



Staging Shakespeare. Renato Sarti's "rude mechanicals" (tragic) comedy

by Maddalena Giovannelli

Plato, *The Symposium*: the night is over, the cocks begin to crow, and the diners are sleeping after their discussions and wine. Only three guests stay awake, interweaving questions and answers. They are the philosopher Socrates, the writer of tragedies Agathon, and playwright Aristophanes: "The same person," according to Socrates, "should know how to write comedy and tragedy; anybody who excels at tragedy will also be a master of comedy."

Shakespeare's work, seeing its many registers and styles, seems to fully confirm Socrates' statement. But too often, on the most important stages in Italy, the tragic dimension of Shakespeare's plays prevails, and the actors seem to orient their actorial style in that direction.

Yet with the Bard you can laugh, in actual fact you must laugh. Renato Sarti, director of Milan's "Teatro della Cooperativa" (*Cooperativa Theatre*), artistic director and playwright, seems to embody, through his own theatrical productions, the versatility of genre Socrates advocated. Sarti's artistic output includes plays inspired by a need to preserve historical memory and which investigate deeply dramatic moments in Italy's recent history. *I me chiamava per nome: 44.787* (*They called me by my Name: 44,787*) tells the story of the concentration camp, Risiera of San Sabba, while *Nome di battaglia Lia* (*Lia, My Fighter's Name*) is the tragic story of a woman partisan. There are also works of a comical and farcical nature, such as *lo santo tu beato* (*I Saint, You Blessed*), an acerbic satire on the figure of Father Pio.



It is worth remembering that Sarti's artistic training took place alongside artists such as, Bebo Storti, Paolo Rossi, Claudio Bisio, Ferdinando Bruni and Elio De Capitani, with whom he shares the idea of a kind of comedy that is never gratuitous, but has meaning and astonishes (among his important influences, it's no coincidence that we find the corrosive Ettore Petrolini and Thomas Bernhard). "I was lucky," says Sarti, "to be able to work with those people at that time. It is not enough to have talent and you can't improvise the role of a comedian: you need to work hard, and you need a long experience. We used to take months, working on comic improvisations and nothing else."¹

And it was in this context that Sarti first encountered the Bard, with the first celebrated production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Elfo Theatre in 1981. Shakespeare's comedy was turned into a rock musical, directed by Gabriele Salvatores, with music by Mauro Pagani; the production may be seen as a milestone in the history of this Milanese company and it is still in the Elfo repertoire in different versions thirty-five years later.

It will come as no surprise, then, that Sarti dreamed of returning to the play as a director and author. In 2008 he presented a first version at Milan's CRT theatre (Centre of Theatre Research): the company Sarti brought together was international and multiethnic, and he carried out the translation and adaptation himself. In the *Mechanicals* scene, his intervention was particularly deft: "In order to work, comedy needs to feed off contemporary references. The craftsmen of this shoddy amateur company did the typical jobs of the time: a carpenter, a bellows mender, etc. How will you ever get laughs, if you don't update the context?"

So in this production amateur actors become workers in a cleaning firm with only women employees, half of them foreigners. Sarti recalled how the audience particularly appreciated the most original section of the show, and the group of actresses managed to achieve a very special rapport with the audience and learned to master comic techniques. A few years later, *Le comiche del Sogno* (*The Women Comedians of Shakespeare's Dream*) evolved, an offshoot of the production that premièred at CRT: for this Sarti reinvents, extends, re-sews in order to give dramatic unity to the intermezzi of the *Dream*.

¹All Renato Sarti's quotations are from the backstage meeting of 21 November 2016 with Maddalena Giovannelli.



La molto tragica storia di Piramo e Tisbe che muoiono per amore (The most lamentable story of Pyramus and Thisbe who die for love). Federica Fabiani, Milvys Lopez Homen, Marta Marangoni, Rossana Mola, Elena Novoselova and Rufin Doh Zéyénoûin.

The idea of developing a spin-off – in other words to turn a minor character of a play into the lead in a rewrite – is certainly not new, especially if one considers the great variety of Shakespeare rewrites, beginning with Tom Stoppard's famous *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. When an author totally abandons the constraints of the original plot, he is left with greater creative freedom.

Sarti's show is very obviously conceived meta-theatrically: the (meta) director of the most tragic story of "Pyramus and Thisbe" is Spazzolona (alias Rossana Mola in the role of Big Broom) from Apulia, who does her utmost to keep the unruly company in order and at the same time dictates from inside the rhythm of the entire show. The gags and lazzi are fast paced and gradually pull the audience in: some actresses try to dance *Swan Lake* out of context, others secretly eat long French loaves that should have been used as swords, others try to get the most important parts for themselves and so grab the audience's attention. An experienced spectator can spot no end of allusions to contemporary theatre (the company's training sends up Grotowski's training), a repeated use of dialects (Pugliese, Romagnolo) and the associated actorial traditions. Sarti employs all the tools of comedy, including its strong popular dimension: "In my work, following Dario Fo's lesson, more than anything I try to achieve a popular theatre: a form of art that speaks to everybody, that communicates with everybody, and that has to do with life, even in its most material aspects." And in



this farcical and popular vein, we should mention Sarti's production of *Amleto avvisato mezzo salvato* (*Hamlet, Forewarned is Forearmed*): a comic opera in verse performed by the comedic actors of the Philharmonic Clown company, where the ghost of the Fool, Yorick, appears to two clown-grave diggers in a bid to lay bare the Danish tragedy.



Otello Spritz (2012). Renato Sarti and Bebo Storti. Photograph by Emiliano Boga.

Laughter, though, as a way of attaining subversive freedom isn't the only way Renato Sarti has wrestled with the Bard. In *Otello Spritz*, here-reads the tragedy of the Moor of Venice, by blending the spirit of cabaret with a cruel representation of the power relations involving women in contemporary society. This choice of register also characterizes *La nave fantasma* (*The Ghost Ship*) (written in 2004), where crude, comic dialogues aim to awaken the attention and sensitivity of audience members to a subject that the media has repeatedly reported, namely the drowning of migrants in the Mediterranean: "I was inspired by Petrolini's black humour: it makes you sit up and consider reality from another angle." On the same lines (with the same actors: Renato Sarti and Bebo Storti) it is worth remembering *Otello Spritz*, a rewrite, exploiting the spectator's prior knowledge of the Shakespearean tragedy, and the gap between Sarti's reworking and the well-known playscript: Desdemona (Elena Novoselova), the daughter of a powerful Russian boss, who makes excellent spritz and has a mobile phone, with a Tiziano Ferro ringing tune. Othello, the black president of the Venetian Region, pursues right-wing policies to climb the political ladder in Rome; Iago, dressed in a flamboyant evening suit, looks like the unscrupulous owner of an expensive nightclub. Even here, as in *Le comiche*, the dimension is explicitly metatheatrical: Storti and Sarti confirmed that the cast had been drastically cut, due to lack of resources. The first part of the show races along, with improvisations in the middle of the audience, hilarious sketches, brimming with political and sexual allusions, a great mix of Italian dialects, superb comic timing.

The audience were drawn in by lights flashing, ad hoc jokes, and continually prodded, they laughed and responded. At the same time Othello and Iago, who were also in contemporary costume, were deliberately unpleasant behind their comic



masks: they were sneering and over-the-top, recalling and amplifying a model of power, all too familiar to spectators. And in the growing baseness characterising the two performers, the key to the production can be found: it is Desdemona, a symbol of every mistreated woman, an innocent victim, with whom the audience is invited to identify, who suffers the behaviour of these two vile, Shakespearean creatures (see the director's notebook).

"In the show *Bebo* and I work in a double direction," says Sarti, "on the one hand, we play directly to the audience and make them our accomplices, and on the other, we invite them to hate us." The laughter gradually dies down, and at the end the silence in the theatre grows serious: the more we laugh and become vulnerable, the more the tragic knot can hit us. Here we have a continual system of communicating vessels – between tragic and comic – representing the key to Shakespeare's greatness, just like ancient Greek theatre; a real emotional "workout" with alternating registers that seem to characterise the greatest periods in theatre history, and the spectators of those times.

Today, are we trained enough? "Not enough", says Renato Sarti.

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