

Andrea F. De Carlo

Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" (IT)

ORCID: 0000-0001-9116-8308

Inhuman Humanity

On the Theater of Angela Di Maso

Abstract

This article discusses Angela Di Maso's theater, which is a reflection on contemporary society and aims to awaken audiences from social conformity and consumerism. This theater seeks to explore human existence, with its metaphysical anxiety, violence, and the brutality of everyday life present. It challenges social norms and stereotypes, using crude language to tell stories that disturb and provoke self-analysis. Angela Di Maso's theater has gained recognition and success for its versatility in combining textual and scenic elements, meticulously developed with actors. Di Maso's work combines tradition and innovation, drawing inspiration from European theater and at the same time representing a form of resistance to traditional and avant-garde theatrical conventions, forging new paths of expression and advocating freedom of expression. The article includes as an appendix an extensive interview with Angela Di Maso, entitled "From Jerzy Grotowski to Angela Di Maso, via Witold Gombrowicz: An Interview with an *Enfant Terrible* of Italian Theater."

Keywords

Angela Di Maso, contemporary theater, tradition, innovation, social norms, tragedy, violence

Abstrakt

Nieludzka ludzkość: O teatrze Angeli Di Maso

Artykuł dotyczy teatru Angeli Di Maso, który podejmuje refleksję nad współczesnym społeczeństwem i stawia sobie za cel przebudzenie publiczności ze społecznego konformizmu i konsumpcjonizmu. Teatr ten tematyzuje metafizyczny niepokój wpisany w ludzką egzystencję oraz przemoc i brutalność codziennego życia. Podważa normy społeczne i stereotypy, za pomocą opowiadanych dosadnym językiem historii, które niepokoją i prowokują do autoanalizy. Teatr Di Maso zyskał uznanie dzięki elastyczności w łączeniu elementów tekstowych i scenicznych, precyzyjnie opracowanych z aktorami. Twórczość Di Maso łączy tradycję i innowacyjność, czerpie inspirację z teatru europejskiego, a jednocześnie stanowi formę oporu wobec tradycyjnych i awangardowych konwencji, wytyczając nowe ścieżki ekspresji i opowiadając się za wolnością wypowiedzi. W aneksie umieszczono obszerny wywiad z Angelą Di Maso, zatytułowany „Od Jerzego Grotowskiego do Angeli Di Maso, poprzez Witolda Gombrowicza: Wywiad z *enfant terrible* włoskiego teatru”.

Słowa kluczowe

Angela Di Maso, współczesny teatr, tradycja, innowacja, normy społeczne, tragedia, przemoc

Angela Di Maso's¹ theater is a pure mimesis of the outer and inner worlds that individuals live in today, a mirror of our times, born essentially from the profound and noble desire to awaken from their torpor our consciences, anaesthetized by consumerism and social conventions, to make us reflect on the motions of the human soul and the fears and pains which grip existence, and above all to kill the banality that dwells within each of us. It is pure catharsis, in the highest and deepest Aristotelian meaning. The stories, the characters, and the settings are naturalistically portrayed, with traits of a theater of the body, of non-verbal languages and gesture, that belongs to the scenic writing of the new theater of the second half of the 20th century or, as has become customary, the post-dramatic. The actors are able both to be their characters and to be the performers of those characters, and the performance makes the telling of a story and the attempt to subvert the rules of storytelling coexist, reconciling the heritage of the new theater tradition with that of naturalist theater.

In her plays, the anguish of everyday life becomes, as for example in Fyodor Dostoevsky and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, a questioning of evil and above all a metaphysical restlessness that ultimately constitutes the truth of a person. Di Maso goes further, revealing with an apparent cynicism and sarcasm, but also with the tenderness of a love unremitting even unto its own extreme consequences, the absurdity, the astonishment, and the scandal that hides behind an appearance of ordinary, desperate, anguished, and boring normality. Verbal violence is translated into kindness, obsession with sex—and not love—the only true prime mover that moves all things; the frequency of abuse, of incest, are recounted as a mirror of the brutal reality in which we live. The exaggerated depiction of sexual violence—also a metaphor for the manipulative and devious psychic violence that each of us is often forced to endure in every sphere of our lives—in families, in convents, and in workplaces is the horror that inhabits our technological reality.

In the preface to the anthology *Teatro*, the well-known Italian film director Pupi Avati observed:

Angela Di Maso investigates and unmask the most secret, most unspeakable part of the self until it is brought to its full awareness, using a deliberate and sought-after crudeness of language. It becomes blindingly clear just how difficult the truth

¹ Angela Di Maso resides and works in Naples. She holds a degree in philosophy and is a journalist, as well as a musician specializing in Gregorian chant. She works as a playwright, theater director, and opera director. She received training under Gaetano Oliva and is a former student and actor of Jerzy Grotowski.

of our conscience really is to bear. Thus, her poetics are raw, painful, abrasive, far from any consolatory attitude precisely because they are intent on the continuous raking over of everything that, although referable to the everyday, can disturb us. This mixture of stripping rawness, for Di Maso a stylistic feature of her expression, proves to be an extraordinary and therapeutic instrument of self-analysis for us readers or spectators.²

It is a theater that upsets, wounds, that overturns stereotypes about feelings and interpersonal relationships, that wants to stir consciences and unmask the other from his many hypocrisies. It investigates and reveals the most secret, most unspeakable part of the self, until it is brought to its full awareness, with sarcastic, bitter, sharp language, aimed at telling painful life stories. Thus, the un-confessable confessions of a cloistered nun (*Ecce Virgo. Storia di una monaca di clausura*), the sterility of a couple who decide to remedy the problem by buying a baby in a catalogue (*Il Catalogo*), the incest between brothers who are the children of gangsters (*Lacquario*), and the other stories are, as Pupi Avati states: “x-rays of an *inhuman humanity*.”³

On a first reading, what immediately strikes one is the theatrical use of language. Even commonplace phrases are mimicked, the misuse of conceptual and linguistic stereotypes is recorded, and one sometimes comes across phrases that are only seemingly unnecessarily convoluted or long-winded, but which well define the depth of the character. The annoyance one may feel when reading it stems from a literary conception of the play. From this conception came criticism of the language of, for example, Pirandello, and before him, of Goldoni. But both Goldoni and Pirandello bring to the stage the language that the educated Italians of the time actually spoke, not a literary language churned out by academics. The other striking aspect of this theater is not only its verbal violence, but the actual violence of the facts either represented or narrated by the characters: the obsession with sex, the frequency of abuse, of incest, not as acts that fate horror, but as the daily reality of life. The great feelings, although joyful and affectionate, are contaminated by cruelty and hatred, the emotions are exaggerated to the extreme, and the language, although poetic, is often, at the same time, also cruel and reflects the vulgarity, aggressiveness, and cruelty of the characters and their world. Emotions, feelings, appear instinctively, while interpersonal relationships are manifested through sexual acts, obsessions, phobias, and perversions. The

² Pupi Avati, “Prefazione,” in Angela Di Maso, *Teatro* (Napoli: Guida, 2017), 5.

³ Avati, “Prefazione,” 5.

PHOTO TOMMASO LE PERA



Daniela Giovanetti in Di Maso's
Cuòre. Sostantivo maschile

Church is part of the established order, religion and faith are formative elements of the individual and choral consciousness, and religious symbols are integrated into daily rituals. The sacred and the blasphemous are present simultaneously, Catholicism being woven into primordial rituals.

Angela Di Maso's theater is very personal and committed, not directly to politics, but to denunciation and social issues. Her characters rarely belong to the educated class. They are petty bourgeois and often proletarians or almost illiterate sub-proletarians. In *L'alluce* (The Big Toe), the Neapolitan dialect is used. Pier Paolo Pasolini argued in his *Manifesto per un nuovo teatro* (Manifesto for a New Theater, 1968) that the language of theater in Italy is false and artificial and that the only possibility for there to be authentic theater is the bilingualism of regional or dialect theater. This is as if to say that even if the language is not always or entirely faithful to the land, the stories, the situations, rather, the characters, are.

The main characteristic of Di Maso's work is its Italian-ness and sometimes Neapolitan-ness, which is reflected in the references to a peasant, proletarian, petit-bourgeois, closed, typical society, but at the same time the expression of

a more general Italian and universal context. Although it is a research theater, it never becomes self-referential, as contemporary theater often does, and is broadly rooted in the great European tradition, with references to some great playwrights and directors: one might think of Kantor's dummy-characters, his choreographies, his strange use of objects, and his macabre dances (*The Dead Class*); the spectator may be reminded of Beckett's poetic absurdity or the minimalism traceable to Grotowski's Poor Theater principles, while the ever-present cruelty and aggression are more easily noticeable in Artaud. These are texts and performances of great strength and poetry, of a theater that is complex, global, amplified, and at the same time minimal, of a theater committed to a post-ideological society. It is especially interesting to note that Angela Di Maso's theater is very "female," with significant figures of very strong women, often dominant, executioners and victims, who embody tragedy and barbarity, frustration and violence, repressed and expressed. One thinks here of Di Maso's latest theatrical work: *Cuòre. Sostantivo maschile* (Heart: Male Noun). Here we delve into the lives of the two protagonists who tell of themselves, with sincerity, to the audience until their hearts become a place where we can all find ourselves, recognize ourselves.

Angela Di Maso's versatility and ability to combine tradition and innovation, and the originality of her personal way of conceiving and making theater that voices the contradictions of contemporary reality, have decreed her success in recent years, both with critics and audiences, nationally and internationally. The actors' acting, voice, body movements, and gestures are elaborated in a choreography studied down to the smallest detail. The costumes and stage effects, together with the colors and music, create a global, integral theater, as could be in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*. What is more, Angela Di Maso also only finalizes her dramas after rehearsals, after the scenic realization made in collaboration with the actors. We can say that Angela Di Maso belongs to a strand of the new Italian theater. In Italy, starting in the 1980s, innovation theater broke away from the ideological opposition between theater and drama, interweaving scenic and textual writing within the framework of history or more elastic environmental situations. "Militant" against the tide, outsider par excellence and promoter of an alternative, innovative, and experimental theater, Angela Di Maso is a symbol of freedom of expression: she has shown that it is possible to do theater outside both traditional and avant-garde conventions, pursuing new paths, including new expressive paths.

The watchword is to resist, and Angela Di Maso, despite a thousand difficulties, resists and struggles stubbornly with pride and great dignity, imposing herself in the Italian theater world, where the oppressive characteristics of

PHOTO VINCENZO CONTENUTO



Gianni Lamagna and Francesca
Rondinella in Di Maso's *Ecce Virgo*.
Storia di una monaca di clausura

a system based on corporate privilege and patronage persist. Hers is a theater and a new paradigm of narration that cannot be traced back to previously pre-defined models, a phenomenon not dictated by transitory fashions that poses questions already destined for future generations.

Appendix

Angela Di Maso and Andrea De Carlo

From Jerzy Grotowski to Angela Di Maso, via Witold Gombrowicz: An Interview with an *Enfant Terrible* of Italian Theater

The following is an interview by Andrea F. De Carlo with Angela Di Maso. In the interview, we are proposing here, various themes spoken by the Italian playwright are addressed. An attempt is made to give an overall understanding of what are the main themes of a dramaturgical writing intent on fathoming the human soul and the society in which we live. Angela Di Maso's dramaturgy maintains a continuous dialogue not only with the Neapolitan theatrical tradition, but also with both the great masters of international theater—Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Witold Gombrowicz, Luigi Pirandello, Eduardo De Filippo, and others—and with the great philosophers of all times.

Andrea F. De Carlo: Jerzy Grotowski once asserted: “It is not the theatrical adventure that is important in life, but life as adventure, that is important. In the beginning, theater for me was only the pretext, the pseudonym of life as adventure, an extra ray. Theater was nothing more for me, never; the actor was the pseudonym for human being, nothing more.” How much life is there in theater and how much theater is there in life? In your opinion, what is the role of theater today and what needs does it have to fulfill?

Angela Di Maso: I have always considered theater a faithful mirror of reality. During the meetings that Italian and foreign universities devote to my dramaturgy, as well as at the end of every performance or presentation of my books where curious students, spectators and readers crowd the foyers to comment on what text, words and vision have sentimentally triggered in them, to the very question of what theater represents for me I answer by borrowing one of the well-known mottos from the philosopher Hegel, but changing the addendums: “What is real is theater, what is theater is real.” There would be no point in a work of fantasy or even a happy ending in which everyone lived happily ever after like Disney fairy tales or American comedies have foisted on us, deluding us. Happy endings would defraud us, Nabokov would say, because they do not exist. Our reality is stark and cruel. Progress itself is increasingly dehumanizing us. There is no longer any room for feelings. Only animals and nature, if not contaminated or raped by human beings, still retain purity and whiteness.

Mine is not a vision of cosmic pessimism. It is nothing other than the telling of reality. I report on paper and on the boards of a stage exactly what I see not through my own world as representation, but the world as it is: a gallery of horrors. Wars, violence, feminicides, bullying, pedophilia, gender discrimination, and intolerance, the exhibition must remind the human being of what he has become in order to fulfill in a cathartic manner, in the deepest Aristotelian sense, what he should re-become, and that is a Person turned to Good—good in a Socratic key in which the term coincides with that of happiness and ethics: he who acts well is a happy person. And a happy person is also happy with the other-than-himself. This is the intimate necessity of my theater-making. Disturb. Reprimand. Nauseate. Yes. Nauseate. Because as Sartre stated: hell is other people. I wrote about other people in the trilogy of the clap. Three plays: *Miserere*, *Luomo perfetto* (A Perfect Person), *Maiali* (Pigs). Three micro-stories about sadism. We are sadists. If there is no happiness for everyone, then there must not be for anyone. In *Miserere*, I denounce the scandals of the Church. The protagonist is a cleric—homosexual and pedophile—born from a priest's relationship with a nun. *Luomo perfetto* is a story about a woman who gives birth to and raises her son by educating him with those qualities she wished her perfect man would possess. She brought her son into the world for herself. He is flesh of her flesh; but this flesh serves her to feed on a love she never had. In *Maiali*, I deal with the subject of the BBW (Big Beautiful Woman). This is an American psychiatric disease in which men get aroused by having sex with extremely fat women who, due to their excessive obesity, suffer from very serious diseases, especially heart disease. Many women in fact die because they cannot stand the sexual effort. In death there is man's satisfaction. The trilogy of the clap is disgusting, exactly as disgusting as the human mind is.

AFDC: We started with Jerzy Grotowski because you trained with his pupil Gaetano Oliva. What did Grotowski's theatrical poetics of Poor Theater give you? What mark has it left on your vision of theater?

ADM: The concept of minimalism forms the basis of both my dramaturgical and theatrical work, i.e. staging. In dramaturgical writing, I move through the Socratic dialogue of brachilog: clear, short, and direct cues. I therefore avoid unnecessary baroque elements. In the staging when I also direct my plays, the directing and acting construction follows the text in a meticulous manner, which is a perfect score in which even the actors' breaths are marked. Set and costumes are essential: a single object decorates a scene bordered by black backdrops, transforming itself into a thousand other objects. In *Ecce Virgo. Storia di una monaca di clausura* (Ecce Virgo: A Story of a Cloistered Nun), a cross placed in the center of the scene flips over and becomes a confessional to receive the sinful stories a young nun tells her confessor, who is as filthy as she is. Scenic movement

is itself essential, often using total immobility. Even the blinking of eyelashes and the curvature of eyebrows are controlled. The music on stage is itself minimal: sounds that are lost like water in the sand. The light cut in plays of shadow and semi-shadow becomes dramaturgy of light. Everything is already said in each cue, in each silence, in each pause. The theater appears poor because what is rich, and must enrich, is merely the word, filled with colors, furnishings, precious fabrics, and orchestral sounds that, like an arrow shot by Cupid, must make the spectators' hearts overflow.

AFDC: Grotowski always remained convinced that theater could never compete with cinema and that cinema offered a different experience from theater. He wanted a theater that stimulated confrontation, that challenged and involved experience. It was a theater based not so much on the image (as in cinema or television), but on the presence of the actor. You have also worked with cinema. How do you see the relationship between theater and cinema? And above all, is this interrelation between theater and image impossible?

ADM: Cinema and theater are two different worlds. I realized this already from the layout of the screenplay, which has completely different rules and syntax from the dramaturgical ones. In cinema, every word or phrase is spoken in a whispered voice. In theater, the voice is the *clavis mundi*. It is undoubtedly interesting to work for both genres precisely to better understand the differences and to study both grammars. It was very formative for me to collaborate on the screenplay for *Una festa da ballo* (A Dance Party), with Italian director Pupi Avati. Nowadays, theater often makes use of multimedia images. In some operations, I am thinking of Lepage's theater for example, the product is stunning rather than spectacle. In other words, one must know the mechanisms well in order not to lapse into hybrid languages that lose their meaning. Cinema remains sublime art in many ways. Often it is superior to theater, which unfortunately does not have the same quality of means of production and distribution. The superiority of theater lies in its extemporaneity. Every night the performance grows with the emotionality of the actor. In film, it is the repetition of the clapperboard that gives you the perfect shot, always the same. To each his own genre. I enjoy writing for both cinema and theater. Two different worlds. Although my theater writing has also been described as very cinematic.

AFDC: Staying with Grotowski's work, another striking aspect of the Polish director is the sacred conception of theater. To the concept of Poor Theater Grotowski added the concept of the "priesthood" or sacredness of the actor. When the actor entered the sanctity of the stage space at that moment, something special happened, something very similar to a religious rite. It was in this space, in the sacred relationship between the actor and the bystanders that the audience was challenged to think and be transformed by the theater. In this sense Grotowski was one of the key figures in the development of

PHOTO EMANUELA MOCCIA



Massimo Finelli, Patrizia Eger,
and Giuseppe Cerrone in Di Maso's
Il Catalogo

political theater in the 20th century. In your theater, what role does the actor play? Could yours be considered a cathartic theater, of initiation and at the same time of “liberation”?

ADM: My theater is cathartic. Everything is conceived exclusively in this sense and never in the form of exhibitionism or artistic self-satisfaction. Also, [I do this] because there would be no point in staging the horror that we have before our eyes every day. It would be enough to look out of the window at home. Bystanders must leave the auditorium irritated, disturbed, angry, or deeply shaken to the point of tears because they see themselves on stage. They cannot pretend not to see or turn away: A self that my theater wants to make aware. It wants to reveal what we are, what we have become, what we will become if we do not put an end to the process of inhumanity that is devastating everything, and if we do not put into practice a sentimental counterrevolution in which, feeling outrage, disgust, horror, shame, we will try to change by regaining all that we are: heart. In one of my shows, *Il Catalogo* (The Catalogue)—many times I have witnessed the audience weeping while watching it; and many were the spectators who, even after years and perhaps upon encountering other shows of mine, still remembered—in a traumatic, cathartic way, in fact!—the shows that had most deeply marked them. I was talking about *Il Catalogo*: A couple unable to have children decides to buy one from a catalogue and goes

to a company where the salesperson asks them what physical, intellectual, and human characteristics they want to have for the perfect child. The clerk, who has the English name Law (albeit he represents the anti-law), does not give to the Portman couple the longed-for catalogue from which to choose the pieces to assemble. What Mr. Law will bring out of this apparently loving couple will be a sterility not of a biological kind, but a sterility of feelings. The woman will vomit to her husband all the hatred she feels for him because he should have had a cancer, not her. Because she would have left him. Yes, she would have done so; she would have looked for other men; she would have had the son she longed for. Instead, her worthless husband had stayed with her because he loved her anyway; because their life, even without a child, was, according to him, equally beautiful. The sterility of feelings is the true cancer of the play. And the audience saw itself in this. Spectators saw themselves again in the hypocrisy of relationships that are kept on a tightrope because they are now deprived of the essential, namely the Good, by social constructs—if you don't have children, you are worth zero—that make them frustrated and angry. Incapacitated. Just as bad is Mr. Law who has had everything in life, including children, and that very abundance has made him a bored man. Here is Schopenhauer's great philosophy fulfilled: boredom becomes despair, which becomes anguish, which becomes badness. [This is] Just as in *Un amico di famiglia* (A Family's Friend), where I recount the illness of a father and his son, the latter suffering early on from Alzheimer's disease, while the father has advanced cancer. Both choose to die. Both patronize each other with euthanasia. Death becomes liberation and re-birth. A very important theme and debate that of assisted death, in Italy considered a crime punishable by law for those who commit it. Absurd. As absurd as life is. Not death.

AFDC: You belong to the city of Naples, which is the capital of theater in Italy, the whole city is an open-air theater. It might sound like a stereotype or a mere cliché, but it really is. How much does this city inspire you and what is the link between your theater and the Neapolitan theater tradition?

ADM: I have no strong ties with the city of Naples other than being a native. The cipher of this is the fact that I write exclusively in Italian and never in dialect. Only one text is called *Lalluce* (The Big Toe), but it was actually written in Italian and then translated into Neapolitan by linguists, because even dialects have their own grammar made up of accents and truncations that seem easy to hear, but the oral transcription does not correspond to the syntax. Regardless of this, I have always wanted my theater not to be "regional" but to have unlimited geographical scope. That is why I use the Italian language, which also lends itself more easily to translations into other European languages. Naples is a port from which to set sail. Of my city I cherish the concept of irony and humor that I often use as a scalpel in the characters' jokes; and of dissimulation: never

taking oneself too seriously is the true secret of the Neapolitans that I make my own. If it were not so, it would be a world, the theatrical one in particular, very difficult to bear. *Lalluce* is a story of a boy who makes coffins. One day he goes to a wealthy house to take away the dead. The care and respect he shows in dressing and pitying the deceased, whom he then delicately lays in the coffin, triggers the fantasies of his son, a repressed homosexual, who a few days later shows up at the carpenter's shop where the young man works and blackmails him: if he does not want to have sex with him, he will be reported for theft, because money and jewelry had disappeared on the day he went to pick up the dead man. Here is the abuse of the socially strongest over the socially weakest, who out of fear must succumb. He who represses himself for fear of society's judgement—the rich man had hidden his homosexuality from everyone for fear of being laughed at—becomes the executioner. It is precisely in the Naples of the *bassi*,⁴ of the alleys, that the outcasts live who prostitute themselves for pennies. It is precisely there that my story is set.

AFDC: The themes dealt with in your plays, e.g. the unconfessed admissions of a cloistered nun, the sterility of a couple who decide to remedy the problem by buying a baby from a catalogue, the encounter between a man and a woman in an erotic chat room, the incest between brothers who are the sons of gangsters, all bring to mind the “liturgy of existence” of Wagnerian memory. Yours is a sacred representation of the evil that afflicts the world, but is redemption possible in this world?

ADM: Only with the Apocalypse. And perhaps there would be no redemption either, because as Nietzsche says, history is destined to repeat itself. Sad. Discouraging, but there it is. Happiness does not exist. Serenity is in spurts spread over time. What assails us instead is despair with ourselves and anguish in our intersubjective relationship with each other and the world. We are perpetually dissatisfied. We need, we desire, we live a whole life riding in the wake of the Fichtian *Streben*, a heart-rending yearning for something, but reaching it leaves us with a dry mouth because we are ready to re-desire without ever being satisfied with what we have. That's what I meant. Redemption is, it would be, only possible by valuing a sense of gratitude towards the things we have and especially towards those we do not have. There is a reason for this, too, which we will understand in time. Gratitude redeems. Gratitude immobilizes the inhumanity that is expressed in crushing the other in order to emerge. My characters tell this story. My

⁴ Neapolitan *basso*, which literally means the “low,” is a windowless, street-level, studio apartment which has historically been the typical home of the city's underclass. It is cramped, and its occupants have no privacy from passersby, who can peer through the open door, the only point of both ventilation and light.

characters mirror this society in which every form of pure kindness is seen as stupid weakness, to be crushed. Redemption is utopian!

In *Lacquario* (The Aquarium), the story is told of a man and a woman, murderous gangsters' children, then brother and sister who love each other. From this love, which is sinful, a child is born. The family is ashamed. That is, they are not ashamed for all the men killed, for the usury done to poor people, for theft and blackmail, but for the fruit born of the incest of the children who, deprived of filial love, find it in their union, and who will naturally be made to disappear. And in the worst way. In Italy, the bosses of the underworld, in order to demonstrate their power, surround themselves with dangerous animals: tanks full of sharks, poisonous snakes, crocodiles in which to immerse those they have to punish. An aquarium of piranhas awaits the newborn. Not even the redemption of love cures.

On the other hand, Christ died on the cross because he loved.

AFDC: The characters you choose to tell are petty bourgeois and often proletarians or almost illiterate underclassmen. Why do you like to focus your attention on this humanity? In your pieces, fragmentary lives emerge enveloped in a formless chaos, and does this have a bearing on identity issues?

ADM: There is no specific class I refer to. I consider the entirety of humanity, in terms of gender and social status. Indeed, it is often the bourgeoisie that is targeted because in the underclass one finds that candor made of pure but harmless instinct. There is no malice, there is no infamy, vices that can instead be found in the upper-middle social scale where the law of the strongest prevails.

In *Maiali*, it is precisely the bourgeois who soil with their sexual perversion a poor girl who has had the misfortune to be born fat and who, precisely because she does not conform to the aesthetic canons that society imposes on us, believe they arrogate to themselves the right to be able to transform her into meat for slaughter, even exploiting that excess of skin to make amateur pornographic films to resell to fetishists of disgust. But who are these people if not the representation of the Nazi that is hidden in each one of us and that they want to eradicate by mocking and exploiting the different in whom they recognize a purity that does not belong to them and that frightens them because it confronts them with their own miseries. In *Primo Amore* (First Love), a philosophy lecturer, an educated and well-off man, searches for women in erotic chats. The ad is answered by an equally cultured and bourgeois woman who, ill and at the end of her days, wants to experience emotions she has never felt and, not finding any, believes they reside in a blind encounter. Here, too, the implication is paradoxical. Critics have described the text as a perfect Luis Buñuel-style screenplay.

PHOTO BRUNO FONTANAROSA



Gaia Petrone and Javier Povedano in Di Maso's *Albino e Plautilla*. *Intermezzo buffo di Leonardo Vinci*

AFDC: The stage use of language is very striking, refined, never casual in which the word becomes the transcoding of sound. Is there a sound symbolism through human language in your dramaturgy?

ADM: Absolutely and in a very natural way. I am a musician. During a concert where I was performing Gregorian chant, the score appeared to me as a written text, that is, the sounds were transcoded into words. There was a story to be told and staged in the neumatics [symbols used in Gregorian chant notation]. However, I did not have the right tools to better understand what had happened and, as a music student, very strict and rigorous, I realized that I needed to understand what was happening and why I was suddenly writing dialogues between characters on the score, even with a certain ease.

So, I enrolled in a Grotowski theater school. The course, in writing, directing, acting direction, but also stagecraft, lighting design, make-up, and costumes, already seemed so familiar to me, perhaps because I am a musicologist and a scholar of melodrama. Theater was already somehow a part of me. It just had to take shape. I started writing texts and directing my own performances. The public's appreciation, which still fills the theaters today or has made my books—*Teatro*, published by Guida, and *Brutta* (An Ugly Woman), published by Divergenze, the first a collection consisting of ten of my texts, the second a one-act play—stand out among the best-selling books in Italy, makes me happy in a very tortuous environment. Theater is like music. Music is like theater. I am made of this, of sound and word that I keep united and enshrined in the deepest and most medieval “Platonic idea.” Philosophy is then the favorite glue.

AFDC: Sound and word: the words of a language—be it Neo-Latin, Germanic, Slavic, Polynesian, or Pre-Columbian—are characterized by a sound and a meaning. Traditionally, these two elements are seen as two distinct, independent aspects. This is how most linguists see it, going back to the classical model that assumes that the relationship between the sound of a word and its meaning is arbitrary. For you, how important is the sound–word link and how does it develop in your theater work? What connection exists between rhythm and word?

ADM: I am a musician. I am sound. I am playwright. I am speech. I am a philosopher who, like a priestess, seeks to unite sound and word in sacred marriage, investigating, probing the deepest sense of the human soul. Of human action. In consequence of love. In consequence of non-love. This is where my theatrical writing comes from, understood as *poiesis*, i.e. construction, creative work, symbolic, fantastic, producer, *ars combinatoria* in the deepest Brunian recall. Theater writing is the art that by its means makes past and absent sensible things present and visible; but also present and future. Theatrical writing makes enduring and immutable words that, when spoken to the wind, would vanish into nothingness. Playwriting makes things eternal by drawing its strength from the infinite miracle of the workshop of poetry in music. My writing is thus born precisely from a process of transcoding, in which I make a transition from a musical code to a literal one—because dramaturgy is a literary genre and one of the most complex and refined—while maintaining in the word that primordial sound from which it itself comes to life. Sound becomes dramaturgy. Word becomes music. Light becomes dramaturgy. The theatrical text then presents itself as an accomplished, perfect, sometimes harmonic, often dodecaphonic score in which are marked—with painstaking and maniacal work—breaths, silences, pauses, agogics, horns, and the beat and rise of each act. With or without words. Because silence and stillness are also dramaturgy. From 2019, a collaboration begins with the Pietà de' Turchini Foundation, one of the most

important centers of Baroque music in Europe. The ambition is to combine theater and music once again, but this time in a different form, namely, to use theater to explain music so that it can be understood by everyone and not only by an expert audience.

The first project, dedicated to seventeenth-century female composers, performers, and impresarios who brought prestige to the city of Naples throughout the world, has taken shape: Adriana Basile, Giulia De Caro, and Anna Maria Scarlatti, famous harmonica players; Adriana Basile, sister of the best-known Giambattista Basile, the author of the famous *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The Tale of Tales); Anna Maria Scarlatti, sister of the famous composer Alessandro; Giulia De Caro who went from “cantarina e commediante” (singer and impresario) to first lady impresario of San Bartolomeo Theater. Giving voice to *Adriana, Anna Maria e Giulia. Famosissime armoniche del Regno di Napoli* (Adriana, Anna Maria and Giulia: Famous Harmonica Players of the Kingdom of Naples)—this is the title of the text—Cristina Donadio was the voice in prose accompanied by the baroque ensemble Talenti Vulcanici (Volcanic Talents) directed by Stefano Demicheli. Adriana Basile, Giulia De Caro, and Anna Maria Scarlatti were indeed prostitutes, but in music, desired, even more than for their uninhibited conduct, for their shrewdness combined with the recognition, in esteem and fame, of their art.

My dramaturgy thus stems from an analysis of the scores dedicated to them by the great composers such as Monteverdi, Scarlatti, and Provenzale, and from historical documents in which the ascent of these women towards musical success, justified by their authentic and very pure vocal talents, for which the main geniuses of the Neapolitan School of Music wanted to compose, is strongly evident. But these intellectually and sexually free artists did not spare themselves the use of every means to tread not long and winding but short and golden paths. My account of the three “famous harmonicas” is therefore that of a century, the 17th century in the Kingdom of Naples, which in terms of vices and virtues seems never to have passed. The performance opened the famous Utrecht Festival in Holland. A few months after its world premiere it was closed due to the Covid-19 epidemic. Before Holland, the show premiered at Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano in Naples. For set design: Caravaggio’s *Martyrdom of St. Ursula*.

Year 2020: *Albino e Plautilla. Intermezzo buffo di Leonardo Vinci* (Albino and Plautilla: A Comic Interlude by Leonardo Vinci), is the second project I have signed for the De’ Turchini Foundation, a text written for actor and Pulcinella puppet. Who are Albino and Plautilla? What is an *intermezzo buffo*? What is meant by the “Neapolitan school of music”? And above all, who is Leonardo Vinci, one of the greatest exponents of the Neapolitan school of music? It is precisely from these questions and from the analysis of the original score that the dramaturgy was born and developed, not as a severe and academic history of music, but as a spectacular theatrical performance in which the serious genre is embodied in the character of Leonardo Vinci himself—author of the music for the comic interlude *Albino e Plautilla*—who, through the story of his

mysterious life and death, will lead the spectator by the hand through the dense and secret staves of pages of genially composed compositions, others commissioned, and many dreamed of. But to the performance of an *opera buffa* (comic opera) would have been trivial to interpose a serious performance, as was customary in 18th century opera. *Albino e Plautilla* is in fact musical buffoonery placed between the acts of the tragedy *Silla, The Dictator* by Vinci himself.

Funny intermezzo in a funny show! Thus was born the strange idea of making Leonardo Vinci, played by actor Massimo Finelli—who tells what the uses and customs of music in the 18th century were, with an obligatory passage on the phenomenon of the castrato up to his funeral monument—co-star alongside another character, not human however, but full of humanity: a genuine, spontaneous, truthful humanity, cheerful and melancholic, Mephistophelean and at the same time profuse with an angelic boyishness; a more popular humanity expressed by a mask borrowed from the great *commedia dell'arte*—Pulcinella, here a puppet, whose wooden body movements and distinctive voice are entrusted to the refined mastery of the world's leading *guarattellaro*⁵ Bruno Leone. The Pulcinella of the *guarattelle* is no longer a servant and peasant, but an archetype of vitality, a rebellious and irreverent anti-hero, an absolute protagonist who confronts, demystifies, and mocks anyone in this grotesque world who still has the audacity to take himself too seriously. Indeed, it is precisely Pulcinella who disturbs the story of the Calabrian composer adopted by the city of Naples, mocking him and downplaying his great deeds by comparing him, in a surreal anachronistic manner, to those Neapolitan myths such as Mario Merola⁶ and Maradona, being part of a cultural substratum more national-popular than elitist, to create a dissonant rift between genres that are undoubtedly different but in reality are united by a single root towards those who have donated something of their art that, from the particular city of Naples, has become historical and universal memory. Indeed, who does not know the king of the skit Mario Merola and Maradona's golden foot? And who has never heard the name Pulcinella pronounced? Leonardo Vinci will become unforgettable to all, because an exponent of classical culture who becomes popular not in the sense of trash, but of known, remembered, esteemed, and loved.

Theater and music—thanks to a dual work of direction for the prose and the opera, in which Brechtian estrangement is combined with Goldonian *commedia dell'arte*—thus experience a happy alliance in which genre distinctions are annulled thanks to the purity

⁵ A craftsman who made and sold *guarattelle*, i.e. puppets, but also he was a true artist, able to put on funny and poetic shows with his puppets.

⁶ Mario Merola (1934–2006) was an Italian singer and actor, most prominently known for having rejuvenated the traditional popular Neapolitan melodrama known as the *sceneggiata*.



PHOTO ALESSIA DELLA RAGIONE

Di Maso's *Famosissime Armoniche*, Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano in Naples

of artistic doing that becomes knowledge and intellectual and sentimental enrichment. *Albino e Plautilla* was broadcast on the RAI channels recording record ratings.

ADFC: Apart from *Lalluce*, translated into Neapolitan, the language in which you express yourself remains Italian. In the language that defines the depth of the characters, current locutions surface, sometimes there is the abuse of linguistic stereotypes, abstruse or verbose phrases. This linguistic mixture is dominated by cynical and sardonic tones, reflecting the same trend of the plot in which the most trivial events are intertwined with extremely profound happenings. Is everything that should be authoritative, important, serious, no more valuable than the trivial?

ADM: Everything has become banal. Even death. If we think of funerals in which the relatives of the deceased regard the sacred altar as the stage of a theater in which they

recite letters written to the dead person full of sentimentality, where while alive, they had difficulty or no time to be able to express all the affection that human beings need. And the final applause when the coffin is carried out of the sacred? Everything becomes spectacle. Everything becomes the trivialization of spectacle.

In a drama entitled *Bolle di sapone* (Soap Bubbles), I address in an apparent banality the urgent problem of sexual assistance required by the disabled. It is mistakenly believed that disabled people have neither feelings nor a body that can demand caresses, because they are considered an “error” of nature. Jim and Jem are brother and sister. Jim has no feet, and Jem is autistic. They decide by mutual agreement, since their requests to the Local Health Care Service (Italian ASL) to have a sexual assistant (a figure institutionalized in Spain and Germany) are rejected. They want only to have sex to feel what everyone else feels. And it is not pleasure for its own sake, but a desire to feel loved; to feel equal to others; to feel “normal.” The dialogue is built on apparently crazy but sophisticated English puns, as cruel as the way these people with severe disabilities are treated. Banality then becomes a key dramaturgical means to ironize what is not funny.

AFDC: Alberto Savinio wrote: “Theater must give us back the frightening reconstruction of ourselves in words and gestures. It must represent our speaking conscience. Very difficult to bear.” The catharsis of which Aristotle speaks is precisely this: to recognize in representation the evil for which we ourselves are responsible. An ancient defect of Italian society is precisely its refusal to look at and analyze itself. To pain, the Italian prefers to confront harmony and beauty. Angela Di Maso has chosen, instead, to look the horror of today’s Italian society in the face and bring it to the stage, to put the spectator in front of a mirror. Perhaps, it does not exist, but why not believe that there can be a better, alternative reality to the world we live in? Why not dream of a life different from the one we lead? Why not hope that something will change? Perhaps, it is precisely hopes and dreams that can push us to change something, not to be content, not to become accustomed to a liquid society, devoid of values and reference points, which frightens and crushes those who do not adapt to its schemes nor recognize themselves in its principles and naively wish to transform them from the foundations.

ADM: The truth must necessarily pass through horror. And despite this, one still does not get rid of it. One thinks of war. Every day we see bombs and the dead, the sight of which arouses pity in us, but then everyone returns to their warm, safe corner. In my play *Miserere*, I describe the horrors of the Church between the pedophilia and violence that priests and nuns are often forced to suffer without the possibility of denouncing. The protagonist is himself a priest—homosexual and pedophile—born from the union of a priest and a nun. The story that unfolds is horrible, just as horrible is the ending. Things can but change, because this world should be re-born—at least improve through

the most ruthless and cruel denunciation, because it is only by throwing the many hidden truths in faces, and the Church has several, and like it the corrupt state, implicated in the murders of those righteous men who were uncovering the Pandora's box, to make up for. Where even the beauty of art, of nature, of poetry are no longer enough, life is not beautiful. One thinks of art where lobbies, in a war between the poor, carry out the worst anti-meritocratic misdeeds. *Il maestro di musica* (The Music Teacher) is the only play with a happy ending. An old music teacher, a homosexual, is falsely accused of having abused one of his pupils and for this reason is expelled from the school. With the help of some old pupils, whom he helps to make into skilled concert performers, he manages to clear his name and regain his dignity.

AFDC: Karen Blixen stated: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." As the free thinker that you are, without resorting to clichés, you give voice to a miserable, violent humanity of rapists, murderers, incestuous fathers, and mothers who witness without rebellion the crime perpetrated on their children by domineering and violent husbands. In the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, suddenly Agamemnon says: "it is natural for men to trample all the more upon the fallen." Yes, we have no pity, no understanding, for those who have fallen during their lives. And he has paid a price even higher than the mistakes he has made. We look at him with snobbishness, with the idea of judging him, as if we could really place ourselves on the pedestal of a supposed moral superiority. How much are your characters imbued with pietas?

ADM: Each of my characters. *Cuòre. Sostantivo maschile* (Heart: Male Noun), my most recent play on tour in all theaters in Italy, was written precisely following the *pietas* of the two lead actresses. We were in the midst of a Covid closure when we started seeing each other via Google Meet and from the story of personal vicissitudes, many of which were unaccountable, as in a stream of consciousness in the midst of an analytical session, I collected all the material and transcoded it into a completed dramaturgy in which the pain of one person becomes a universal pain in which each of us can recognize ourselves and feel relieved that we are not alone in feeling emotions that make us lose our compass in the search for that golden path where the road to happiness is always so jagged and tortuous. Sharing. Another key word in my poetics.

AFDC: Jean-Paul Sartre stated that man is free to choose even in the face of suffering. In your theater, however, one cannot be truly free since suffering results in crime. There is no alternative. One is either executioner or victim. What happens instead to the victims, to the slaves, to the martyrs, to the frightened, to those overwhelmed by disease, to those drowned in vice, to those blinded by lusts, to those stupefied by TV hype?

ADM: They succumb. They succumb where it is also us who let others do what they want with us. Exactly as in politics, where they want us, a flock of sheep deprived of all intelligent judgement, to be able to choose for ourselves what is good and what is bad. Television, for example, is a powerful weapon of the regime. Everyone is homologated, even by physical characteristics. We must all be the same. Every diversity—physical and psychic—is a target to be eliminated. My theater does nothing but take these people and bring them on stage. The real protagonist is not the actor on stage but the spectator. It is he who chooses the end of the play. It is he who chooses sides. It is he who must make the happy ending, but this time no longer on stage but in acting itself.

In *La prima volta* (The First Time), I tell of a man and a woman who are very old and therefore shut away in a nursing home by their families. Everyday loneliness slowly turns into love, a love that is not senile but adolescent, the one made the first time when everything is discovered. Life is not over until it is over. Happiness exists. It is up to us not to discover it but to cultivate it, day by day, remaining faithful to what is good and right in each of us and not depersonalizing ourselves as the outside imposes. We are not monsters. We are only distracted by others about ourselves.

AFDC: Linking up with the previous question. I would like to borrow the concept of *forma* (form) theorized by the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, understood in its double meaning: of mask—if you like, also of Pirandellian memory—that others impose on us and of behavior to which we conform ourselves to be accepted. Gombrowicz said that fighting against *forma* means wanting to return to nature. In your work this is, however, no longer possible; there is no salvation, actual reality is irretrievably lost: behind the mask there is only a deformed man, suffocated by routine and social conventions. Do the characters in your plays pursue liberation from the *forma*? Do they fight it? Where does this existential conflict lead?

ADM: To the acceptance of what one is or has become, and to overcoming. That is the task of my theater. To take off the mask, to show oneself for what one is, and where there are faults do everything to cover them up by making beds of fresh, fragrant flowers of Good grow. We are all born good, but it is our relationship with others, starting with the family relationship itself, that then dirties us. The gentle soul is considered weak and stupid and so we violate ourselves to conform to human ugliness because this world must treat us exactly as it treats us. But no! This existential conflict, this perennial possibility of choosing between being good or being evil, must lead us to the choice of Good. But I repeat, [it is] a choice that we often must and can only make by showing what we have become. Shame on us for this homologation and be born again to a new life. It does not matter if to others I will be considered a loser because I prefer my garden to horror.

PHOTO BRUNO FONTANAROSA



Gaia Petrone in Di Maso's *Albino e Plautilla*.
Intermezzo buffo di Leonardo Vinci

AFDC: At the end of his life, Gombrowicz concluded that there is no escape from *forma*, but that the only—albeit partial—freedom lies in artistic creativity. The artist, in fact, even if unable to escape the *forma*, can at least feel free to play with it, thereby discovering true freedom. How far do you go to play with your dramaturgy?

ADM: A lot. Theater writing allows me to play with words and say everything that is not always possible to communicate clearly and directly. So through the very game of heteronomy I take on myself, I make my own, all the attitudes of the other person until I become that person, transforming myself into a character that, only at the end of the game, in reality it was not even I who created, but it was he who came to look for me, asking me to tell his story and not letting go of my hand until I had answered his appeal to listen. The game then becomes esotericism, alchemy, pure magic. In *Una giornata al mare* (A Day at the Sea), the story of a mother struggling with her son's addiction to antidepressant drugs, mother and son were sat at the foot of my bed one night and

began to argue. They woke me up. I got out of bed and turned on my computer and started writing down, almost like an automaton, everything they were saying to each other. What came out was a story of extraordinary poetry as only the love of a mother trying to save her child can be. There. It is the characters in search of an author, in this case, who play with me.

AFDC: Your most recent work is *Brutta*, a one-act drama in which, amidst paradoxes and reversals of meaning, you strip the characters of their honest bourgeois clothes to show them naked and prey to the demons of incommunicability, alienation, sex, and violence ready to explode. But truth is also a path to take, not a goal to start from. And we all know that we prefer to ignore the truth—so as not to suffer, so as not to heal. Why else would we become what we are afraid to be?

ADM: We constantly live by pretense. We pretend. We imagine ourselves to be better than we appear. The fact that we are actually worse than we appear also comes out without any fear or trembling, as Kierkegaard would say. We then live on precarious balances that it takes very little . . . that is to say, everything that has not been foreseen is enough to make the walls come tumbling down. *Brutta* is the story of a man and a woman stuck in a perfect marriage for years until the woman, during a dinner party, pauses to look closely at her husband and discovers his ugliness. Yes, the aesthetic ugliness. She tells him so. Quite naturally, too. She tells him that after years of marriage she wants to leave him because even the sight of all that ugliness disgusts her. It sounds like a platitude, yet there is no worse offence that can hurt us deeply than someone who highlights our physical—rather than intellectual—flaws to the point of mocking us. To mortify us. What, however, is hidden in the subtext of the lines of this drama is something quite different: it is the consequence of an extreme love, capable of stopping happiness, apparently, in order not to make the one we believe loves us suffer. A Pirandellian drama in which the executioner becomes an unwitting victim—hence the transformation of the Italian adjective from masculine *brutto* to feminine *brutta*—in a cruel, ruthless play of parts in which nothing was as it seemed, *Brutta*, published by Divergenze, is in its second reprint. This is exciting news because contemporary drama certainly does not fit into the more commercial literary genres such as novel, fiction, or poetry. An undoubtedly elitist genre, for insiders, now instead a genre for everyone. Soon there will also be the first translations into other languages precisely to make my theatrical poetics travel and become known outside Italy. One of the important translations will certainly be the one into Polish, and perhaps with its own performance by a company of Polish actors. I would be very happy if Poland could get to know my theater poetry in which I tell not about Italy, but about the world.



ANGELA DI MASO

born in Naples, is a graduate in philosophy, lecturer, publicist journalist, and musician, specializing in semiotics, singing and Gregorian music direction. She has flanked her concert activity with that of playwright and theater director, studying direction and acting at the University of the Sacred Heart in Milan with Gaetano Oliva, a student, and actor of Jerzy Grotowski. She collaborates as dramaturge and director of opera theater for the European Music Foundation Pietà de' Turchini. She is Subject Matter Expert in the chair of “History of Theater and Disciplines of the Performing Arts”—Department of Humanistic Studies at the University of Naples Federico II. She is a lecturer in the “History of Music and Melodrama” at the European University LUETEC. She directs the editorial series *Controscena*, dedicated to contemporary Italian dramaturgy, published by the Divergenze. She collaborated with movie director Pupi Avati on the screenplay of *Una festa da ballo* (A Dance Party). Her dramas have been translated into English, Dutch, and Romanian. Her plays are performed both in Italy and abroad.

ANDREA F. DE CARLO

graduated in foreign languages and literature at the University of Salento (Italy) in 2004, with a dissertation on *Bolesław Leśmian and the Russian Symbolism*, and he was awarded a PhD degree at the same university in 2010, with a dissertation on Dante's critical reception in 19th-century Poland. During the academic years 2006–2010 he taught Polish language and literature at the University of Salento, and in the academic years 2020–2021 taught Polish language at the Aldo Moro University of Bari. Since 2011 he has taught Polish language and literature at the Department of Literary, Linguistic, and Comparative Studies of “L'Orientale” University of Naples, where since 2021 he has been a researcher in Slavic studies.