

Emma Dante

The Practice of Loving

Interview by Maria Ficara and Fabrizio Pompei

How did you come across theatre?

School introduced me to theatre. My family did not go to see performances, so I came across theatre late in life. I was taken by the school to the Greek theatre of Siracusa to see Antigone. There I understood that theatre interested me and that it was what I would do in the future

Did you already think of becoming a director?

I do not even consider myself to be a director now! I am still full of doubts. I always imagined I would be an actress because I did not feel strong enough to be the leader of a group, or somebody who has ideas to propose to others. I wanted to be a sponge that absorbs other people's ideas. I attended a theatre course while I was at High School and then I graduated at the National Silvio D'Amico Theatre Academy in Rome.

Why did you decide to found your own company?

I had returned to Sicily and I was in crisis. I did not work much; I hated auditions and I was never cast. I hated the world of contracted actors who tour performances they do not give a damn about; I hated that useless theatre, that sterile and meaningless way of relating to art. All these things made me feel uneasy. I stopped working for a whole year. I thought it would be forever. I did not want to have anything to do with that rubbish people called theatre. I make, and I wish to make, an uncomfortable kind of theatre that at the same time must be useful to somebody, functional in producing change, with no presumption or morality. For me, making theatre had a different meaning than it had for others. The pressure and need were not the same.

I realised that I was no longer interested in being a sponge. I wanted to be a centripetal force. Also because of a

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serious family problem, I returned to Palermo and decided to stay and to start a big workshop. I spread the word around and several locals presented themselves: youngsters, actors and students of the Palermo Repertory Theatre. Most of them left after the workshop, but some have stayed and still work with me. They have become the hard core with whom, in August 1999, I founded the Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale (South West Coast Company).

What do you mean when you say that theatre must be useful?

Theatre must be useful in the sense that it strikes a chord; it has to stir up a thought. My theatre has had a purpose, not in order to change laws, habits, or the carelessness and approximation that exist in this world. Theatre is a little fuse, a small mine that can lie unexploded for centuries. But some people put their feet on it and feel a short circuit. This is important for me. If in these four years even just one person has felt a wound, and has treasured this wound, I know my theatre was worth while and that I will continue.

Why is your company called South West Coast?

Because it was born in Palermo. I wanted to speak about my city of origin. I was born in Palermo, but then my parents took me to another Sicilian town. In fact I have spent very little time in Palermo, I was there only the year when I attended the theatre school. How should I name my company? How should I label the story I want to tell? I should give it a name that was located and positioned precisely in Palermo, on the south west coast of Sicily. I thought: it will be a theatre of the south, the soul of the south. South is the key word.

What kind of relationship do you have with the other theatres of Palermo?

None. We don't have any kind of relationship with the institutions or with the theatres of Palermo. For three years I have directed the Rossofestival in another Sicilian town, Caltanissetta, and the festival is supported by its left wing town council. It is a successful experimental festival, and I have invited performances to it that otherwise would not have reached Sicily.

What do you think of official theatre?

The official theatre in Palermo? I think the worst possible of it. But my point of view isn't argued with. It is a circle of which I am not part and of which I do not share the way of thinking and policies at all. It is a closed theatre, behind closed doors, and the people there who receive public funding have no interest in what happens around them.

So you work using other circuits?

We began with the help of some friends who gave us their space. Now we have a room in the community centre of the ex-Prison, a self-managed squatted and run-down building. We also give performances at the Laboratorio Zeta, another community centre close to the railway station.

One of our first performances, *Odissea*, was born after a six-month workshop for a project called *Zen Insieme*, financed by the Home Office with the support of Palermo Prefecture. We presented it for the first time in the Palermo neighbourhood called Zen, Zona Espan-sione Nord (North Extension Area), a notoriously infamous area of council houses, where the young-at-risk live. Then we staged *Insulti* (Insults) and *La Principessa sul Pisello* (The Princess and the Pea), a performance that

reminded everyone about the death of a female student and of a child and that tried to keep their memory alive. It was performed for three months in houses, courtyards and bars. At the end of each performance we would put a hat on the floor and collect money. We rehearsed the next performance, *L'Arringa* (The Harangue) for three months and we only performed it once, in a restaurant, during an event called "Theatre Is Served".

But then you created Mpalermu. How did you work on this performance?

We needed to get out of Palermo and we were aware that if we didn't we would die. *MPalermu* means inside Palermo. It is a performance that deals with an inside from which you cannot get out. We had to find a way, and this is the theme of the performance: a family that tries to exit from their house, but never succeeds. We won the national Scenario Prize 2001 and we crossed the Straits of Messina. *MPalermu* was talked about in the whole of Italy; it was loved by critics and audiences. With *MPalermu* we understood that we had to stage original texts; we could no longer extract them from novels or fairy tales. We realised that we had the skill and the will to write new stories, to work on dramaturgy and not only staging. In our history, our strong identity starts to emerge with *MPalermu*, when our stage writing was born.

MPalermu is the performance that we all love the most because it is the heart of our whole existence. Everything starts from there and amongst our performances it is the one that has the impudence, naivety and freshness that none of the others have. The other performances are already more cunning and skilled, while *MPalermu* has no craft, it is a performance almost without a paternity, a bastard

performance. That is why it is my favourite. The others have a mother, a birth, whereas *Mpalermu* doesn't; for me it is as if it has always existed.

How was the story of Mpalermu created?

I wanted to talk about my city. But how can one do that without falling into peripheral, commonplace or high and mighty points of view? I understood that to talk about Palermo I needed to spy on someone by peeping through the keyhole, to speak about the detail which then becomes universal. I believe that if you pinpoint an intention even only with a gesture, which means you understand what its real motive is, at that moment you can talk about everything. I started from a family, because it is the symbol of Palermo. Later I specialised in families creating the trilogy composed of *MPalermu*, *Carnezzzeria* (Butcher's Shop) and *Vita Mia* (My Life). These three performances tell of my city.

For the creation of characters I always start from the concept of affiliation. They are like a family, of the same blood and illegitimate children, affiliated, belonging to the same system. In *MPalermu* the family members live at home, they are always about to go out, but they never manage to. *Carnezzzeria* is the degeneration of this existence: after staying inside so long, incestuous relationships and mutual violence take place, beastliness arises and illegitimate children are born.

It is not without reason that *Carnezzzeria* is the Sicilian translation of butcher's shop, whereas *Vita Mia* is a ritual of death. At a certain point, somebody dies inside the house. An absurd wake begins: three boys play with an empty bed in the middle of the stage. It is a dangerous game, like that of a child who risks an electric shock from touching a plug. In this case, the



Giacomo Guarnieri and Ersilia Lombardo in *Vita mia*, directed by Emma Dante. Photo: Dario Guarnieri

bed is the plug. The three boys play with death. They try to occupy the bier, but their mother prevents them from doing it because she does not want to see them dead. Yet, one of them has already died in an accident, even though she continues to see him alive like the other two. So, on stage, she dresses him up for the burial, while he seems to be alive, playing and trying to escape.
What kind of relationship is there between you

and your actors?

I am the leader; I am the one who, as they say, "has the visions". They are completely at the service of my visionary tendency and, above all, of the poetics that we are still searching for.

I am the motor for everything, but they also know that without them I am nothing.

How do you choose or train your actors?

I choose my actors on the basis of their complete availability to be corrupted by me and to corrupt me. I am not interested in actors' skills, but in their determination to apply their talent in an artistic process. If in the actors I notice even the least fear of putting themselves at risk, even if they are the best performers in the world, I will never choose them, because they have not chosen me. My actors, after many years of work and research, have become extraordinary. Everybody says how good they are, but they have worked hard, maybe even too hard, to still be at the beginning: I have driven into them the concepts of sacrifice, care, precision and need - we would not know where to go without need. That is it: I choose the actors' need and then I take it apart to test them.

Tell us about your role as a director and author of your performances and about what you call stage writing.

The fact that I am author and director is more or less the same thing for me, in the sense that I do not distinguish between these two jobs. The words are said at the same time that they are directed, which is to say channelled in a very precise direction. It is not a text made up in another moment or in a different context and later spoken by the actor, but it is created during rehearsals. My dramaturgy is based on a very important principle: that of the generated, and not pronounced, word. So what the actor says will never be born beforehand. There can be a general idea, an outline of the words, but they are always generated by the actors. So, I can think of a text in my head, at a theoretical level, but then, in practice, the actor has to be able to generate the words, not

only to pronounce them. I will never give my actors finished texts. I work on the primary source from which everything is born: the actor's body.

Can you describe an improvisation?

It is not easy to direct an improvisation; you must know how to work on it, in the sense that you have to give actors many more gateways than is usually imagined, exactly because it is an improvisation. You have to build such a precise grid so that actors can only do something precise, which the director has decided. You have to lead the actors to do what you want without them feeling constrained. Building an improvisation, as far as I am concerned, is like building and directing a performance.

If the director's staging is precise and scrupulous, the actors will act naturally without ever having the impression that the director told them what to do, even if she did, and very much so!

When I arrive at the rehearsal space, I have a clear idea. Let's take, for example, my performance *Carnezzeria*: I wanted to tell the story of four siblings, three boys, and a girl who should be dressed as a bride and pregnant. I wanted her brothers to take her on stage and leave her there, but I did not know why. Usually, when I begin writing, I always know what I want to say, but I never know the drive, the reason why the characters come to tell that story. I don't know; I discover the 'why' during the process. This is what is interesting. Theatre amuses me because while doing it, I find out the reason for doing it.

I dressed up the actress as a bride and put an artificial belly on her, and on that belly I made a black cross: a bad mark, something to hide. It was a mourning belly that somehow should be abolished, erased. Then I placed her brothers in fur-coats beside her

and I told them: "You want to abandon her because she is marked, because she carries this bad story inside her, a bastard child. You want to leave her here, you have to make sure that somebody takes her, you do not want to see her anymore." Through the actors' improvisations we discovered why it was so; we understood that they wanted to abandon their sister because she was pregnant by one of them; because all three had raped her and now they wanted to get rid of her.

In the first rehearsals, for a week, I asked them to do an improvisation that did not work. The brothers arrived on stage and addressing the audience - my actors always look at the audience, without ever using the filter of the fourth wall - they tried to sell their sister like merchandise. Nina, the sister, is very naïve; she is a woman who does not know, who has never seen anything, who was always kept at home; she has always let her brothers do whatever they wanted, because she trusted them. I said to the actress that trust was her most important feeling; Nina trusts all three of her brothers, even though they will hurt or beat her. She is like a tame dog that lets its master do everything to it, because it believes in the master, even though he will abandon it or kill it. The dog will never judge its master and will always look for the way home. The dog has no concept of betrayal; if it loves you, it will love you forever, in spite of anything you may do.

Only later I understood what did not work in this improvisation: the attempt to sell the sister to a spectator. Nobody would have ever stood up and taken her, it was a fake relationship. The brothers should not leave her to one spectator in particular, but to all of them. They should abandon her there; only in this way they would all take her. At the end of the performance, they nail down her bride's veil on the stage and they

leave. She is not able to move: it does not occur to her that she just has to remove the clip from her head. The veil is part of her nature; she will never be able to take it off. Nina will remain on stage with the veil nailed down under everyone's eyes.

Several of your performances are on tour. Do you choose other actors for new productions in order to keep the repertoire alive?

Right now we have five performances in our repertoire and of course the company has become bigger, also to help the 'older' actors of the group not to get stuck in languages they know too well. I am terrified of closure, of the compressed air of night-clubs, of falling asleep in unmade beds with sheets that have been dirty for centuries. So, as much as I am able, I try to awaken new impulses in myself and in my group. I am always happy to host new people in my home; after all, I do theatre to fill up my loneliness.

It is as if from popular theatre you have drawn language, characters and context (you choose to use dialect, a familiar dimension in a problematic reality), and from research theatre, a physical approach, collective creation and improvisation. In your experience what comes first: the desire to narrate or the choice to do it in a certain way?

For me to narrate is not as important as to search for a new language that opens up as many questions as possible. I am not interested in narrative theatre or in dance theatre; I search for something that lies in between, neither fish nor fowl, which cannot be easily defined. I try to lift the veil that has fallen over the world (as Romeo Castellucci says), to reveal it to my eyes and to those of others, even if only for a very brief moment. The dialect I use in my performances is a

re-invented language of prehistoric roots, it is a language of the caves, that is why I like it, because it is almost incomprehensible, even to me.

In your performances you talk about Sicily, of the life you know, without being afraid of stereotypes. Do you put this reality on stage to understand it, criticise it, detach yourself from it or to get to know yourself?

The Sicily I present is a lie that helps me understand the truth. Stereotypes and archetypes prevent me from falling into a trap: I am afraid of over-deliberation, of the distortion of reason, I am always scared of moving too far away from the physical needs that are inherent to human nature. I do not want to be separated from human beings, from their stink, their nobleness, and I believe in their failures more than anything else in the world. That is why I use symbols and icons that in some way represent human beings, to then, of course, destroy and reconstruct them. I do and undo all the time, like Penelope who weaves and un-weaves her cloth, blocking her action in time.

If we asked you to give a date to your performances, what age would they belong to? To the past we come from, to the still strongly archaic present or to the future of an unchangeable reality?

I want to answer you with the words of a great artist, who knew more than I what he was going towards: "I am not a prophet who tries to predict the future of theatre. The future is here, I care about nothing else. In art you can achieve utopia only once, but that is the one time that counts." These are the words of Tadeusz Kantor, an essential point of reference for me; a great figure, a true innovator. I think he was the greatest theatre practitioner of the 20th century.



Ersilia Lombardo in *Vita mia*, directed by Emma Dante. Photo: Dario Guarneri.

Let's talk about your perspective on the woman from southern Italy. Is the woman you portray your mother? Is it you? Or is it the woman in all of us?

My theatre is matriarchal, it is true, but the women I portray are almost always mercilessly exploited and abused. They are dying creatures with an exaggerated and cumbersome liveliness. They are women of the south, strong and fragile at the same time. They are women with a strong survival instinct, they defend their species at all cost, and this species is male, it is the population that is able to inseminate their womb. Yes, the women I talk about are my mother. The women I talk about are *motherixes* (mothers-matrixes).

Who is the victim and who is the persecutor in society?

For me, good and evil are like one thing, so I reckon that the victim and the persecutor are also one thing: victims always look for

their persecutors, even if they are afraid, because, alas, they cannot do without them. If the victims are lucky, they do not find their persecutors, but this does not mean that they have not searched for them. I don't believe in divine salvation, or in earthly salvation. I believe in the marvel of this horrible life.

What have you learnt from theatre?

Theatre is for me the flight-simulator of a glider without engines. I nose-dive and I glide, imagining the abyss underneath me. Most times I fall and obviously I do not hurt myself seriously, because it is all pretend. I pretend; I continuously pretend that I am falling. Theatre teaches me to pretend falling, with broken bones.

What do you learn from your practice as a director?

I learn to love.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

EMMA DANTE (Italy) was born in Palermo in 1967. She attended the school for actors directed by Michele Perriera and, in 1991, graduated from the Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica of Rome. In 1999, she founded, in Palermo, the Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale with Gaetano Bruno, Sabino Civillieri and Manuela Lo Sicco. Among her recent performances are *Medea* and *La scimmia*, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2004. After *Vita mia*, her company premiered *Michelle di Sant'Oliva* in June 2005, on the theme of homosexuality. Emma Dante is now preparing a performance for 2006 on the mafia, in collaboration with Elena Stancanelli. Since 2002 she has been the director of the Rossofestival, opening new spaces for contemporary theatre in Sicily.

MARIA FICARA (Italy) was born in Sicily in 1969. She has a degree in Foreign Languages and Literature and has done post-graduate studies in theatre. She is a translator and writer and she teaches at the University of Messina. She works with Teatro Proskenion as a dramaturg and project leader and has been a member of the international theatre network Linea Trasversale since it was founded. Maria gives workshops and lectures on dramaturgy in Italy and abroad and she has edited *Il Teatro come Terra degli Incontri* (Scilla Editrice, 2003) and *Donne di teatro e Cultura della (R) Esistenza* (Editoria e Spettacolo, 2005), an Italian selection from *The Open Page 1995-2005*.

FABRIZIO POMPEI (Italy) graduated in Arts at the University of L'Aquila with a final dissertation on Emma Dante's theatre. Since 1995, he has taken part in many activities supported by the Theatre Department of L'Aquila University, working with several theatre groups as an actor. He has worked as a director since 2004 and he is preparing a performance on the Resistance for the History Institute of Abruzzo. He is an independent film-maker, and has conceived, written and directed eight short-films. He is one of the authors included in *Il Teatro come Terra degli Incontri* (Scilla Editrice 2003), edited by Maria Ficara.