Ermanna Montanari

To the voice for the north face
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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, 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 Gesellschaft 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 Campianesi 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 Pitozzi 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 actresses 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

Campianesi 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 rîzôvà”, 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 fèt a lè, da par te?” “What are you doing in there all by yourself?” “Ya fura a’ e sôl, ya 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. Campianesi Miniatures, Oblomov Edizioni, 2016, pp. 96 - 98

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 (Julien 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 Luç 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 Bêlda in Luș. 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 perceivable 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.”
**DIALOGUE BETWEEN ERMANNA MONTANARI AND ENRICO PITOZZI 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 annull 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 not geometry, but rather the way geometry transforms, modifies itself. Space is the way sound speaks of this quality of space. I’d like to dwell on this point: the space of the figure and the space of sound.

**ERMANNA MONTANARI:** 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 rakesliss ours nerves, but this is the space we’ve have 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 halves” 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, rolling, pollution, chaos, which I inhabit like a meand. 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: adapting 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 microphon. 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 Stterminio (Extermination, 2008), for the role of Signora Cazzafuoco, the voice is the porosity of our bones. For Alcina and Bêlda, 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 Bêlda 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 hermaphroditone, 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 enchained 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 – ἄνευμα in Greek – sign, gesture, but also ἀνευμα: blowing, breath, or νεύμα: 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.
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 animatingly rich, 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 Polacchi [I Polacchi] at Teatro Rasi, their home theater in Ravenna. “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 avoid the foolish temptation to attribute reason to one and emotion to the other, 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 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.”

Thus with Montanari and Martinelli we find ourselves well outside the mythology of the god-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 measureable 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.” 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 patience, 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”. Their alchemical process involves every artifice of the spectacle, starting from this first call, 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. She has developed this autonomy thanks to the path she has pursued within Teatro delle Albe, by
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, 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.

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. 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 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 Marti- nielli, 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 familiarity 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.

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 illusion 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”. 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.

There are several key moments in this artistic dialectic as it has developed and modified over time: in 1937, the couple's decision to do theater; in 1988, the first mature spectacle, Confine [Border]; in 1993, the landmark Cenci [derived from Artaud's play]; and in 2010 the company’s
adaptation of Mollière'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 *Wayzcek*, Raffé in *Confine*, Rosvita in *Rosvita*, and Beatrice in *Cenci*.16

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],17 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 realization of Ermanna's "politicized theater" and thus contributed to the flowering of the company's aesthetic principle of the "politttttttico", not from the viewpoint of the narrator, but from that of the body of the actor who inspires the telling.18

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 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 I had no words and I was seeking them. Finally I 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 came out they were like millstones; they created a sacred void when he spoke. I have modelled my voice on that sound. [...]. 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 slenderer 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.19

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

16. See the chronology on the Teatro delle Albe website.
17. "Teatro politttttttico" was invented by Martinelli and Montanari at the "Teatro e politica" conference organized by Giuseppe Bar- tolucci in Narni in 1987. The text of the manifesto was first published in M. Martinelli, *Teatro impuro*. Bonifica, polittico in sette quadri [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, [...].
Vu pensiero - photo Sara Colciago

L'Avare - photo Tommaso Li Pera
psychological interpretations and private ramifications to reaffirm 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 stuttering, his equilibrium and my imbalance, his firmness and my corrosion. Marco, who so loves words in theater, agreed to test himself in an uncustomed terrain, to construct a scenic score made principally of silence, of bodies, an atmosphere to breathe in. Few words, but exactly those.20

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 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 scenic score made principally of silence, of bodies, an atmosphere to breathe in. Few words, but exactly those.

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, Rovista.21 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.22 Ravenna Teatro, with offices at the company’s home theater, Teatro Rasi, is fully staffed with an experienced, long-term team of skilled administrators.

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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 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 a stage character who lives an independent life, one greater than any confusion provoked by a mere shift in sexual identity.

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The impasse lasted late into the rehearsal process, involving the entire company, and we seemed incompatible with the precious cage envisaged by Molière and the clamor he created uncontrollable as Jarry’s Mère Ubu. But the path leading to the music of the final composition on his safe/house, a patriarch hostile toward useless words and irritated by noise, as avid and caracter) of Harpagon could be re-activated out of the genetic magma with which the actress herself, a dynamic peculiar to her art: How to conform her own process of creation with the petit-bourgeois society that surrounds him? Certainly, the figure (more even than the cha-

maternity of the character of Harpagon and with his identity within the excruciatingly normal

event of the group”) and that of Roberto Magnani, an Albe member of the second generation, who came to the experience (“a hellish October, after which something clicked and worries were over, but there were ghosts that continued to hover around the stage”).


ta-Taida "offers for a mystic burial", 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.

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 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 Jarry's I Polacchi and the subsequent world travels of this later spectacle, a free interpretation of Jarry's Ubu in giro per il pianeta. 1998-2008.
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 Perhindërian 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 Perhindërian, the characters Varia (Ermanna) and Emmanuel (Dadina) allude to Jarry’s relation with his own mother, which he saw in Christological terms. In Marco’s 1989 play Bonífico, the Romagnol characters Daura (Ermanna) and Arterio (Dadina) have a similar relation; and in a dialect text by Nevio Spadoni, author of Lu, 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 Perhindërian, 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. Suspended above the flames, surrounded by the smoke rising up around her, accompanied by the music of the ‘Holy Anchories’ of Mahler’s B² Symphony, Varia murmured her apocalyptic prophecy, a gloomy monologue in dialect by the smoke rising up around her, accompanied by the music of the ‘Holy Anchorites’ of Mahler’s B² 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. It would be M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, L’Apocalisse del molto comune, cit., 123-127.

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36. Cfr. L’amore ubalsolo, 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 Bizzocchi and Catia Galli of Masque Teatro, made in its lower part by long cylinders punctured with holes that contained waxed gauze.
40. M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, L’Apocalisse del molto comune, cit., 120.
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-scientific and other pedagogical activities of the company had been run exclusively by Marco, who is possessed of the demon of wishing to pass on theatrical knowledge.

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, 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 technita Dio-nisoa, thinking of the actor's craft as a mystery based on accumulated experience, forms, and mental habitude. 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.

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 sink in life from outside and put the century-old force 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. This is Martinelli’s method for working on classic texts, subjecting them to a 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.

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 Perhindirion. Alongside him stands Ermanna Montanari as Médar Ubu, “extremely white, from hair down to her tunic, like a miraculous Madonna or a spectral witch, cuddled 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 attention-scraping of her harsh dialect”. 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 the demon of wishing to pass on theatrical knowledge. Her 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. 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”.

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, and

45. Since 2007 Ermanna has conducted an ongoing laboratory with girls named the high wire, mobilizing on one side the barbarian romagnol dialect, and on the other their lives and put the century-old farce back on its feet, to make it lame and play with it, on the ward.
46. 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., 34.
47. M. Martinelli, E. Montanari, L’Apocalisse del molto comune, cit., 35.

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., with extremely high heels that made her stride, forcing her to take small steps in a wave movement that emphasized the body’s mobility. 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 Pêdar 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). 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 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 through the village with a fence of sugarcane stalks placed at rhythmic intervals. The gazebo was painted black and must conduct a lengthy physical preparation in order to be “in symphonic relation with the outside”. The production of I Polacchi went on extended tours, with important performances in Belgrade and Teheran, 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 tira, 2007, in which Ermanna also performed a support function in the production of the spectacle). The work has been continuously revised and reactivated. Martellini 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. Working on space and stage language, Ermanna varied the elements in the successive editions of I Polacchi as it toured the world. At Teatro Resi in Ravenna, the set evoked Jarry’s pataphysics, featuring a “machine for de-braining”, the golden, papier-mâché horse first used in Perhindérian, 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. The model for Mother Ubu, after all, was the character Varia from Perhindérian, 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
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). 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.” 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. 

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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.

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, which 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 “canzoniere”. 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 Badina, new actors have joined the company in successive waves. First came Roberta Magnani, Alessandro Argnani, and Alessandro Renda, followed by a still younger generation including Michela Marangoni, Laura Raschi, 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.

60. E. Montanari, La piana del Adda, in iv, 79.  
61. 76-77.
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 indiscernible 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.62

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”.63

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62. From the Santarcangelo Festival program, 2011.
63. Incursione patafisica al Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, cit., 46.
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 Lus, 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 Santag, 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 *Lus* 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 *Lus* and *Pérsia* 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, squalls, mine-deep exhortations of woe, birdlike chirps of malicious gleam. 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 bring to mind *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 bring to mind some of the terrifying centre of the performance.”

Maria Giulia Minetti, *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 material body, and ‘refutes merchandise’ by avoiding any kind of reassuring pleasantry. 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-assemble: 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

“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 pleasantry. 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-assemble: 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.”

Walter Porcedda, *La Nuova Sardegna*, February 27, 2011
“Ermanna Montanari speaks, shrieks and grows 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 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 apothecary 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 inimicable 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

“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 tran-
smuted into an aura. This is an artistic maturity that has become mastery (the antique, the ar-
chetype 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 can-
celled 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 latitudes, 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. Lux.”

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

“Many of us remember the traumatic and exalting experience of L’isola di Alcina, the Concer-
to 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 Mon-
tanari, 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 sta-
te, quintessential, which communicates, impassions, strikes in its entirety. The new chapter is
entitled Lux, 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 ricevera, inaugu-
rated the season directed by Francesca De Santis. La camera da ricevera, 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 dan-
gers’. 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 ima-
gination, 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 per-
sonality 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,
Bêlda 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 com-
pany 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, smooths 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 for-
bidden, 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 8 thousand spectators go through evil to become pure. [...] In our superficial years of tech-
nological 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 Le 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 Negritude, 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,
frantic, of Luigi Ceccarelli’s music with the sound engineering of Marco Olivieri. A veil separates
the praying of three Palestnian women addressed to Mary, Maryam in Luca Doninelli’s text, the
lectern, behind a veil on which projectons and plays of colour are shown, she brings to life
the prayers of three Palestnian 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
Martellini’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 projectons of mosaics, crowds devastated by war,
and architectures of Luigi Ceccarelli’s live electronics and Daniele Roccato’s string bass.
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and architectures of Luigi Ceccarelli’s live electronics and Daniele Roccato’s string bass.

Ermanna Montanari, amid projectons, 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 narraton. 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 characteristcs of a voi-
ce 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 vendetas nor redemptons. She has not forgiven God for letting her son die, even if he was
then resurrected. Maryam does not know resignaton or pacifcaton, she leaves intact the pain
of loss. Pure, whole, absolute, this pain seems an enigma. [...] Ermanna Montanari moves imper-
ceptbly, fixed in space, bound to the thin microphone stand. The way of her body, absolut-
ly 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 motonless pain in the gestures seems refected 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 per-
formances, in this case she is on less familiar terrain. She is not called on to delineate the-
se 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 microph-
one, 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, intu-
ed within herself without need of accompaniment.”
Renato Palazzi, Il Sole24ore, February 19, 2017
Inferno - photo Silvia Lelli
fedeli d'Amore - photo Enrico Fdrigoli
“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 poet’s 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 Cecarelli’s music, Marco Oliveri’s sound engineering and Francesco Catachichi’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 intersect 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 Cecarelli. 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 paracataloge, 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, drama.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 Cecarelli, 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 Mondriaesque 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 polyphonic 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