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Noise in the Waters: the sounds of an ongoing tragedy

DI GEORGE DE STEFANO

Italy's Teatro delle Albe's dark and disturbing production about Mediterranean migration to Europe has its US premiere

Yusuf, a teenager from Western Sahara, drowns, along with all the passengers he has promised to take to Europe, when a wave swamps their overcrowded dinghy.

Jean-Baptiste, a small boy, eight days adrift on a raft packed with desperate and dying adults, leaps into the sea, thinking he is going home to his mother in North Africa.

Jasmine, a young Tunisian, flees her homeland, and, after enduring a grueling sea crossing, arrives in Sicily where, to survive, she sells sex to an 80-year-old man.

Then there are those whose names we never learn, like the seventy-seven who, thrown overboard after their boat breaks apart offshore the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, are hacked to death when a careless Italian admiral forgets to turn off the propellers of the launch he commands.

We never see these tragedies in *Rumore di Acque (Noise in the Waters)*, a dark and intense production by the Italian theatre company Teatro delle Albe currently having its American premiere at La MaMa in Manhattan. In the show, a dramatic monologue accompanied by live music, an unnamed Italian general tells us about them. Clad in a military tunic adorned with medals, his eyes hidden by sunglasses, the general relates his horrifying stories of desperation and death in a barking, guttural voice, full of scalding sarcasm, frustration and rage.

As superbly impersonated by Alessandro Renda, the general is an impotent observer of the terrible plight of refugees from the global south who, seeking to escape political and random violence, poverty and hunger, board unseaworthy vessels and set off for European shores. Obsessed with imposing order on chaos, the general totes up the numbers of the living and the dead, compiling his lists with maniacal intensity. He alternates his compulsive numbering with stories about the refugees, who, in his vivid accounts, become so real to us that although we never actually see them, we do.

Marco Martinelli, a co-founder of Teatro delle Albe, wrote the play in 2010 from news accounts and from interviews he conducted with immigrants who had made it to Sicily. (The production debuted four years ago in Ravenna, the Teatro delle Albe's home base.) He researched the work during a year's worth of trips to Mazara del Vallo, which, though in Sicily, is, according to Martinelli, "the most Tunisian city in Europe." There, he reports in the program notes, he and his colleagues heard not only "stories and testimonies," but also "the song of the muezzin on Italian soil."

That sound is evoked by Onofrio and Lorenzo Mancuso – aka Fratelli Mancuso – Sicilian musicians whose work is rooted in Sicilian and other Mediterranean traditional music. Seated upstage from the general, wearing matching brown suits and a somber mien, they accompany the general as he rants, and

perform alone at moments when his torrent of words subsides. They play a variety of Mediterranean instruments and sing, in close, piercing harmony, performing one song – “Lamentazione,” from their album *Cantu* -- as an a cappella duet. The brothers’ music, rich in the Arab, Byzantine, and Italian influences that have come into Sicilian culture over millennia, is consistently affecting, and an essential element of the production’s emotional power.

Rumore di Acque has been brilliantly directed and designed, respectively by Marco Martinelli and Teatro delle Albe co-founder Ermanna Montanari. Alessandro Renda as the general speaks to us from within a circle of volcanic rocks suggesting an island. He delivers his soliloquy in Italian (the adequate, but at times attenuated English translation is projected on a rear wall) and in English. Renda, throughout the 90-minute production, performs with focused intensity and great gestural and vocal resourcefulness. Speaking into a microphone he sometimes wields as a weapon, he’s a strutting, arrogant, and disturbing figure, but Renda makes him a compelling one, too. And, more than that -- someone who, as a comfortable and privileged Westerner, isn’t too remote from us, the audience.

In a Brechtian touch, the play ends on an unresolved note. There is no catharsis, and little hope, and how could there be, given the continuing crisis in the Mediterranean and the ongoing failure of "Fortress Europe" to respond in a humane manner. (The play bitterly mocks the empty buzzwords of government -- "progress," "freedom," "open-door policy.") The “noise in the waters” reaches our ears through this remarkable production, which demands of us: now that you’ve heard this, what will you do?

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