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Leo de Berardinis and Perla Peragallo. Biographical note

by Donatella Orecchia¹

Leo de Berardinis was born in Gioi, a village in the region of Cilento (Salerno), in January 1940, from Neapolitan parents who soon after moved to Foggia. Once graduated he went to Rome, where he attended the C.U.T. (Centro Universitario Teatrale) starting his training as an actor (diction, text study, body technique, with Giancarlo Cobelli and with a pupil of Marceau, Roy Bosier); at the C.U.T. he met Carlo Quartucci and with him he started working for what would be many years.

Leo debuted in 1962 with Compagnia della Ripresa at the Teatro Goldoni with the play *Me e me*, a collection of texts by Jacopone da Todi, Luciano di Samostrata, Leopardi and Beckett, in 1963, still in Beckett's wake, with *Finale di partita* (*Endgame*), and in March 1964 with *Aspettando Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*), at the Teatro Stabile di Genoa, at that time directed by Luigi Squarzina. In Genoa the Compagnia della Ripresa changed its name to 'Teatro Studio'.

In 1965, the company Teatro Studio staged *Zip Lap Lip Vap Mam Crep Scap Plip Trip Scap & la grande Mam*, and presented it at the Festival della Prosa of the Biennale di Venice. De Berardinis' last work with Quartucci, in 1966, was *La fantesca di Giovan Battista Della Porta*. At this point he was already thinking of going his own way, thanks to the encounter with Perla Peragallo, who would be his partner in art and in life for a long time.

Also Perla Peragallo, born in Rome in October 1943, attended the C.U.T., and had her debut as an actress in plays directed by Giorgio Bandini (*Gli eroi malvestiti*, 1961, *La Cortigiana* by Pietro Aretino, 1964) and by Giovanni Poli (*La commedia degli Zanni*). Dissatisfied with that kind of theatre, she decided to leave the company and started working with Leo de Berardinis.

The artistic debut of the couple, who would soon call themselves simply Leo and Perla, was *La faticosa messinscena dell'Amleto di William Shakespeare*, a "cine-theatre" performance, presented at the Teatro della Ringhiera in Rome in April 1967, followed by *Sir and Lady Macbeth*, at the Teatro Club Carmelo Bene. It was a dazzling debut.

Deep and intense actors/artists, builders of everything in the show (text, sound, light, costume, scenery, video), as from these debuts, Leo and Perla have intended the performer at the centre of the action, a real 'director of himself'. In June 1967 Leo and Perla were invited to take part in the "Convegno per un Nuovo Teatro" in Ivrea. Here they came in touch with some pioneers of the new Roman avant-garde like Carmelo Bene, with whom they would work the following year, producing a new reading of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. In 1969, the two actors turned to the cinema, making *A Charlie Parker*, for which they were actors, cameramen, editors and producers.

Then they decided to leave Rome and move to Marigliano, near Naples, where they founded the "Teatro di Marigliano", in search of new spaces, new dialogues and perhaps a new theatre. At this point their phase of the "Teatro dell'ignoranza" started, when they produced very few performances, starting a research linked to the territory, in touch with the country, with its inhabitants and their theatre: it was the Neapolitan adaptation for the stage, the «alphabet of the illiterates»², in search of a language that also the lumpenproletarians of Marigliano could understand. Here they produced *O Zappatore* (1972) with three inhabitants of the village. The two following performances, *King Lear* *Lacreme Lear Napulitane* (1973) and *Sudd* (1974) were set between Rome and Marigliano. *Sudd* debuted in Rome in the Spaziozero pavilion and was presented in Paris at the Théâtre Jean-Louis Barrault for two months.

These were years of intense work - and of refusal by the world of theatre, including that of research - when they realized *Chianto 'e risate e risate 'e chianto* (1975), *Rusp spers* (1976), *Assoli, Tre jurni, Avita muri, De-Berardinis-Peragallo* (1979). Three performances followed and closed the period of Leo and Perla's fellowship. Performances that were signed by the crisis and by a change of mind on their writing, more and more marked by improvisation and - particularly in *Annabel Lee* - by the presence of music, almost dominating all other theatrical codes. This was the last time Perla Peragallo was on the stage with Leo de Berardinis.

After leaving the theatre, Perla continued following Leo in his performances, keeping in the background, then gradually choosing a bashful and lonely life. In 1985 she opened a school of acting, the "Mulino di Fiora", where, among the others, Roberto Latini, Valentina Capone and Ascanio Celestini got their training. Perla died in Rome in August 2007, at the age of sixtyfour.

Meanwhile, Leo continued his solitary research, characterized at first by unusual performances, of which there's hardly any documentation. This was a new phase of his artistic career, one of a change from the "theatre of the unfinished" to the "total improvisation", when Leo went on stage without rehearsing: the times for putting up a new performance were considerably reduced, while his appearances on the stage were multiplied. In these years Leo turned - more than he had done in the past - to

¹ The present synthetic 'biographical note' refers to: G. Manzella, *La bellezza amara. Arte e vita di Leo de Berardinis*, la Casa di Usher, Florence 2010; *La terza via di Leo. Gli ultimi vent'anni del teatro di Leo de Berardinis a Bologna*, re-proposed by C. Meldolesi, A. Malfitano and L. Mariani and 'one hundred' witnesses, Titivillus, Corazzano 2010 and M. La Monica, *Il poeta scenico. Perla Peragallo e il teatro*, Editoria & Spettacolo, Rome 2002.

² *Leo de Berardinis Re incarna* (Buzzi, Cangiullo, Corra, Buster Keaton, Majakovskij, Marinetti, Palazzeschi, Petrolini, Totò, Raffaele Viviani), di e con Leo de Berardinis, Napoli, Estate a Napoli, Parco Virgiliano, 13 settembre 1981.

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the great masters of the tradition of actors, choosing them as his own reference for the *construction* of a (no more existing) tradition: Totò, Viviani, Petrolini, Eduardo, Laurence Olivier, Buster Keaton, Charlot (not Charlie Chaplin), which produced improvisations, «appearances», unique moments, of which very little is left. Of this period was *Leo de Berardinis incarna Buzzi, Cangiullo, Corra*³ in Naples, where Leo recalled - like in a futurist evening - his fellow travellers (Petrolini, the Futurists Marinetti and Corra, Viviani, Majakovskij) in a sort of jazz improvisation.

In 1983 the Cooperativa Nuova Scena of Bologna offered him to stage Jack Gelber's *The Connection*, which was presented the same year at the Teatro Testoni: of its original text very little remains, but the sense of expectation, of solitude of the actor/director telling his own agony and finally denouncing that even marginalization had become a consumers' good (reversing Gelber, and referring to the great parodic tradition of the Neapolitan vaudeville, with Totò as the clearest example)⁴. Leo then moved definitely to Bologna, presenting, with Nuova Scena, two versions of *Amleto* (in 1984 and in 1985), *King Lear – studi e variazioni* (1985) and *La Tempesta* (1986). With Nuova Scena he also carried out a research on performances for “solo”, examples of which were *Dante Alighieri – studi e variazioni* (produced together with the Biennale di Venezia in 1984), and for which Leo de Berardinis was awarded the Ubu prize as best actor of the year, *Il Cantico dei Cantici* (1985), *Il ritorno, riflessi da Omero-Joyce*.

In 1987 he realized *Novecento e Mille*, in which he closely confronted the contemporaneity through all that he believed had characterized the twentieth century: Kafka, Eliot, Beckett, Mann, Borges, Pasolini, Majakovskij, Artaud, Pirandello, Ginsberg, Gershwin, Schönberg, Charlot and Gene Kelly. It had nothing to do with a mere anthology nor a historical synthesis of the theatre of the century: rather, it was a flow of consciousness of the theatre.

Still in 1987, Leo was dismissed by Nuova Scena after four years of work, for unclear, possibly economic, reasons. Suddenly he must create an independent structure of his own, that would allow him to continue the work he had taken up with the young actors who had stayed at his side. He set up the Teatro di Leo, not only producing performances, but organizing research workshops, days of study, meetings and theatre reviews. The first performance was *L'uomo capovolto*, an intense “solo”, claiming the need of a theatre that could synthesize the essence of the scenic art through the bare essentiality of the performing art. In the following years – as actor and director - he carried out several projects and performances with his company: *Delirio* (1987), for the Festival of Santarcangelo, *Macbeth*, with the Centro Teatro Ateneo of the University of Rome (1988), *Novecento e Mille* (2nd edition, 1988), *Il fiore del deserto* (1988), from Giacomo Leopardi's work, *Quintett* (1988). In 1989 he finally met Eduardo de Filippo, for the staging of *Ha da passà 'a nuttata* together with the Teatri Uniti of Naples and the Festival dei Due Mondi of Spoleto. The performance was awarded the Ubu prize for best performance of the year and the Idi prize with the same motivation.

Then there came *Metamorfosi*, and *Totò, principe di Danimarca* (both of 1990), this one produced by the Teatro di Leo and by Asti Teatro 12, and was present on behalf of Italy at the review “Italia in scena” in Brussels and at the Festival Internazionale in Valladolid in April 1991.

In August 1991 Leo presented *L'impero della ghisa o dell'età dell'oro* at Taormina Arte, and in September, within the Mostra del Teatro in Venice, *Lo spazio della memoria*, a performance realized with Steve Lacy's collaboration, confirming their special relation with jazz. The performance expressly put at the heart of his research memory as a link with tradition, as an inner space of the theatre, as a place to meet the other and a space of dialogue between actors and musicians, a sharing of *solos*.

Not by chance, a hall offered to Leo's company by the city of Bologna, inaugurated in March 1992, was called “Spazio della Memoria”. Born as Teatro di Leo, it was the prelude to the building that he had been requiring for a long time: a workshop for a new language and a new elaboration of the culture of the theatre.

The years 1994 and 1995 were crucial for Leo. First, he was nominated artistic director of the Festival of Santarcangelo, a management that needed to be re-founded after the controversies that had marked the previous one. Shortly after, the convention for the management of the Teatro San Leonardo was signed by the Municipality of Bologna, which meant having two halls open to experimentation. In November 1994 *Il ritorno di Scaramouche di Jean Baptiste Poquelin e Léon de Berardin* was presented in Naples, went on tour till May 1995 and was repeated also in the next season. In 2000 Leo staged *Past Eve and Adam's*, a play that took its title from a passage in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. On May 4 2001 the University of Bologna conferred an honorary degree on Leo, on the occasion of the celebrations for the thirtieth anniversary of DAMS (1971-2001).

On June 16, 2001 Leo de Berardinis underwent a simple operation in cosequence of which he was in a coma, and died in Rome on September 18 2008.

³ *Leo de Berardinis Re incarna (Buzzi, Cangiullo, Corra, Buster Keaton, Majakovskij, Marinetti, Palazzeschi, Petrolini, Totò, Raffaele Viviani)*, di e con Leo de Berardinis, Napoli, Estate a Napoli, Parco Virgiliano, 13 settembre 1981.

⁴ G.Manzella, *La bellezza amara. Arte e vita di Leo de Berardinis*, quoted.