

## Leo and Perla's laborious staging: a cascade of (cinematic) light for the actor's ghost

by Cristina Grazioli

On April 21, 1967 in Rome, at the La Ringhiera Theater, Leo De Berardinis and Perla Peragallo presented their first play, *La faticosa messinscena dell'Amleto di William Shakespeare* (*The laborious staging of Shakespeare's Hamlet*), later part of the meaningful context of the Ivrea Conference.

Defined by the authors as “a cinetheatrical play,”<sup>1</sup> it took its place clearly, starting from its intentions, within the territory of a dialogue with movie projection, fully aware of the differences that the use of film implies as a code for stage writing.

The stage set included three screens (white sheets) of different sizes, upstage and stage left and right, on which heterogeneous images were projected, drawn from a current events repertory (the White House, the Ministry) or shots – in color or black and white – of the two actors interpreting *Hamlet* (doing all the parts, in costume or everyday dress), as well as objects, neon signs and advertising. The films, initially shot by Alberto Grifi and Mario Masini, were later completed and edited by Leo and Perla<sup>2</sup>.

The actors lost their physical substance and appeared as figures blurred by klieg lights, reduced to larval shadows, “the reverse side of characters.”<sup>3</sup> Their “effigy” presence translated them into grotesque contemporary figures (Ophelia and Laertes on the edge of a pool, the King and Queen on a lawn against a background of lampposts, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern looking for government funds), accompanied by pop and rock music (for example, Riz Ortolani's *Mondo cane* and Beach Boys songs).

Perhaps because of technical (budgetary<sup>4</sup>) problems, the choice of “dubbing” the ghost characters became a convenient way to make the film “act” as dramaturgical material. The microphones, essential for deforming language, had to live up to the force of the images. The authors used cinema as a “point of resistance to betray,” a sort of body-to-body (we might say body-against-image) between the “organic” potentialities, expressed primarily as vocal material, and the extreme of reducing the body to a larva, *phasma*. This is a powerful aspect of the poetics of Leo and Perla, which here has a dramaturgic purpose, since it is related to *Hamlet's* ghosts, translated into simulacra of interpreters. Beams of light, aimed by the two actors themselves, fill first the stage, then the spectators, while the projections are superimposed on the bodies of Leo and Perla. “We were interested in one thing: the mummies all around and life that jerks drunkenly from side to side”<sup>5</sup>; the pressing reasons are ‘death,’ the “interruption of theatrical flow,” the “present estrangement.”<sup>6</sup> Film is a means by which images are translated into their luminous essence. “What we are making isn't a film, but a recorded event.”<sup>7</sup> One “vital” value of the cinematic work in itself is contrasted with that of a relic of the film medium, in a technical sense. “A camera or a recorder aren't a means for expressing ourselves – but a way of interrupting, freezing; one of the many ways to kill a sound, a light, a silence.”

The “effigy” characters are for Leo “irreversible bodies.” *Hamlet* is “a stranger” and the metaphor set in motion is vampirism: “the frames or the magnetic tape [...] must suck away the lives of the spectators.”<sup>8</sup>

To the start of the mentioned “resistance” also responds the layout of the technical apparatus, which, left on stage, create an obstacle for the actors to move about freely. But a sound collage echoes the multiple focal points (Verdi, Gianni Morandi, among others) from magnetic tapes activated on stage by the actors themselves.

Cinematic light becomes a scenic space<sup>9</sup>. The freedom of the space comes from the pervasion of the stage and hall with this “diffused” light, which engulfs the space of the spectators. Bartolucci interprets the performance as a new type of spatiality<sup>10</sup>.

Also the gestures are determined by the mode of the light: fragmented and hammered by screams<sup>11</sup>. Leo-Hamlet and Perla-Ophelia wander about in front of or behind the screens, “fleeing the images or superimposing themselves on them,

<sup>1</sup> G. Manzella, *La bellezza amara. Arte e vita di Leo de Berardinis*, La Casa Usher, Florence 2010, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> For the reconstructin of the play see L. De Berardinis, P. Peragallo, *Il lavoro su Amleto [intervista con Franco Molé]*, in F. Quadri, *L'avanguardia teatrale in Italia. Materiali (1960-1976)*, Einaudi, Turin 1977, 2 voll., I, pp. 243-255; M. La Monica, *Il poeta scenico. Perla Peragallo e il teatro*, Editoria & Spettacolo, Rome 2002; G. Bartolucci (ed.), *Teatroltre. Scuola romana*, Bulzoni, Rome 1974 (Teatro Marigliano folder).

<sup>3</sup> L. Borgia, *L'evento e l'ombra. Fenomenologia del nuovo teatro italiano. 1959-1967*, Maria Pacini Fazzi publisher, Lucca 2006, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> See G. Manzella, *La bellezza amara. Arte e vita di Leo de Berardinis*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> L. De Berardinis, P. Peragallo, *Il lavoro su Amleto [intervista con Franco Molé]*, cit., p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> L. De Berardinis, P. Peragallo, *Amleto, Macbeth, Watt*, in «Teatro», June 2, 1969 issue, pp. 54-59; later in F. Quadri, *L'avanguardia teatrale in Italia. Materiali (1960-1976)*, cit., I, pp. 256-262 : 258.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> G. Bartolucci (ed.), *Teatroltre. Scuola romana*, cit., (Teatro Marigliano folder), pp. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. G. Bartolucci, *La scrittura scenica*, Lerici, Rome 1968, pp. 51-52.

<sup>10</sup> G. Bartolucci (ed.), *Teatroltre. Scuola romana*, cit., (Teatro Marigliano folder), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> See the reviews in this focus; see L. Borgia, *L'evento e l'ombra*, cit., p. 193.

commenting on film inserts or even dubbing them live, even out of sync.”<sup>12</sup> Thus Hamlet “reaches the spectators like an out-of-focus echo, shattered among the shreds of other texts.”<sup>13</sup>

The following year (1968) Leo and Perla presented *Sir & Lady Macbeth* at the Teatrino di Bene on Vicolo del Divino Amore. The play testifies to the two artists' continued “passion” for the technique of light, as well as tools of dramaturgy, “figures” that plumb the depths of their poetics. The scene is now a dark cave, a “black clot of cruelty and fear that emerges from the darkness shot through by flashes of multicolored light, hallucinatory dialogues, harrowing screams.” A bidet is placed in the middle of a “technological forest” made up of electric cables, tape recorders, microphones, a structure with “about twenty caliper lamps gathered into a sort of tree (at one point they all light up together with a very violent effect), in addition to underwater diving flashlights with which the actors can illuminate themselves freely with a hellish blue and red light.”<sup>14</sup>

Bartolucci emphasizes the absence of symbolic references in the colored lights: “A light that is blue, red or purple not because it wants to classify those colors sentimentally or identify the emotions of those noises, but that is such above all because it must be blood red, blue to express the shade of their animal vomit, and purple to turn the blood into an even denser and more complicated humor, without being other than itself, as an index of funerals, assistance to death.”<sup>15</sup>

In this case, too, it is a sort of “resistance” of the bodies to the light: “bodies melt into lights, then are struck by noises, then offer themselves as “holes.”<sup>16</sup> Although the choice of light sources is different, in both spectacles the lighting serves the purpose of physical alteration, integrating itself with the means of the art of acting. In *Macbeth* the “extremely violent effect of the flash of 1000-watt lamps, [...] reverberates on the bodies with a harsh whiteness to gives them a corpse-like look.”<sup>17</sup> The diving torches with colored jells further contribute to the deforming effects. A light that “is subservient to the noise, since the latter envelops it, but imposes itself on the bodies, which endure only in themselves, greatly oppressed as they are by the light and the noises. Then the whole is the result of an extraordinary alternation and compositiveness, a fluency and an unparalleled figurativity, by its mobility and fire, its sensitivity and cognition.”<sup>18</sup> In addition to consuming and distorting the bodies and faces of the actors, the lighting violently attacks the few areas of the stage not reached by the cinematic light<sup>19</sup>.

Lorenzo Mango compares the three stages of this reinterpretation of *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* to that of Dante. The symbolic interpretation of the text corresponds to a dramaturgy of light “that impinges on the empty rigor of the optical box by cutting through the depth of darkness or, conversely, by bleaching the geometry of the walls, hiding or highlighting the bodies and objects.”<sup>20</sup>

Light and darkness have profoundly marked the work of Leo and Perla ever since their debut, conceived and exploited in all their potential and at various levels; the stage elements, first of all the actor's body and voice, are literally immersed and soaked in light and darkness<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> S. Margiotta, *Il Nuovo Teatro in Italia 1968-1975*, Titivillus, Corazzano (PI) 2013, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> G. Manzella, *La bellezza amara*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp. 16-17.

<sup>15</sup> G. Bartolucci, *La scrittura scenica*, cit.; later in *Teatroltre. Scuola romana*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> S. Margiotta, *Il Nuovo Teatro in Italia 1968-1975*, cit., p. 45; cfr. G. Bartolucci, *La scrittura scenica*, cit, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, pp. 54-55; G. Bartolucci (a cura di), *Teatroltre. Scuola romana*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> See S. Margiotta, *Il Nuovo Teatro in Italia 1968-1975*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> L. Mango, *La scrittura scenica. Un codice e le sue pratiche nel teatro del Novecento*, Bulzoni, Rome 2003, p. 227.

<sup>21</sup> All of Leo's work is worthy of detailed analysis for its use of light.