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Enzo Moscato. *Compleanno* (1992)

directed by Enzo Moscato

set and costumes by Tata Barbalato

with Enzo Moscato

Premiere Naples, Teatro Bruttini, 1992

Enzo Moscato's Spirit Party

by Carlo Titomanlio

“A very bare room, with a table, two chairs, a vertical coatrack. The two chairs are one facing the other, as if awaiting to host a colloquium. The table, on the other hand, seems to be set as if what was going to happen was a little dinner party amongst friends”.

The above is the initial stage direction of *Compleanno* ('Birthday', 1992), the incipit of what you might be moved to imagine as a sort of conversation piece. In fact, one of the chairs will stay empty, indisputably signalling an absence, and no real dialogue will occur: only a long stream of consciousness, pronounced by the only character on stage. And as he moves around the room, ready for a birthday party, the character will (re)voke a gallery of “characters from a metropolitan bestiary (...), of hybrid existential grafts” (Moscato, 1999). There's a cat called Rosinella who is searched for and called for repeatedly with sighs and whispers (“Rusiné, Rusiné, Rusiné”), there's a woman called Ines who seems to be the figure towards whom the story is addressed (Ines, it should be noted, is the anagram of 'sine', Latin for 'without', yet another marker of absence); and then there's Spinoza, whose biography we hear, impossible like a Latin-American soap opera (the daughter of transsexual parents, both operated on in Casablanca, born in a test-tube and named Spinoza not as an homage to the philosopher but because of her difficult, angular personality – 'spinoso' in Italian means 'spiky', 'thorny'). These are ectoplasmic figures, ironic traces of contemporary stories, simulacra of an innate Neapolitan theatricality. Called out of a timeless dimension, the evoked characters enter a rhythmic and alienating chain of refrains, something akin to object theatre but also reminiscent of Beckett's absurdist comedies.

The true absent figure, as we know, is Annibale Ruccello, Moscato's fraternal friend who tragically passed away in 1986. In this context, we could address Ruccello as the “you false-true of poets”, quoting a magnificent poem of Sereni's, also dedicated to a lost friend. But what really happens in *Compleanno* is a convivium of spirits: the absence in the piece is physical but not spiritual, and it's lived out in defiance, as a kind of shadowplay, memory-play, playing-dead and the game of awaiting death (the reoccurring litany we hear on stage, lugubrious like the obsessive lament of a wailer, is “Do you know whose birthday it is today, do you know whose it is, whose is it?”).

Two totally different registers co-exist in the script of *Compleanno*: a lyrical, plaintive, popular one, expressed in a refined, knowledgeable dialect, even when the words it employs are trivial; and another register, which is cultivated, avant-garde, an amalgam of literary and slang terms, peppered with neologisms and foreign words (Guerrieri called it a ‘Gaddism of the Quarters’, when he described Moscato's language in 1997): “And I say in my heart forever: that after death may the diamond come on the lotus flower” (in which “in my heart forever” is in English in the original text); or “Ma itta bbolisi, bagassa? Das nau! – Le rispunnette l'Inquisitore in malo modo» (in which the German punctures the Neapolitan, for there is no Italian in the sentence: “and who's supposed to want you, you whore? Das nau! – the Inquisitor rudely answered her”); or, still: “Ines?... Ines?... Ines?... Ecoute! Ecoute, mon ami, this is a passage from my next novel!” (italics originally in French).

And in fact, as Enrico Fiore has observed, the original subtitle for the production was “citation of sentiment”, a sentence which works almost as an indicator of what the text contains: emotions resurfacing in a different form, by language and by context. But sentiment is also, and literally, a kind of listening: listening to the spectres of absence and to the musical rhythms which, although they aren't included in the script, were present and pervasive in the performances of the text (musics such as the Gypsy Kings' ballad *Tu Quieres Volver*, ‘You Want to Return’, or the heart-wrenching folk melody ‘*O cunto d' 'auciello grifone*, ‘The Story of the Griffon Bird’).

The text is circular, then, and characterised by a precise rhythm and by the obsessive impulse to repeat words and expressive structures: an interior monologue which also contains citational and meta-theatrical reverberations (“Dear God, this is what I'm doing because this is what my writing imperiously commands! Because this is how the mechanisms of my imagination work, the flurries of my typewriter!”). This is typical of Moscato's writing, which seems to roll in upon itself like a tide, and which here also incorporates explicit acknowledgements of Ruccello's work, amongst which his piece *Le Cinque Rose di Jennifer* (‘Jennifer's Five Roses’). And the roses are red, and plastic, placed on the table for a celebration that won't take place: as the stage directions read, “red roses, tied up in a small bouquet and placed horizontally on the table, next to a bottle of cheap sparkling wine, which has already been opened, and to a crystal glass”.

Like Harold Pinter's 1957 *The Birthday Party*, from which it takes its name, *Compleanno* has become one of its author's most common pieces since its debut in 1992; already a stratification of past fragments in itself, the script has lent itself to infinite variations, indulging year after year the particular moment of its many reprises.