducing slight shifts, when interpreting Fatima the speaking donkey, Bélda the soothsayer from Romagna, an entirely invented Mother Ubu, the menacing Harpagon, or the Burmese heroine (her most recent creature) Aung San Suu Kyi. And yet, she was always Ermanna, with her austere elegance (defined by her apparel, or costumes, as well), her gentle meekness, her pride as an actress and as a woman: at the end she knelt down and placed on the ground, at her feet and at ours, intersecting one another, a lily and a billhook, the emblems of her soul."

**Franco Cordelli**, Corriere della Sera, February 12, 2015

"Watching Ermanna Montanari on stage is a vital experience, almost physical: her body, small and slight, becomes immense; the spectator is hypnotised by her magnetic face and voice. She is at once body and an instrument thereof, musician and musical instrument. With that above-mentioned flesh she is capable of feminine intensity and unfathomable abysses, in a dreamlike language whose enigmatic sonority carries all the archaic turbulences of her native Romagna. Getting into theatre at time when the 1977 movements were developing in Italy, today she is a key actress on the Italian and international scene together with the Teatro delle Albe, the company she cofounded in 1983 [...]. Romagnol and its music illuminate the words in the actress's mouth. It is her stage language, an artifice in the search for simplicity and for the happiness of saying. Her humble locality and its rarefaction nonetheless make up a universal theatre language that speaks of relationship with the land and the vital things and contradictions of this region, of her village."

**Laurence Van Goethem**, Alternatives théâtrales n. 129, July 2016

"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. [...] 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. [...] 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."

**Renate Klett**, Theater der Zeit, September 2016

"*Lus*, which is a fusion, a crossroads, an intermingling based on a score by Nevio Spadoni translated into human (human?) sound by the far from normal voice of Ermanna Montanari (insistent myth, standing apart from the herd on the contemporary scene) and by the sound architectures of Luigi Ceccarelli's live electronics and Daniele Roccato's string bass. Ceccarelli has already done cult works with her such as *L'isola di Alcina* and *La mano*. With the hard-wired directing of Marco Martinelli which historically counterpoints the ethical reason at the heart of Ermanna's work. [...] And if Montanari and Martinelli's artistic itinerary is a journey through the ordeals of Négritude, if Ermanna's personal diary perhaps lies between two (among many) fundamental visions one has run into (and subsequently taken account of) - Edith Clever's incomprehensible and nocturnally threatening flood of German words, and the unease of the iron encumbrance of Louise Bourgeois' sculptures - we may be sure here, with the tongue of Romagna drawn from Nevio Spadoni, that a barbaric howl will be taking the stage, eruptive, hypnotic."

**Rodolfo di Giammarco**, La Repubblica, September 7, 2016

"Ermanna Montanari, 'queen' of the Albe of Ravenna, with her extraordinary ductile voice succeeds in giving breadth and depth to words, in embodying the word. Excellent. Motionless at the lectern, behind a veil on which projectors and plays of colour are shown, she brings to life the prayers of three Palestinian women addressed to Mary, Maryam in Luca Doninelli's text, the mother of Jesus, venerated also in the Muslim faith. Four movements, four cantos, with Marco Martnelli's rigorous direction, for a pain that elicits a vibrancy that no one could fail to share. Set forth with formal and expressive elegance (fine musical 'dramaturgy' by Luigi Ceccarelli) in a darkness cut by slashes of light, among projectors of mosaics, crowds devastated by war, writings in Arabic."

**Magda Poli**, Corriere della Sera, February 16, 2017

"We glimpse a female figure in the dark: we know who it is but it is by her unmistakable voice, which here achieves an extreme degree of simplicity and intensity, that we recognize her.

Ermanna Montanari, amid projectors, shadows and writings in Arabic on transparent drapes is, as often happens, alone on stage to tell us the story of three women which concludes dramatically with the story of Maryam, the name given to the Virgin in the Koran. [...] Ermanna becomes the voice, sublimated body, of these three characters - Zeinab, Intsar, Douha - and of Maryam, far from the stylistic elements of the monologue: it would almost seem as if she didn't care about being 'seen' so much as heard, as she climbs the musical scale to give life to the narration. An image projected all round brings us the face of a woman wearing the hijab to cover her head, while the three protagonists one by one give way to a Virgin with a halo of light-bulbs."

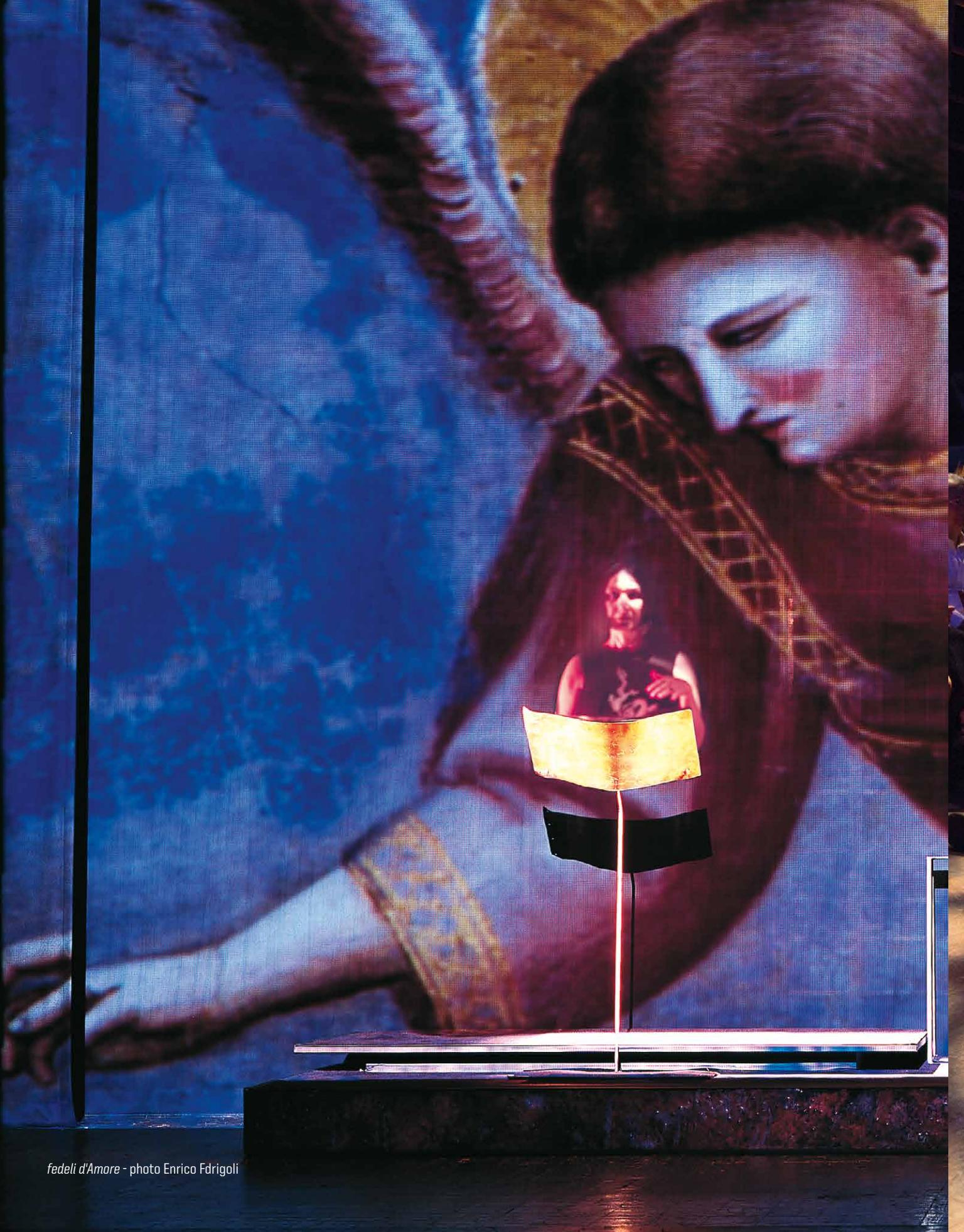
**Maria Grazia Gregori**, delteatro.it, February 17, 2017

"On the Albe's stage the impossible thought of death is chiselled by the characteristics of a voice of fire and iron. Beautiful, full of grace and force, capable of cruelty and abandon, Ermanna Montanari is mother of a love that eludes rhetoric. Mary combatant who has neither answers nor vendettas nor redemptions. She has not forgiven God for letting her son die, even if he was then resurrected. Maryam does not know resignation or pacification, she leaves intact the pain of loss. Pure, whole, absolute, this pain seems an enigma. [...] Ermanna Montanari moves imperceptibly, fixed in space, bound to the thin microphone stand. The way of her body, absolutely present, alive but immobile, impetuous but restrained, arouses a growing, subterranean longing in the spectators. Francesco Catacchio's lighting fills the bare stage. Only the voice moves and shifts the bodies all around it. The boundary between stage and stalls is dissolved. The motionless pain in the gestures seems reflected in the Koranic sounds, now solemn, now frantic, of Luigi Ceccarelli's music with the sound engineering of Marco Olivieri. A veil separates us from Maryam. Ungraspable, the woman's body is a shadow, it is all the shadows of the world, all the names of history."

**Caterina Piccione**, February 17, 2017

"As for Ermanna, how to describe the result she achieves? With regard to her other top performances, in this case she is on less familiar terrain. She is not called on to delineate those powerful Romagnol peasant women of hers but Arab women, bearers of another culture, another expressive measure, another temperature of passions: she must diversify these three female presences in their accents, must curb their vehemence in order to avoid rhetoric, and she does all of this with a naturalness that amazes. Immobile and erect before the microphone, standing out in a tenuous pool of light, with no external artifice except, in Mary's response, a bizarre luminous halo of the kind used in popular devotion, she seems here and there to dematerialise, she becomes pure phoné and her delivery, now restrained, now raucous, angry, comes to resemble a motionless song, a song without notes, not sung but solely spoken, intoned within herself without need of accompaniment."

**Renato Palazzi**, Il Sole24ore, February 19, 2017



*fedeli d'Amore* - photo Enrico Fdrigoli



*Inferno* - photo Silvia Lelli

"There is a theatre of vision and poetry that questions the present by drawing on humanity's efforts to give a reason for its own existence. This tension has always characterized the poetics and politics of the Teatro delle Albe and the research of Ermanna Montanari and Marco Martinelli. *Maryam* reaffirms their ability to question the universal, the mythical story, the religious cement, to give voice to it, to shout out the 'scandal' of it before the unfathomable non-sense of pain. [...] Luca Doninelli's text is a painful canto, a suffocated cry that Ermanna Montanari embodies, sublimates in the sound and iconic mechanism fine-tuned by Marco Martinelli, backed up by Luigi Ceccarelli's music, Marco Olivieri's sound engineering and Francesco Catacchio's lighting design. [...] The text in Arabic (translated by Tahar Lamri) projected on the scrim that distances Ermanna Montanari and makes her an image, is alternated with projections and visual inventions that interweave with an evocative and poetic soundtrack which gives breath to the stories, underscores the hieratic scansion of those prayers, entrusted to Ermanna Montanari's extraordinary vocal instrument. [...] You come away from Ermanna Montanari's *Maryam* with your eyes full of elegance and beauty, with confirmation of the expressive power of an actress who is also an author, inimitable in her performative art."

**Nicola Arrigoni**, Sipario, February 27, 2017

"*Inferno* at the Teatro delle Albe, adapted from Dante's poem, with a fascinating soundscape perfected by Luigi Ceccarelli. With this work, Marco Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari, the performance's two souls, have reached one of the summits of their theatrical (and musical) careers. [...] In a previous piece, I spoke of Ermanna Montanari's vocal art (no more and no less than a Callas of recitation). If we take one of her most virtuoso and moving 'declaimed arias', the monologue of the avaricious and the prodigal (Canto VII), which reaches its climax with the verse-refrain 'for which the human race each other buffet', we find ourselves faced not only with rap (as many have said), but also ecclesiastic cantillation, ancient *paracatalogé*, recitative, rhythmic melologue, modern *Sprechgesang* – many different voices live in Ermanna's Voice, and 'diverse voices make sweet sounds'."

**Emilio Sala**, Amadeus, July 22, 2017

"*fedeli d'Amore (Love's faithful)* therefore takes its place in the journey through Dante, begun in 2017 with the *Inferno* and scheduled to continue with the other two parts of the *Comedy*. So along the familiar lines of the courses plotted by Martinelli, Montanari and the Albe, it stands as a sort of brief open commentary, linked to the main voyage. A polyptych in seven panels, as we said, it speaks in seven different voices, all contained within the acting wisdom of an Ermanna Montanari who – it's now a commonplace to say so – is outstanding in transfiguring the word by making it pass through her body in such a way that it occupies the entire stage, building spaces and meanings, distilling them from a writing that retains their sounds by exalting their signifying capacity, while young Simone Marzocchi on stage with his trumpet underscores the sometimes unpredictable tonal passages and leaps. An Ermanna Montanari, among other things, magically immersed in sudden flashes of light that cross the dark depths of the

set in a pursuit of angelic Giotto figures, almost open glances, between wonder and anguish, at the contemporary inferno."

**Dolores Pesce**, dramma.it, June 18, 2018

"The dense voyage that Ermanna Montanari takes us on in *fedeli d'Amore (Love's faithful)* is an installation of contemporary art and Theatre. Alone at the lectern, and then accompanied by the descents of acute and hallucinating notes from Simone Marzocchi's trumpet and the highly refined score of Luigi Ceccarelli, Montanari is transfixed by lights that pierce the existential darkness in which she is immersed. The set is a postmodern polyptych of words and images projected onto the backdrop, at the centre a skeleton of Mondrian-esque evocation, overlapping squares and rectangles. Between stage and stalls, an opaque curtain: Montanari and the musician are apparitions. Ghosts, momentary incarnations ready to disappear. Martinelli's writing, soaked in Ravenna dialect and stitched into the polyhedral voice of the witch Montanari, recounts – and imagines – slices of the life and thoughts of the exiled poet, hunted, a refugee. His twenty years of flight in an Italy 'that kicks itself, disunited, lacerated, shattered and false'."

**Francesca Saturnino**, larepubblica.it, July 7, 2018

#### Reflections made by the photographers who work with Ermanna

Taken from Laura Mariani, *Ermanna Montanari. Fare-disfare-rifare nel Teatro delle Albe*, Titivillus, 2012.

"I immediately saw her power, her ability in vocal and physical metamorphosis. But how could one harness that beehive, how could one block that whirlwind of energy?"

**Enrico Fedrigoli**

"An untameable and dazzling creature of the stage."

**Marco Caselli Nirmal**

"I try to catch the most direct side of Ermanna, who does as she wishes and is thus at ease with herself."

**Silvia Lelli**

"It seems to me that the way we perceive such a carnal voice is all the stronger when there's something evanescent in her image, when we don't entirely grasp the limits of her limbs or the features of her face."

**Claire Pasquier**

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photo Silvia Lelli