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## REPORT

### STAGING DANTE TODAY A THREE-DAY RESIDENCY OF TEATRO DELLE ALBE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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“Dante is everyman.” Quoting Ezra Pound,<sup>1</sup> incidentally Penn *alumnus*, Marco Martinelli, dramaturg and director, addressed the audience on stage at the Annenberg Center Live at the University of Pennsylvania and answered the question on why Dante and his *Commedia* still resonate to this day, and how it is possible to reenact his masterpiece in front of a contemporary audience. Being able to make Dante’s verses meaningful in this day and age is no small feat; nevertheless, Teatro delle Albe has been working toward this goal, as Martinelli and Montanari, founders of Teatro delle Albe, successfully showed during their performance at the University of Pennsylvania on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2019.

Marco Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari, as it turns out, are not accustomed to shy away from formidable challenges. Since they founded Teatro delle Albe in 1983, they have managed to create a synergy between classical material and modern *mise en scene*, staging works such as “L’isola di Alcina” (2000),<sup>2</sup> “Sogno di una notte di mezza estate” (2002)<sup>3</sup> and “Rosvita” (2008)<sup>4</sup> to great

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1910), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Alcina is a renowned character in Ludovico Ariosto’s masterpiece *The Orlando Furioso*. The Compagnia delle Albe, inspired by this figure belonging to the Italian literary canon, told a story set in Romagna which recalls certain thematic aspects of the 16th century poem.

<sup>3</sup> As the title suggests, “Sogno di una notte di mezza estate” is a rethinking of one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays, although it is employed by the Teatro delle Albe as a steppingstone for a broader reflection on dreams.

<sup>4</sup> The figure of Rosvita – already staged by Teatro delle Albe in 1991 – belongs to the German literary canon. Roswitha of Gandersheim is considered to be the first German female poet in history, although she wrote her poems entirely in Latin. Montanari

acclaim. One of their latest projects, however, appears to be, in terms of scale, the most ambitious and challenging one they have brought to the stage so far. With the 700th anniversary of Dante's death approaching, the Teatro delle Albe decided, in 2017, to stage the first of the three installments that will eventually compose their final triptych: "Inferno" (2017), "Purgatorio" (2019) and, in 2021, "Paradiso". Given the sacrality of the material – especially for an Italian audience – and the seemingly insurmountable task of recreating Dante's imagery, Martinelli and Montanari heavily relied on the participation of the public and launched a *Cantiere Dante*, which brought together hundreds of people (non-professional actors) who wanted to be a part of the show. They did not cast the role of Dante, as, returning to Pound's quote, Dante is "everyman"; therefore, the audience itself was asked to embody Dante, while Martinelli and Montanari played the role of Virgil, Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory.

In the midst of preparing the second installment of their rendition of *The Divine Comedy* (which took place in Matera in June 2019 and in Ravenna in July 2019), Martinelli and Montanari were asked to participate in a three-day residency at the University of Pennsylvania from February 27th to March 1st 2019, where they attended classes and held meetings with both students and faculty. On their first day, Martinelli and Montanari led a workshop with undergraduate students. They were tasked with discussing *Commedia dell'Arte*<sup>5</sup> in a traditional academic fashion, but eventually the class became more interactive, with all the students forming a circle around Martinelli and improvising lines from Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*. This particular centripetal approach is what makes Teatro delle Albe a unique and engaging presence within the contemporary theatrical scene; not only, as stated, through *Cantiere Dante* Martinelli and Montanari managed to bring together untrained actors and make them play various roles in the show, but they relied on the same holistic setting throughout numerous occasions (for instance, for their show "Eresia della felicità" at Santarcangelo<sup>6</sup>, they were able to involve two hundred

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remodeled Roswitha's works from Ferruccio Bertini, ed., *ROSVITA, Dialoghi drammatici* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Particularly fitting to Teatro delle Albe's idea of theatre, the "Commedia dell'Arte" heavily relied on improvisation and participation of the public. Popular in Italy, it lasted from the 16th century until the end of the 18th century, until Carlo Goldoni's reform of the theatre. See John Rudlin, *Commedia Dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> The adolescents who took part in "Eresia della felicità" arrived from various countries, including Italy, Belgium, Senegal, Brazil and the United States; dressed in yellow t-shirts, they shouted poetic verses written by Majakovskij in his youth.

adolescents from multiple countries around the world and to stage, every day for two weeks, semi-improvised performances of Vladimir Majakovskij's verses.) Majakovskij's influence can be traced, unsurprisingly, also in Teatro delle Albe's approach to Dante's *Commedia*. Martinelli himself stated, during the show at the Annenberg Center, that Majakovskij's idea of theatre relied on the participation of the masses, which figured as a starting point for Teatro delle Albe's staging of Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>7</sup>

Returning, then, to Martinelli and Montanari's show in the Annenberg Center, which served as the centerpiece of their three-day residency at the University of Pennsylvania, it is worth noting that, even on such an occasion, their mutual sense of participation with the audience never faltered. The show was divided into three parts: at first, Montanari read Canto 33 of the *Inferno*; then, Martinelli took the stage, presenting Teatro delle Albe's Dante show in Ravenna and "Il cielo sopra Kibera", another Dante-related project which took place in Nairobi in 2018; lastly, Montanari took the stage again to recite the poem *Ahi serva Italia*, which is part of Teatro delle Albe's latest show "fedeli d'Amore" and which is inspired – yet again – by an invective situated in Canto 6 of the *Purgatorio*.

As an introductory remark, Mario Sassi, PhD student in Italian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, introduced Canto 33 of the *Inferno* (the infamous Conte Ugolino's story), laying the foundation for Montanari's vocal rendition of those renowned verses. Stressing the thematic resonance of verse 42 ("e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli")<sup>8</sup> Sassi prefigured Montanari's tonal shift in her performance, which was brilliantly executed and embraced a polyphonic approach, shifting from the dark and desperate resignation of Ugolino to the innocent supplication of his children and nephews. Montanari would later describe to the audience the process by which she manages to create a *figura*,<sup>9</sup> a term which defines her staging of a character and which, in the case of Dante's damned souls, resonates even more (as Auerbach famously pointed out in his *Studi su Dante*).<sup>10</sup> Montanari, in fact, in staging her *figura* of Ugolino, or any other figure she encountered in the course of her career, finds that being immersed in crowded places, hearing people's voices, and eventually

<sup>7</sup> See Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Majakovskij e il teatro russo d'avanguardia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), 243.

<sup>8</sup> *Inf.* 33. 42.

<sup>9</sup> See Enrico Pitozzi, *Acusma. Figura e voce nel teatro sonoro di Ermanna Montanari* (Macerata: Quodlibet Studio, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Eric Auerbach, *Studi su Dante* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005).

embracing them completely, become the key factors to perfectly voice a character, even when he/she is completely distant from her own experience (as in the case of Ugolino). Montanari revealed that such a process is painful, but nevertheless necessary to find the ultimate truth in the performance.

Martinelli then took the stage, showing the audience pictures of Teatro delle Albe's *Inferno* and describing their *modus operandi* and their artistic choices (with the help of Giuseppe Bruno Chomin and Lillyrose Veneziano Broccia, who served as occasional translators). One of the crucial aspects of the conversation, and of the Teatro delle Albe's approach as a whole, appeared to be the aforementioned challenge of adapting a 14th century text in a 21st century cultural *milieu*. It is a challenge, however, that in Martinelli's view does not lead to a strict dichotomy, but rather to a syncretic approach. Not only their choice to involve untrained actors to play various characters can be seen both as an uncanny and synergetic procedure, but also Montanari and Martinelli's choice to alternate Dante's verses with the writings of contemporary artists, such as Simone Weil and Pier Paolo Pasolini in order to show how Dante's essence can be found even in fairly recent works. Martinelli indeed stressed the importance of the show's title, "Staging Dante Today", pausing after each word, understanding the importance of bringing Dante to life even after 700 years. In showing some footage from the *Inferno*, Martinelli lingered on a particular image that appeared on the screen: the last station of the show, when Dante arrives at the bottom of the infernal world and is confronted with the figure of Lucifer. Montanari and Martinelli's brilliant idea, perfectly integrated with such a strive towards modernity, consisted in substituting the classical image of the fallen angel with the one of a married couple standing on a turning platform. At first glance, both the bride and the groom appeared happy and joyful, but as soon as the platform started turning, the audience could see a hidden knife behind their back. As a matter of fact, the lowest section of Dante's *Inferno* is destined for those who betrayed (their family, their country, their guests and their benefactors); Montanari and Martinelli's re-elaboration, then, goes exactly into a rediscovery of Dante in a contemporary light.

Proceeding on the link between Dante and the contemporary world, Martinelli also presented a project that took place in Kibera, Kenya, called "Il cielo sopra Kibera" (2018), which was performed by 140 children and teenagers in Kibera, an area in

the city of Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>11</sup> The challenge of bringing Dante into this area of the world was much greater than the one they faced with the staging of the *Inferno* in Ravenna. The spatial and cultural distance, however, did not prevent Martinelli from trying to engage with that particular audience; after a short time, the kids became interested in Dante's journey and even asked him to change some details (for instance, they changed the number of the beasts Dante encountered in the first Canto: in their view, they must have been more than three!).<sup>12</sup> It is rather fitting that *kibera* actually means "forest" in Swahili; the parallels, then, between the *selva oscura* and the problematic reality in which those children and adolescents have to live are not hard to find. Martinelli continued to show footage of the show, which eventually moved from a confined location to the streets of Nairobi, since, as the reenactment of the *Inferno* progressed, the kids did not want to stop at the bottom of the Hell, but raise to Purgatory, and to Purgatory they went. Since the second *cantica* is much more filled with poets and artists than the first one,<sup>13</sup> they all proceeded to the streets yelling poems out loud, creating a contemporary Purgatory in which poetry, beauty, theatre and love are the only means to escape hell, or at least to endure it.

The will to present a contemporary version of Dante's work concerned also the last portion of the show, when Ermanna Montanari took the stage again and delivered a powerful performance of the poem *Ahi serva Italia*, written by Martinelli and included in their show "fedeli d'Amore", which constitutes a further rethinking of Dante in contemporary terms and for which Montanari won the prestigious Ubu prize. As a matter of fact, the show, which premiered in Ravenna in June 2018, is made of seven *tableaux vivants* that concern Dante and his world. Montanari, once again, immersed herself in the *gravitas* of the text, modulating her intonation and stressing key-words. Going from Dante's invective against a 14th century divided Italy, Martinelli's poem is imbued with the same anger and disillusionment that characterize Dante's verses.<sup>14</sup> The anaphoric structure of the poem (with the

<sup>11</sup> On days 3, 5 and 6 of October 2018, 140 students enrolled in the schools "Little Prince", "Cardinal Otunga", "Ushirika" and "Urafiki" performed Dante's work in the streets of Kibera. The fundraising which made this event possible was conducted through the online platform "For Funding", co-operated by Intesa San Paolo bank.

<sup>12</sup> As opposed to the leopard, lion and wolf which Dante encounters at the beginning of his journey. See *Inf.* 1.31-54.

<sup>13</sup> See James F. Wilson, "Poets and Poetry in Purgatory" in *Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, XXVI, 1972.

<sup>14</sup> The infamous invective in Canto VI of the *Purgatorio* follows the encounter with the soul of Sordello, Vergil's fellow citizen. See *Purg.* 6. 76-151.

constant repetition of “Italia”, followed by unpleasant and troublesome adjectives) brings to mind the infamous first tercet of *Inferno* 3 (“Per me si va ne la città dolente / per me si va ne l’eterno dolore/ per me si va tra la perduta gente”)<sup>15</sup> when Dante and Virgil arrive at the entrance of Hell and look at the inscription on its door. Martinelli’s words and Montanari’s execution of *Ahi serva Italia*, then, create an analogous sensation of a modern hell, in which Italian citizens grope around in the dark, unable – at least for the time being – to find a light. In Martinelli’s poem the standard Italian language is at times intertwined with numerous regional dialects, creating a plurilinguistic vibe that mirrors Dante’s use of language in the *Commedia*.<sup>16</sup> As Dante’s use of various linguistic registers captured his idea of an all-embracing poem, which would affect and concern every human being, Martinelli’s use of dialect seems to serve the same overarching purpose: a problematic social and political climate that is not confined to a single part of Italy, but is unfortunately spread out throughout the country.

The conversation resumed the following day, when Montanari and Martinelli returned to the University’s campus for a roundtable with the Graduate Students of Italian Studies. The discussion was lively and filled with precious insight about their work and method; the roundtable included some clips of their past shows, such as “Lus” and “Ubu sotto tiro”, both of which presented a strong and effective use of dialect and, especially in the case of the latter, an overwhelming participation of a teenage audience, as for the aforementioned “Il cielo sopra Kibera”.<sup>17</sup> It appears, then, that Montanari and Martinelli’s main statement after their three-day residency, in which not only they performed and presented their work, but also actively engaged with various audiences, from undergraduate students to graduate and faculty, consisted in the firm belief that Dante still speaks to us to this day; that a Dante representation is still possible in the 21st century; and, ultimately, that, if engaged in the right way, the public can – even nowadays – be enthralled by Dante’s poetic force. Emblematic, in this sense, is

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<sup>15</sup> *Inf.* 3. 1–3.

<sup>16</sup> Dante’s plurilingualism is often opposed to Petrarch’s “unilingualism”, insofar as *The Divine Comedy* presents instances of both prosaic and elevated vernacular, while Petrarch’s poetic language is very consistent. See Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati and Jürgen Trabant, ed., *Dante’s Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> “Lus”, performed for the first time in 2015, was based on a short poem written in the vernacular of the Emilia Romagna region by Nevio Spadoni. The protagonist, Belda, is a seer and healer who is the victim of malevolent falsehoods. “Ubu sotto tiro”, performed in 2007 in Scampia (Naples), was based on Alfred Jarry’s writings and adapted in the Neapolitan vernacular.

an anecdote that Martinelli and Montanari told the audience during their show: when preparing for the staging of the *Inferno*, they asked a 12-year-old girl to impersonate Beatrice. Although it appeared to be quite challenging to entrust a child's sensibility with such powerful verses, she ultimately told them that those words spoke to her and that she felt them like her own. Staging Dante today, therefore, not only seems to be possible, but, with the direction of Teatro delle Albe, it also becomes an engaging and maieutic experience.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Teatro delle Albe will return to the University of Pennsylvania in early October 2020 to offer workshops for the Italian Studies and the Music programs, and to stage the American premiere of “fedeli d’Amore: polittico in sette quadri per Dante Alighieri” at the Annenberg Center Live. The visit is sponsored by the Center for Italian Studies (Mauro Calcagno), the Italian Section of the Department of Romance Languages (Eva Del Soldato), and the Annenberg Center Live (Christopher Gruits), all at the University of Pennsylvania.