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SALTO MORTALE CON QUADRUPLIO
AVVITAMENTO: SEVEN ITERATIONS
IN ENGLISH OF MARCO MARTINELLI'S
RUMORE DI ACQUE (NOISE IN THE WATERS)
LETTER

Visibility takes shape in the same way two facing mirrors generate two infinite series of images enclosed one in another that do not actually belong to either of the two surfaces, so that each is nothing but a replica of the other, thus forming a couple more real than each on its own.

Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

Dear Doriana,

in these pages I will discuss seven varied iterations in English of Marco Martinelli's play *Rumore di acque* which were published or produced in the United States between 2011 and 2015. *Rumore di acque* is an hour-long stage monologue written by Martinelli in 2010 for Teatro delle Albe actor Alessandro Renda, which presents a grotesque, deranged military bureaucrat ("The General") who raves about the impossible task assigned to him of keeping records of the tens of thousands of people who have died at sea trying to cross from Africa into Italy. At intervals throughout the monologue, the Mancuso Brothers sing mournful laments adapted from the Sicilian folk tradition.

In her intervention at the *Translation and Its Theories* Summer School in L'Aquila in 2019, citing Ervino Pocar's observation that «translation is impossible, but we have always translated, and always will»¹, Angela Albanese described theatrical translation as

¹ Ervino Pocar, *Rispetto di quel povero artiere che è il traduttore*, in *L'artefice*

an acrobatic *salto mortale* with four increasing degrees of difficulty:

1. *Salto mortale 1*: from one language to another;
2. *Doppio salto mortale*: from page to stage (writing > speaking);
3. *Triplo salto mortale*: live performance in an original language with projected subtitles (writing>speaking>writing);
4. *Salto mortale con quadruplo avvistamento*: live performance with live translation integrated into the performance².

The numerous American versions of *Rumore/Noise* have run the gamut of these four acrobatic feats. In different types of collaboration with the author and actor, I have been involved in these productions as translator, performer, and onstage translator. Before describing each in turn, I would like to introduce two conditioning factors which may help explain the experiments that director, actor, and translator chose to take with this play in its American stagings.

The first factor is that I grew up in a nation that chose to believe itself monolingual, with English as the hegemonic tongue. Until quite recently in the United States, although many people studied languages, language difference was almost entirely *glissato* in the burgeoning but astonishingly blind national media. Language difference was not recognized to exist as something to have to deal with; it was not considered interesting. As a child in the 1960s I sometimes wondered why characters on television never went to the bathroom. It was as though the biological fact of having to pee or poop did not exist. Language difference was similar: on television, in the movies, you rarely experienced language difference. If a character was foreign, they simply spoke English with an accent, which might be portrayed as colorful, comic, sexy, menacing, sim-

aggiunto. *Riflessioni sulla traduzione in Italia 1900-1975*, ed. by Angela Albanese, Franco Nasi, Ravenna, Longo, 2015, p. 227.

² For definition of theatrical translation as an acrobatic *salto mortale* by Albanese see *infra*, pp. 395-403.

ple-minded, or what have you. A particular curiosity, for example, was Nazis as portrayed on television, because high military Nazis on tv almost always spoke not with a German accent – which was reserved for brutish guards barking *Jawohl!* and *Heil Hitler!* – but in a snooty, upper-class English accent. Why would high German officials speak like Cambridge snobs on American tv? Who knows? In any case, that was normal in American media: language difference was not considered dramatically interesting. It had no inherent meaning, it was a bore, and like having to go to the bathroom, it was sometimes necessary but people didn't want to see it or think about it.

The other conditioning factor has been well-expressed by Franco Nasi in a recent article, and that is the principle that the first consideration of any translation must be to convey the *meaning* of the original. Parodying Trump's "America First" and Salvini's "Italy First" rhetoric, Nasi has termed this principal "Meaning First"³. "Meaning First" is at the foundation of the concept of the so-called *literal translation*. But while we may delude ourselves that there is such a thing as *literal meaning* in texts we read, such a mysterious essence is harder to grasp during a live theatrical event, where there are so many messages coming across and going in different directions simultaneously that it is much more elusive to identify the essential meaning that predominates over all others. In the performance of a play, is the text that is being enacted the principal conveyor of meaning, or is it rather the liveness of the larger social event, with its ritualistic density and multiple focal points, that actually bears the pre-eminent meaning, of which the text is only one among many carriers? We can talk about the meaning of a play in a traditional literary sense only by detaching it forcefully from its embodiment, its incarnation, its existence in actual shared time and space.

Herewith the iterations of *Rumore di acque* in English that I have taken part in.

³ Franco Nasi, *Translation, Creativity, Awareness*, forthcoming 2020 in a volume edited by Jan Steyn, Cambridge University Press.

It should perhaps be mentioned that *Rumore* is an angry play, an enraged play, and the object of the play's rage is the capacity of human beings to ignore and rationalize away – to choose not to see – the needless horror of death on a mass scale:

1&2. *Salto mortale*: The first two translations of *Rumore di acque* into *Noise in the Waters* were literary and published in academic journals. Virtually identical English translations appeared first in the journal «California Italian Studies», Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2011⁴, and thereafter in «The Mercurian, A Theatrical Translation Review», Vol 4, No. 1, Spring 2012⁵. Both were published with facing page translation. In CIs, the text was followed by short paragraphs describing the play's staging and publication in Italy, with biographical information about Marco Martinelli and Teatro delle Albe, and a translator's note. In «The Mercurian», there were short biographical notes about Martinelli and the translator.

3. *Doppio salto mortale*: The first English performance took place in the form of a staged reading, directed by Paola Coletto, with the translator in costume reading the role of the General and very rudimentary musical accompaniment, as part of the *International Voices Project*, at Victory Gardens Theatre in Chicago in March 2013⁶. The reading was attended by about twenty-five people and followed by lively public discussion, in which audience members compared the issue of African migration into Italy with migration into the United States across its southern border with Mexico.

4&5. *Triplo salto mortale*: The following year, Teatro delle Albe brought the Italian staging of *Rumore di acque*, featuring Alessandro Renda in the main role and musical accompaniment by the Mancuso Brothers, to La MaMa Theatre in New York⁷ and Montclair State University in New Jersey⁸. In both cases the performance

⁴ <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/95d7c407>>.

⁵ <<https://themercurian.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/the-mercurian-4-1-spring-2012.pdf>>.

⁶ <<https://www.ivpchicago.org/readings-1-1-1>>.

⁷ <<https://vimeo.com/85579977>>.

⁸ <https://www.montclair.edu/inserra-chair/2014/03/09/12536_theatre-and-music-from-mediterranean-italy/>.

was accompanied by English supertitles projected above and behind the performer. For the La MaMa staging, set designer, Ermanna Montanari (a founding member of Teatro delle Albe, principal actress, and composer of many works) introduced a new design. The original staging had elevated the General onto a low square platform, with a large screen behind, and lighting from directly above the actor. For the narrow, brick-walled space at La MaMa, with the audience on raised bleachers, Montanari instead constructed on the stage floor a spiral of black stones, like an asteroid belt, perhaps twelve feet in diameter. At the outer edge the stones were large, but became smaller and smaller as they circled centripetally inward. In the center of the spiral stood the general with his microphone stand, as though in the middle of a black hole. The two weeks of performance in New York were supplemented by a round table discussion at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò (New York University) featuring Martinelli, Ermanna Montanari, and Renda⁹. At Montclair State, in addition to the performance¹⁰, Martinelli and Montanari conducted a workshop to theatre students, and the Mancuso Brothers offered a conversation/performance workshop to nearly 100 students and members of the public¹¹.

6. *Salto mortale con quadruplo avvitemento*, version 1: For the two performances at Links Hall in Chicago that followed the New York/New Jersey run, we decided to try something different, an experiment generated from the conditioning factors mentioned above. The problem with supertitles in prose theatre – a practice borrowed partly from subtitled movies, but in live performance especially from opera, where they offer a solution to the obstacle that most audiences cannot understand the original Italian, German, French, or Russian in which the music is sung – is that the audience has to constantly jerk their eyeballs from the action and speech on stage to the written text above and behind the actors. It's fatiguing and distracting. More than that, it is simply strange to impose such a dominant

⁹ <<http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/node/6286>>.

¹⁰ <<https://www.njvid.net/show.php?pid=njcore:37201>>.

¹¹ <<https://www.njvid.net/show.php?pid=njcore:35799>>.

additional source of focus onto the dramatic event, while pretending that you have not significantly altered the whole experience.

I had seen Ivo Van Hove's production of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, given in Dutch (entitled *Rouw Siert Electra*), at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 2009. For the American staging, Van Hove and company had introduced subtitles and supertitling as an active, formal element of the staging, an additional producer of meaning in the live event. Instead of shunting the language problem to the margins of the stage, Van Hove worked the problem of language difference into the performance: the English text was projected all over the set, by varied means, onto different surfaces. One intimate scene between young people consisted of an exchange of text messages, with their phone screens projected in a way readable to all. That is, instead of being concealed, language difference was featured as meaning-bearing and central to the dramatic event, as yet another medium of aesthetic and hermeneutic response, integral to the live event. Martinelli, Renda, and I thought we might try a similar experiment in Chicago.

Being a monologue, *Rumore di acque* presents particular challenges. In New York, it was reasonable to assume that a fair percentage of the audience was italophone. In New Jersey, the performance was in large part made possible by faculty in the university's distinguished Italian program, so that there too, with some advance preparation, many students in the audience would not have been totally dependent on the supertitles for their comprehension. The two performances in Chicago, instead, were given at Links Hall, an alternative/avant-garde dance and performance space, where relatively few in the audience would understand the original language. We decided to plunge into language difference, to make it central to the spectacle, in such a way as to add elements of risk and immediacy to the barely-contained energies already present in Renda's performance. In performance, the obstacle of "getting across" linguistically might help to evoke in the audience's gut the obstacles immigrants face getting across the sea.

Martinelli's staging at Links Hall once again transformed the play's physical setting. In contrast to the dark sets of the Italian and

New York productions, the dance space at Links Hall is all light, a plain box with a blond wood floor, bare white drywall walls, and minimal lighting suspended from a white ceiling. To provide some definition within this open space, Martinelli hung two empty picture frames, also white, from the low ceiling. Virtually the only color was provided by the General's cartoon mockery of a military dress uniform, the discrete brown suits of the Mancuso Brother's and their wooden musical instruments, and the pinstripe business suit of the onstage translator.

There were only about 3 hours available to determine how the translator would be integrated into the staging. With the General center stage behind his radio-era microphone on a stand, the translator mostly stood upstage right and behind, or sat on a padded bar stool, holding a sheaf of loose papers, from which he would read. As Renda performed the lines of the General recounting the stories of individual victims drowned at sea, the translator would intercalate the English translation during pauses and breaths in Renda's delivery, and drop each sheet of paper, which would flutter to the floor and begin to clutter the space, symbolic of the mounting numbers of dead. The General's voice in the foreground was guttural and harsh, while the bureaucrat's translation came through in a sharp and cutting tenor. Visually, the General in ostentatious military dress and the translator in discreet business attire appeared to represent two pillars, military and civilian, of the machinery of death.

7. *Salto mortale con quadruplo avvimento*, version 2: Two founding members of the Milwaukee theatre collective Theatre Gigante, Isabelle Kralj and Mark Anderson, were present at the Links Hall performance, and decided on the spot to bring the play to their theatre. This production took place the following year, in September 2015¹². In place of the Mancuso Brothers, Kralj and Anderson commissioned a new score for the play by the legendary American accordionist, Guy Klucsevsek, who performed live¹³. Kralj was

¹² <<https://shepherdexpress.com/arts-and-entertainment/ae-feature/theatre-gigante-presents-noise-waters/>>.

¹³ <<http://www.guyklucsevsek.com/>>.

able to dedicate a full week of rehearsals to the new staging, during which she further developed the twisted relationship between the two mirroring characters. In the meantime, Renda had memorized almost the entire script in English, providing the director with more resources to add to her exploration of the psychic clash between the two voices. Rather than a translator, the civilian figure became alternately a shadow of the General and the General's shadowy manipulator. When the General shifted between English and Italian, he became still more insidious, threatening, and chaotic: which was his real speech, which his real body? In performance, the performer/actor and performer/translator seemed to be in razor's-edge competition, each language struggling to dominate, each treacherously undermining the other as they echoed the same lines. Each figure became an infinitely-reflecting mirror of the other, each man with their hands at the other's throat as they sank into the abyss, blind to the un-numbered bodies floating around them.

Because I was personally involved in most of the productions described here, any attempt on my part to provide a critical *resonance* of these American iterations of Martinelli's play would be suspect. What can I offer beyond the platitude that translations are a particular form of proliferation of a literary or dramatic work of art? Proliferation generates various kinds of connection among the people who come into contact with one another, in myriad ways, as the process unfolds. In the practice of proliferation specific to theatre, consumers of the work of art become its creators, and vice versa. The derivative presumes to replace its source, but ideally it should fail in the attempt, its failure the sign of its success. Translating a work of art is a struggle against futility, a struggle that consists in the manifestation of that very futility. Generously scattered futility binds us to what we aspire to but are unlikely ever to achieve.