

## Donatella Massimilla

# Theatre and Self-Dramaturgy

Since starting work in theatre, I have always been fascinated by female themes and poetics in connection to women's histories and lives. It could simply be because I am a woman and as such, both in theatre and in my work as a theatre director, I search for narratives in which I can feel myself represented. But in fact it is not so simple and other reasons exist. The primary reason is the lack or marginal position of female roles and characters in our contemporary playwriting (even if experimental theatre has elaborated - in Europe particularly - a dramaturgical production starting from the actor's improvisational work). Then of course, there are the more "historical" and "actoral" reasons.

In Asian theatre the interpretation of female roles and characters by male actors is a codified and generally respected tradition. In the West this only happened in precise historical periods, such as those which make reference to ancient Greek and Elizabethan tragedy, certainly more on cultural and social grounds than on traditional artistic ones. I have always been struck by the fact that past authors (from Euripides to Shakespeare) imagined and wrote female characters that would be performed exclusively by men (with the interesting difference that Greek tragedies often had female titles, like Medea, Hecuba, Electra, etc., whilst the Elizabethan mainly male - Hamlet, Macbeth, etc. - even though the female characters are shadows who determine or inspire the action). Women and women's histories would be represented on stage through a male expression. Only Jean Genet, rewriting for stage the true story of the two Lapin sisters, *The Maids*, explicitly asks that Claire, Solange and the Madame should be interpreted by men. There is a great difference - I myself have experienced it when directing this play with male and female actors.

So I approached real stories of women, what I call "bios-graphies", to rewrite them for theatre because I was convinced that it was necessary to create roles for women actors in contemporary dramaturgy. This could even mean, as in the *Women's Decameron*, that women would also interpret male roles, with an ironic distance.

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*Women's Decameron* (taken from the novel by Julija Voznesenskajja) was a production that made us talk about that historical period of repression, gulags, of a concealed Russia, using an imaginary, poetical and amusing story as the frame. A group of women in a maternity ward have all given birth and, because of an infection in the hospital, they are "secluded" and isolated for ten days, compelled and tempted to reveal themselves to each other. Apart from the symbolism in the women's hope related to a "new life", the possible confrontation between diverse and conflicting roles (from party leader to intellectual, from tramp to theatre director), the writer diffuses her own story of a woman imprisoned for years in a gulag amongst the characteristics and tales of the women in the novel.

I managed to meet the author in Germany where, even though she had lived there for many years as a political refugee, she still only spoke Russian, prisoner of her own language. So I invented a Prologue to our production in which an old actress (the same one I had admired in the role of the governess Charlotte, in Strehler's *Cherry Orchard*) interprets the *Decameron's* author, Voznesenskajja herself, on the eve of her departure from Russia, while reciting small fragments from Chekhov, tidying her room, packing a small suitcase. Suddenly she is attracted by the words and songs of women who, about to give birth, come to bid her farewell, and also ask for help. So the true story of the writer is in its turn concealed in the new dramaturgical frame - the performance - and the old actress that interpreted her in the Prologue remained afterwards on stage to attend, and in a certain sense direct, the whole presentation like a kind of guardian angel/ matron.

The *Decameron* was a choral production with the actresses not only giving voice to the "true" stories of the characters they interpreted, but also to their own lives and emotions. This is the most important thing to underline. To talk about others and

about oneself touching on themes like "the first love", "betrayal", "money" allows a female expression to emerge which is based on similarities and complicity, whilst adopting from a distance the lives of other women, regardless of the unity of space, time and place. Those characters simply contained, I would dare say maternally, archetypes that could continually be merged and redefined in other stories.

Together with Olga Vinyals Martori, the Catalan actress with whom, after the *Decameron*, I founded the association called Ticvin (as in the village in Russia where it is said many fools lived), we chose to work with theatre in prisons. There we found other stories and "bios-ographies" directly tattooed on the skin and souls of those who really live in seclusion. To make theatre with prisoners/actresses came naturally to us. After having created a kind of common language, we invented, together with them as travel companions, memory itineraries to experience like a game, improvising and using songs and dances that they wanted to share. When the images and emotions transformed into real theatrical material, we tried to value that female life experience which sometimes provides an ancient and special intuition.

We conceived our first performances in prison as "self-dramaturgies", both with women and later with men. These include *Viaggio con Alice* (Journey with Alice) and *La nave dei folli* (The Ship of Fools), stage writings that had chosen, as starting points, themes which then totally changed. We spoke about human beings and their feelings, but in prison all that which is about life is also about desire, lack, denial. At moments the same bodies, normally hidden behind anonymous gym suits, seemed to come alive again and explode in the performance's costumes. The made-up faces emerged from darkness and gave expression and light to a theatre of colours and glances, true and non realistic, biographical and antibiographical, specific and universal.

I would now like to open a parenthesis on what has been our parallel artistic research - theatre produced outside the prison walls, for example on the subject of Frida Kahlo. In order to meet her person/character's soul, around which we wanted to create a performance, we went all the way to Mexico in search of her *Diary* (we were obsessed by the few published pages), only to find it locked in a safe. We then chose to stage our own story in search of Frida - the theatre tale of our journey. The piece was entitled *Yo, Frida Kahlo* (I, Frida Kahlo). Years later, we finally managed to get hold of the *Diary* and a completely different version of the performance was made, entitled *Alas rotas* (Broken Wings). This production has, in a way, closed a cycle of love and suffering for this extraordinary, fascinating and complex woman, who in the last years has passionately inspired numerous theatre performances all over the world.

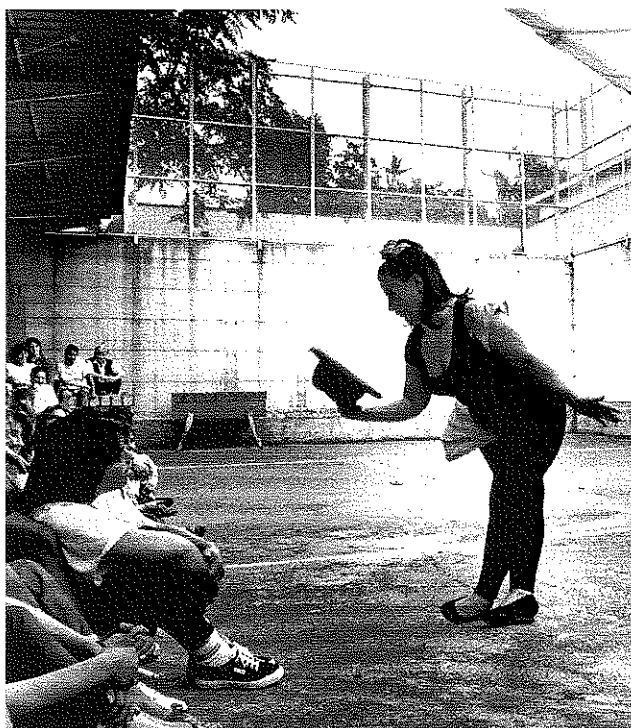
Our latest production is unrelentingly once again dedicated to a woman, Antonella Chitò, a tramp who, in a small book of half prose and half poetry, tells stories of drugs and alcohol, of passions and rebirths in an autobiographical and poetic style. What we call a modern tragedy, *Angeli sulla strada* (Angels on the Street), inspired by Antonella and by all the women who have lived "differently", is now being performed in schools and prisons, although it has also been presented in theatres. In the performance Antonella's divided "I" is presented by a female and a male actor, both on stage all the time.

So all our more recent work, with groups exclusively composed of women or of men (mostly within the prisons, but also with performances outside), seems to be pushing our artistic research towards entering and exiting female and male expression, in order to discover feelings and emotions without gender distinction and ultimately valuing the different intrinsic components and qualities that - as I said in

the beginning - other traditions or historical periods have made their own.

Translated from Italian by Julia Varley

DONATELLA MASSIMILA (Italy) has worked at San Vittore prison, Milan, initially directing a performance with women inmates, then with both men and women. In October 1994 she organised the First International Symposium on Theatre and Prisons.



*La notte di San Lorenzo* directed by Donatella Massimilla with women from San Vittore Prison, Milan. Photo: Maurizio Buscarino