

Title || Compagnia della Fortezza's I Negri ('The Blacks').
Author || Letizia Bernazza
Translation from Italian || Flora Pitrolo
Published in || «Sciami», 2017 - www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com
Rights || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2016. Visit [term and condition](#) on sciami.com
Number of pages || pag 1 di 3
Language || ENG
DOI ||

I Negri (1996)

from Les Nègres by Jean Genet

directed by Armando Punzo

artistic collaboration by Nicola Rignanese

set and costumes by Valerio Di Pasquale, Carmen Lopez Luna con la collaborazione di Gianni Gronchi e Luisa Raimondi

music by Pasquale Catalano

with Adriano Amata, Alfonso Avella, Carlo Barresi, Nicola Bello, Barhane Bouzid, Juàn Caceres Gonzàles, Domenico Caia, Nicola Camarda, Francesco Capasso, Alberto Casaroli, Giovanni Chessa, Antonio Cinque, Ignazio Cocco, Ludovico Di Leva, Valerio Di Pasquale, Domenico Di Sarlo, Michele Ferraro, Carmelo Ferrugia, Mirko Gianduia, Giuseppe Giannuso, Giorgio Granatelli, Antonio Grisi, Antonio Linguanti, Salvatore Longo, Raffaele Prete, Leonardo Priolo, Giuseppe Raineri, Luigi Riccio, Rocco Romano, Graziano Salis, Roberto Sanna

production of Carte Bianche, Centro Teatro e Carcere di Volterra.

Premiere Volterra, Prison, July 24, 1996 – VolterraTeatro Festival, Theater of San Pietro, 25-26 July 1997

Compagnia della Fortezza's I Negri ('The Blacks').

by *Letizia Bernazza*¹

In Compagnia della Fortezza's *I Negri*, as was the case for their *Marat-Sade* and for *La Prigione*, the company's own circumstances are reflected in the original text. Instead of focusing on the text's antithesis between Blacks and Whites which Genet develops beyond the problem of racism as a problem between the I and the Other², Armando Punzo concentrates on the opposition between prisoners and free individuals; he thus transforms the prostration of the Blacks, who cause the murder of a white woman in front of a court of whites, into the humiliation of the detained who effectively display themselves to an audience of free spectators.

The director has spoken of "asking himself how Genet might have felt: what his humiliation was, what had led him to write this text and at the same time to distance himself, through the act of writing, from the biographical events which moved him to write. I see it as a meeting point between despair and a ferocious self-irony" (Punzo, 1996). The questions Genet's text elicits (what does it mean to be Black? What colour are the Blacks? How do you feel as a Black?) are used to reflect on the defenceless, marginal condition experienced by those who live in detention centres, as well as on the obstacles encountered by the Compagnia della Fortezza and on how those obstacles were overcome. "Since our very first readings", Punzo continues, "we dedicated *I Negri* to all those people who have betrayed us somehow. We feel like we should thank them because they reminded us of who we really are, of what our place and our role is. Without these people's superficiality we would have never been able to perform this work" (Punzo, 1996).

In *I Negri*, the play-within-a-play structure which exists in Genet's version is cut and as such Archibald (the character who guides the play within the play in the original) disappears, as do the white characters, written into the text "the way they are traditionally seen through the eyes of the Blacks, that is fixed in their role of power in the hierarchy of a colonial society" (Esslin, 1990: 217): hence the Queen, the Governor, the Judge, the Missionary, and the Valet are cut, as well as two characters whose importance is negligible in terms of the plot's progression (Snow and Diuf).

The director's focus, then, lies entirely on the 'Black' presences of Village, Virtue, Bobo, Felicity and Ville de Saint-Nazaire. The identification between Blacks and prisoners is made explicit through the use of fragments from the positivist psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso's 1864 manual *Delitto, Genio e Follia* ('Crime, Genius and Madness'), in which links are made between the physical anomalies of criminals and specific kinds of moral degeneration. These inserts – together with materials from the press regarding the real crimes of the prisoner-actors – connect Genet's text to the conditions of this particular staging, and sarcastically stigmatise the cultural prejudices which affect people's idea of life in prison.

Here, then, the show does not start with Archibald's words, but with a long monologue delivered by Village. He detailedly recounts the succession of events that led him to seduce, rape and finally strangle the White Woman, and his telling will supply the base for all the events to come. After having described his initial encounter with the young Blanche, Village attempts to dialogue with Virtue. Here, in Genet's text, we have Village's unlikely yearning to learn the gestures of love and Virtue's discovery of sentiment within himself, exacerbated by a lifetime of exploitation. However in this rendition of *I Negri*, the director chooses to (ironically, humorously) single out the impossibility for both characters to make space for love, implying that society's 'dropouts' are denied even the most human desire for affection. The only feeling allowed to them is hate – a hate directed towards the Whites, that is, here, the free spectators. Bobo reiterates this in a successive monologue,

¹ Extract from Letizia Bernazza, 'Clownerie, epicità e azioni fisiche negli spettacoli della Compagnia della Fortezza', in Valentina Valentini and Letizia Bernazza (ed.), *La Compagnia della Fortezza*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli (Cz), 1998.

² For more on these matters, see Sergio Colomba and Albert Dichy (ed), *L'immoralità leggendaria* (Milan: Ubulibri, 1990)

Title || Compagnia della Fortezza's I Negri ('The Blacks').

Author || Letizia Bernazza

Translation from Italian || Flora Pitrolo

Published in || «Sciami», 2017 - www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com

Rights || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2016. Visit [term and condition](#) on sciami.com

Number of pages || pag 2 di 3

Language || ENG

DOI ||

constructed by Punzo using three different moments from Genet's text³. Bobo's words are followed by the first text from *Delitto, Genio e Follia*. In the extract, Lombroso halts on the facial anomalies of the 'delinquent' who, through a series of humorous puns, ends up coinciding with the actor/detainee as a negative emblem of a human bestiary⁴ (...).

In *I Negri*, then, it's Village who takes on the role of the narrator; it's Village who begins by recounting the tragic events involving the White Woman which serve as the very stuff of the trial that follows, and it's Village who continues to guide the narration. Certain transition scenes see him run up the walls of the playing space, declaring that he is not 'imprisoned' in a character, and that in fact his role is to guide the scenic action, to drag the Blacks out of their seats to display them in front of the audience, where their movements are manipulated by others, like puppets. As Village mediates the performance's double relationship (between dramatis personae and actors and between actors and audience), the Crier attempts to give continuity to the actions, which are interrupted by the prisoners' howls, noises and melodies offstage. In the performance the function of the narrator is performed in a comical-grotesque key: the character is like a circus barker, able to capture and surprise the audience through a comical verbal register filled with nonsense and puns. Village's character, on the other hand, finds its depth in a colourful, riddle-like use of the Neapolitan language. His scenes are effectively "numbers" from a music-hall context, from which his performance borrows a rhythm, a continuous going in and out of role, a typically variety-show relationship with the audience, which has its pinnacle here in the calling of audience members onto the stage⁵. An example of how the comical register serves a distancing function here is the lovers' duet between Village and Virtue (both of whom are played by men): hand in hand, sitting beside one another, they converse but they do not see each other, for every time they crane their neck they do so in the wrong direction, away from their interlocutor. A scene of seduction thus acquires a comical, grotesque dimension, in which the dialogue is often interrupted by voices mocking the voices of the Blacks, or irreverently mocking the female tone of voice [...].

While in *Marat-Sade* and in *La Prigione* actions occur at a fast pace, and the gestural and vocal dimensions of the piece allow the actors' energy to explode their physical potentialities, in *I Negri* words and movements are slowed down, as if they were compressed inside the performers' bodies. This controlled, delicate quality underlines the state of abandon of the detainees, and in turn also exposes the power of the audience watching them, implying a superiority in the freedom of the audience and an inferiority in the Blacks / Detainees. As the piece begins and the spectators enter, some of the performers have already taken their place lower down than the audience in the auditorium, and sit on sparse wood benches arranged in a semicircle, their heads bowed down, their shoulders curved – as if they were silently laying at the feet of the 'innocent society'. Slowly, in pairs, they move towards the centre of the scene, where they wait in silence to be manoeuvred. One of each pair takes on the role of the puppet master, and begins to move his fellow performer's body, which becomes so limp it needs to be held up by the arms and the head. The puppet-actors allow themselves to be moulded, their legs are heavy, and their faces, hands, and feet are visibly in tension, a tension augmented by the impossibility of the poses they are made to assume. With their arms along their sides, their legs akimbo, the Blacks remain still as they challenge the long list of 'criminal' body types; paradoxically and grotesquely, the performers' sweaty, tattooed and scarred bodies on stage provide a counterpoint to Lombroso's delineation of the features 'delinquent'. The puppet masters lay their hands on their companions' faces and deform them: they open the mouth to evaluate the teeth, they keep their eyes wide open, they turn their heads by the chin, they press onto the nose until these faces become the 'monstrous', repellent faces Lombroso describes.

The energy employed in enacting these poses is transferred also to the monologues, which are recited with the unflinching calm of those who are condemned to bearing this kind of treatment, and who have learned how to visibly display their fragility. We hear the grave tone of a text in Arabic spoken by a young man from Maghreb on his knees; the sing-song cadence of a lullaby pronounced by a Sardinian detainee, sitting at first and then taking his place lying down at the feet of the audience; we hear the screamed Sicilian of a prisoner imitating the calls of a market vendor as he stands on the wooden benches – what emerges from the texts are the feelings of the Compagnia della Fortezza members, their pulsions, their mindsets, their memories. The performers are constantly getting undressed and redressing (old tailcoats are put on and taken

³ "You're afraid of the smell, now? It's the same stench that rises from my African land. I, Bobo, want my train to slide over the thick waves, and I want a stink of offal to take me away and kidnap me. And you, you pale and odourless race, you, race without animal smells, race without the plagues of our plains"; "I order you to become black, black even into your veins, may black blood run through them"; and "What we need is hate. It's from hate that our ideas will rise." (From p. 15, 35, and 23 of the original French text).

⁴ See Cesare Lombroso, *Delitto, genio e follia*. Scritti scelti, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1995, pp. 194-97. I Before the final monologue, the actor impersonating Felicity throws himself into a comical simulation of a hold-up and, ironising of the some of the episodes which have truly involved the actors-detainees, shouts from the bench: "Stop everyone this is a robbery! And you don't be an idiot! Hands up and open eyes, or I'll shoot then. You have to give me half a loaf of bread, because I'm dying of hunger. I'm off, goodbye, I was raised in prison" (in Compagnia della Fortezza's own typewritten notes, in rhyme in Italian).

⁵ During the first insertion of Lombroso's text, Village invites two audience members to come onto the stage – he scrutinises them to see if they too carry the alleged features of the 'delinquent'. Singling out no criminal trait in particular, he asks them to go back to their seats, amongst the applause of the audience.

Title || Compagnia della Fortezza's I Negri ('The Blacks').

Author || Letizia Bernazza

Translation from Italian || Flora Pitrolo

Published in || «Sciami», 2017 - www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com

Rights || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2016. Visit [term and condition](#) on sciami.com

Number of pages || pag 3 di 3

Language || ENG

DOI ||

off the detainees at various moments in the piece), a repetition which culminates in the final scene in which Felicity is stripped of his black trousers and stands still, centre-stage, in his underpants – he begins to howl a desperate cry, shivering, bowling.

In *I Negri* the use of monologue is justified by the position of alterity established between the Blacks / Detainees and the White / Free Citizens. One by one, the Blacks take it in turn to speak out towards the assembled audience to explain the reasons of their resentment, and to do justice to their identity as marginalised members of society. Village is the first who does so, speaking of hatred to make the audience comprehend his action towards the White Woman. Bobo condemns the 'faded race', and reminds the audience that one day it'll be the Blacks they'll be forced to love and admire. Felicity asks the 'Blacks of every district' to act in solidarity against their disenfranchised condition. Ville de Saint-Nazaire uses the monologue to announce the end of the performance and to beg the spectators to reflect on what they have just witnessed. So it's only Virtue and Village who use the form of the monologue to establish a contact; but while in Genet's text the two characters "find the courage to break the vicious circle of their daydreams to find an authentic form of human contact through love" (Esslin, 1990: 221), this performance sabotages the serious sentimental moment by showing us two clownish characters, clowning about in a conversation broken up by gags and practical jokes.

Unlike the stage organisations of *Marat-Sade* and *La Prigione*, there are no apparent divisions between playing space and audience in *I Negri*. The space is tight, devoid of platforms or pitches or bars; the performers play on the same level of the audience, which is assembled on a seating bank in a semicircle around the stage. However some typical troublings of the status of the audience versus that of the performers remain: the seating bank is steep, and the detainees are often positioned with their backs to the audience. The steepness pushes the audience upwards, elevates the spectator up upon the metallic structure; the backs of the actors act as a screen to the already limited playing surface. The naked, immobile backs of the Blacks create a human blockade, as if they were protecting a space which is too precious and which was too hard to acquire to share it with the Whites, who stare at them as they are manipulated, stretched and deformed on a background of circus music. The feeling of the space is akin to that of an anatomy theatre: the stage is a place where corpses are dissected, and the detainees are those corpses, analysed and quarter-drawn for a group of outside observers. The opposition between horizontal and vertical space, which is the very expression of the conflict between performers and spectators, is reified only on a few occasions: when the presenter/circus barker comes close to the spectators, letting them in on his music hall gags; and in the moment in which the detainees crawl onto the seating bank, their arms outstretched towards the audience.