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REPORT

'PURGATORIO' 2019: A RESPONSE TO THE WORK OF MARCO MARTINELLI AND ERMANNA MONTANARI

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This brief report discusses Marco Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari's *Purgatorio* 2019 at Ravenna's Teatro delle Albe. The report sets out three aspects of the political remediation of Dante's *Purgatorio* that the Teatro delle Albe has offered: first, a plurilingual, pluricultural vision of Italy; second, an emphasis on denouncing domestic violence; and third, an environmentalist impulse that reads the tropes of care and cultivation in Dante's canticle in the light of the notable engagement of today's youth to protest our current state of environment crisis.

Keywords: Dante, Teatro delle Albe, *Purgatorio*, Marco Martinelli, Ermanna Montanari

Many are convinced that the world we inhabit is, or has recently become, infernal. Dante's first canticle lends itself easily to re-interpretations tightly woven with references to hellish contemporary politics. It was in this key that Marco Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari, founders of Ravenna's Teatro delle Albe, presented the *Inferno* in 2017. But what of the *Purgatorio*, the canticle of penitence and prayer? For Martinelli and Montanari, the *Commedia* is not a work that needs to be adapted for theatre; for them it already is, in its inherent modes, theatre.¹ Martinelli and Montanari see their work as directors to be that of rendering the theatrical nature of the poem visible, making it available to as many participants as possible. It would be a stretch to speak about "spectators" for a performance like theirs; even on the night that I saw it, disrupted by violent thunderstorms that forced the show indoors, those of us in our comfortable seats at the Teatro Rasi were all made participants.²

¹ Marco Martinelli, *Nel nome di Dante: Diventare grandi con la Divina Commedia* (Milan: Ponte alle Grazie, 2019), 98.

² I attended the performance on the 9th of July, 2019.

On a usual night for this series of performances, the entire city of Ravenna delineates a sequence of spaces that the viewing public must traverse, pause in, and encounter anew.³ Rather than the whole city becoming a stage, it might be more accurate to say that the poem takes its place in the here and now, makes itself present in the trajectories the directors have set out by following the urban space itself.

But what is the mode of this participation for the audiences of *Purgatorio* 2019? Ultimately, also for the *Purgatorio*, as for *Inferno*, the engagement is political. There has been much recent interest within Italian Dante scholarship, in academic circles as well as in work directed towards a broader public, in Dante's biography and the story of his political entanglements.⁴ Martinelli's book on Dante pushes in this direction, intertwining the story of Dante's life with the story of his relationship with his father. The Dante that comes forth for Martinelli and Montanari's *Purgatorio* is thus deeply personal and intensely political. In what follows, I will briefly set out three aspects of the political remediation of Dante's *Purgatorio* that the Teatro delle Albe has offered, first, a plurilingual, pluricultural vision of Italy, second, an emphasis on denouncing domestic violence, and third, an environmentalist impulse that reads the tropes of care and cultivation in Dante's canticle in the light of the notable engagement of today's youth to protest our current state of environment crisis.

Scholars have discussed the plurilingual nature of Dante's poem in great detail;⁵ Martinelli and Montanari in their turn have presented us with a plurilingual *Purgatorio* that strikes the listener's ear with political force. In addition to Dante's Italian, this *Purgatorio* rings out with voices speaking, regional dialects, English, French, Romanian, Swahili, and Wolof. These are the voices of the people of Ravenna, wherever they may hail from, including recent and not-so-recent immigrants as well as the voices of visitors, young non-professional actors who have worked with Martinelli in Nairobi and Timisoara. These voices form a glorious plurilingual chorus with profound political punch at a time when rhetoric in Italy that claims itself "national" seeks to define its nationalism by the principle of exclusion. The Marco Lombardo presented here

³ For more information on the performances, see <https://www.teatrodel-lealbe.com/ita/spettacolo.php?id=993&PosPadre=8>

⁴ To give just two examples: Marco Santagata, *Dante: Il romanzo della sua vita* (Milan: Mondadori, 2013); Emilio Pasquini, *Vita di Dante* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2015).

⁵ See, for example, *Dante's Plurilingualism*, eds. Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gagnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (London: Legenda, 2010).

(fused with lines from Sordello) thus makes his plea for Italian unity in a choral setting that proclaims that Italy as profoundly diverse.

Dante populated his poem with a willed mixture of “anime che son di fama note” (*Par.* 17, 138) and his own, unknown, friends and relations, such as Belacqua or Forese, filling the lines of his three cantiche with names drawn from across time, from near and far. In a similar way, this Ravennan *Purgatorio* of 2019 fills itself with names and stories, some known from Dante’s poem and some known within that local context. In a rearrangement of the sequence of *Purgatorio*, the first penitents the public encounters are the souls of murdered women. In the months preceding the performance, groups of local women worked with members of the Teatro delle Albe team, collecting and writing stories of violence that they and their friends and neighbors had personally experienced. In one of the most powerful and moving scenes of the evening, the women came in to the theatre in a horde, each dressed in gowns and wedding veils, exhorting the members of the audience, “Ricorditi di me”. Their stories were told in anguished cries, Pia’s “Siena mi fê, disfecemi Maremma” (*Purg.* 5, 134), followed by a sequence of local stories of horror, each condensed, in the manner of Pia, to a single sentence or little more. Amongst these stories of abuse and death was a voice speaking for Giulia Ballestri, the 39-year-old woman from Ravenna killed by her husband, a prominent dermatologist and television personality, in 2016.⁶ The voices told stories specific and local, but also universal, deadeningly familiar tales of abuse. As in Dante’s poem, it is precisely the particular character of the individual encounter that allows the reader to engage with the nature of human behaviour in all of its potential violence and its capacity to overcome that violence.

This theatrical adaptation keeps faith with the modes of the poem in its commitment to the local and the personal even in its claims for universality. Where the adaptation instead steps away from the modes of Dante’s *Purgatorio* is in the question of forgiveness and penitence. Pia is saved and the infernal Francesca is not for all sorts of reasons that the poem does and does not divulge. But one difference that comes forth clearly is that “pentendo e perdonando, fora di vita uscimmo a Dio pacificati” pronounced by the victims of violence in *Purgatorio* (*Purg.* 5, 52-53). Such forgiveness and sense of peace is perhaps not possible for a living chorus of women raging today, now, on behalf of their murdered sisters; the emphasis shifts, here, to remembrance of the dead and, in playing

⁶https://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/06/22/news/donna_uccisa_a_bastone-199720920/?refresh_ce

the roles of those dead, to calling out the injustice, the indignity, the cruelty and infernally repetitive nature of domestic violence.

Laura Redaelli, one of the Teatro delle Albe team who worked with this group, pointed out in conversation that one difficulty was detaching these personal stories from individuals. The lines shifted from one person to another on different nights, so that each woman was unlikely to tell her ‘own’ story. Such detachment of the personal was necessary and important; each is voicing a personal story, but ‘ownership’ of the personal must be given up in the service of this collective performance. The nature of the work of the *Purgatorio* depends on this handing over of ownership, of renouncing any sense of individualistic self-fashioning in order to work as a community, to speak words not (only) your own. This humility of community, this sense of the individual as part of a group came forth again and again over the course of the evening. The circumstances of pushing hundreds of actors indoors on the particular night that I was there meant that Martinelli and Montanari’s roles as Virgils and Beatrices, (both Virgil, both Beatrice) were brought to another level of also micro-guidance; they called forth groups and individuals by name, both Dantean names and the ‘real’ names of the individuals. These names, long-known and less known, filled the evening with a sense of the personal relationships and affections, the work and the sense of communal belonging that these performances have fostered.



Alessandro Argnani, Luigi Dadina. Photo by Silvia Lelli 2019©. Reproduced here with permission from Teatro delle Albe.

These Ravenna performances follow a series of performances in Matera, and in each case Martinelli and Montanari have thought carefully about the urban space and formed their scenes in response to those spaces. While in Matera, the penitents on the terrace of greed lay prostrate, as in Dante's poem, on an ornate floor, there was no appropriate surface in Ravenna on which to place Adrian V and Hugh Capet.⁷ The innovation for Ravenna was instead to sheathe the pope's feet in army green wellies and hand him a hoe. In the Ravenna *Purgatorio*, the avaricious are cultivating the garden. And this decision seems to have led to a compelling thread throughout the performance that speaks to the concept of cultivation and care of the natural world.

The emphasis may be seen through the discourses on art in the terrace of the proud; the presiding genius of that terrace in this remediation is Joseph Beuys in the place of Oderisi. If, in Beuys's work, we see a staging of the handing over of art from the few to the many, a gesture interpreted here in the penitential frame of humility to compensate for artistic pride, we also see, in the work of transformation handed over to each individual, the aspect of care for the natural world. We might think, for instance, of '7000 Eichen', in which 7000 basalt stones, not dissimilar in their appearance to what one might imagine on the backs of the Dante's prideful penitents, were piled on the lawn in front of the Museum Fredericianum in Kassel in 1982.⁸ This weight would be relieved, as, one by one, each stone was paired with an oak tree planted somewhere in the city. And so, in this *Purgatorio*, the pope and the king are given the work of cultivation that they failed to accomplish in life.

The stress on the issue of the care of our earthly gardens reaches its appropriate culmination in the Earthly Paradise, which in Ravenna was represented by a parking lot. As Marco Martinelli in the role of guide explains, this is our Earthly Paradise; no *locus amoenus* is left to us. We are left with our 'aiuola avvelenata', as Martinelli put it. In this bare space, four adolescent Mateldas dressed as Greta Thunberg are disconsolately prodding the tiny margins of soil in four pots containing juvenile fruit trees. When Ermanna Montanari reads Beatrice's lines to Dante, her voice is

⁷ I thank the directors for the pleasure of talking through postures and gestures for the *Purgatorio* with them at the Teatro Rasi in December: "Verso il Purgatorio 2019: persone e gesti nel purgatorio di Dante"; A dialogue with Marco Martinelli, Ermanna Montanari, Heather Webb, Giuseppe Ledda, 1 December 2018 <https://www.teatrodellealbe.com/ita/contenuto.php?id=113>

⁸ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-7000-oak-trees-ar00745#3>

gentle. But the Mateldas are far rougher with the audience, shouting Greta Thunberg's "You've run out excuses and we are running out of time". In this *Purgatorio*, today's *Purgatorio*, it is the children who denounce and who bless. Cato, played by an elderly citizen of Ravenna, is mild, Beatrice's reproach to Dante has lost its sting, but the children speak with energy and with righteous anger, the sort of anger that Dante attributes to Saint Peter in his *Paradiso*. And it is the children, at the end, who touch each of the heads of the assembled members of the public to pronounce them "puro e disposto a salire alle stelle".

Marco Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari have offered us a *Purgatorio* that shows what a living poem this is, an organism that opens itself to remediation and to performance because it contains within itself the possibility for varied modes of engagement. Their *Purgatorio* 2019 is an intensely political endeavour, seeking to incite participants to acts of art, acceptance, cultivation, and care.