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Fanny & Alexander, West (2010)

Production Fanny & Alexander, Festival delle Colline Torinesi
Idea Luigi de Angelis and Chiara Lagani
Dj-set Mirto Baliani
Drammaturgy Chiara Lagani
Texts Chiara Lagani and Francesca Mazza
Direction, stage space Luigi de Angelis
With Francesca Mazza
Hidden persuaders Marco Cavalcoli and Chiara Lagani
First performance: Turin, Cavallerizza Reale – Festival delle Colline Torinesi, June 2010.

Fanny & Alexander, West (2010). Presentation

by Alice Fadda¹

With *West* we come to the end of the long, intense journey that Dorothy and her alter ego spectator have accomplished together with Fanny & Alexander inside the O-Z project². In *West* we have the concretization of a breakdown, the breakdown of a woman along with a society. Dorothy, here played by Francesca Mazza, is fifty-two years old and has a long braid, a blue dress with a zipper down the middle, worn over a white T-shirt and jeans, at the feet of the dancers, and of course red and glittery. She is sitting at a table exactly at center stage, an essential square space whose boundaries are set off by white tape glued to the floor.

At the edges of this kind of ring – four klieg lights that never change their intensity or anything else, illuminate the heroine, who never leaves the space, though sometimes she shifts a little by dragging her chair to another part of the stage. The sources of this work are related to Baum's novel and to the collective imagination from the Victor Fleming film (the blouse worn by Francesca Mazza, for example, has the face of Judy Garland/Dorothy printed on the front), but it is also based on theories such as the architecture of choice, libertarian paternalism, hidden persuasion and the language of advertising. This material is linked to Francesca Mazza's personal autobiographical history, which Chiara Lagani used to build the play's stagecraft.

The space also cites a performance by Marina Abramovic, *The artist will be present*. In fact, "the question posed to the spectator is about the issue of presence as antidote, as the possibility of a quality, as primary ethical matter."³ In addition to this there is no doubt that the stage space is to be considered a fence, a cage or a ring, a place that encloses, imprisons. Dorothy is blocked, imprisoned, in check, victim of a spell.

The plot is simple. Dorothy seems to be trapped in a white, luminous space, in which she carries on what looks like a continuous stream of consciousness, whose rhythm frantically rises in concomitance with the sound setting, a live DJ set of electronic music – operated by Mirto Baliani. This flow is made up of fragmented phrases, words that are suddenly interrupted, repeat, overlap, run into each other or of advertising slogans and catchphrases about our by now digital world. Through this material, the last avatar Dorothy talks about her and her experiences: a bad accident, her fascination for the United States, an emergency hospital admission, the embarrassing situations that can arise between a man and a woman or what is normal and what exceptional. The story consists of simple episodes brought on stage as examples of courage to escape without the help either of the *Wizard of Oz* or of *Him*. From the earliest moments of the play Dorothy resembles a crazed guinea pig. Between the continuous DJ sets, anecdotes of all kinds wedge in on society and various ads, and the spectators begin to understand what is happening on stage. Actually, Dorothy isn't alone: there are also two other presences that announce themselves only vocally. That sort of stream of consciousness, mostly incomprehensible, hectic, full of anxiety, is simply the expression of the spell that keeps Dorothy in check. She is held captive by these two voices, which through headphones order her what to do and say, at their discretion. It's here that the hetero-direction is revealed, shown in its first, frightening, full form and becomes truly tangible: the two hetero-director voices, Chiara Lagani's administering the text score and Marco Cavalcoli's the gestural one, which only Dorothy hears through the headphones, and toward the end of the play they become visible even to the spectators. Dorothy then, like a good robot, carries out Cavalcoli's orders, a veritable full gestural and ever-changing alphabet "swift kick, continue, short dress⁴, shrug shoulders, touch your mouth when you're crossed on the left, yield, yield, continue, crossed on the left, shake your shoulders, double fists drum your hands, kick, kick, kick, swift kick, flamenco heel, minor break, when you're crossed from behind touch your hair, when you're crossed on skates shrug your shoulders, yield" Meanwhile repeat the phrases, slogans, fragments of words that are given by the acousmatic voice of Chiara Lagani:

¹ A. Fadda, *Fanny & Alexander: Il progetto O-Z e il dispositivo dell'eterodirezione*, M.A. dissertation, supervisor V. Valentini, assistant supervisor P. Quarenghi, Sapienza Università di Roma, a.a. 2014-15.

² For more information on the O – Z project consult page http://fannyalexander.org/archivio/archivio.it/ozbologna_home.htm.

³ M. Petroni, *Cancellare le parentesi*, "Abitare", July 2011 in www.abitare.it.

⁴ At this order Francesca Mazza lowers and raises the zipper of her dress.

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“Normal it is / to stay at home / exceptional / to stay out late at night /
order / is normal / disorder / is exceptional /
for the people in your family all this is normal listen to your thirst a normal family is / a husband and a
wife with a normal job having children who get married exceptional it is not to have a steady job
Normal is a dish of pasta / exceptional is / ethnic / couscous / sushi / foreigners. Exceptional! Normal.
A normal job / freelancer / employee / teacher.
An exceptional job is / actress / sailor.
It’s normal to have a love relationship that begins when you’re young and lasts through a lifetime of
togetherness / exceptional it is / to have many different love stories / A suit / is normal, / a wedding dress /
exceptional.
A normal man / reliable / responsible / sensible.
An exceptional man is / the opposite / even exceptional perhaps /
is a man who excludes you from his life / it’s exceptional to be on your own /
to be able or willing to be on your own.”⁵

In *West* the research on hetero-direction takes on new connotations and raises other questions that arise from the new form taken by the device.

If in previous plays and in the next project *Discorsi* the device was perceived, heard only by the actors on stage, in *West* the hetero-direzione came into plain view, in such a way that the spectators could also be part of this outstanding play about obedience and freedom. Also, in *West* the device was for the first time live. Cavalcoli gave Francesca Mazza orders through a microphone from inside a booth, as in the *Wizard of Oz*, while Chiara Lagani did her job as hetero-director through playlists previously recorded with her own voice through *I-tunes*.

This live session obviously led to a performance based on improvisation. The text is divided into five scenes: the two hetero-directed ones determine in a totally random manner what instructions to give the actress, who knows the text but not the exact order of what to do, which can in fact change with each staging. The only guide that enabled Francesca Mazza to understand the chapter to refer to was the music: “the only element able to signal the transition from one scene to another,”⁶ which marked the time and manner of the performance. But the ambiguity of the hetero-direction also serves to point out the contradiction inherent in *West*, where the point of reference is America, the true West, with its slogans about freedom, fame and success, but at the same time it is based on two different and opposite threads: the question that keeps Dorothy suspended, and with it the spectators, is on the one hand being free to choose, to say yes or no, and on the other being free not to make any decision, so that someone else will do it for us, saving us from any bad choices. Among the texts chosen for the thematic construction of *West*, Fanny & Alexander used a text written by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein⁷, centered on the *Nudge Theory*: according to this theory indirect suggestions or aid provide positive reinforcement since they can affect the motives and incentives that are part of the decision-making process of groups and individuals, at least as effective as direct instructions, laws or forced compliance.

Here, then, the damage we spoke of at the beginning: Dorothy – who is a mythical character but also a woman and therefore par excellence a sensitive subject – takes charge of it, drags it on stage, into that ring bathed in light, in a nervous trance in every sense. Any entranced housewife can easily identify with her, with her slow eyelid movements, lost in the light of the shelves filled with products that scream “buy me!”

West is a play based on conditioning, a creative game where each participant – the two persuaders, the music, Dorothy and her alter-ego, the spectators – are conditioned by each other. If we cannot escape hidden persuasions, imagine then the hetero-direction mechanism⁸.

The journey of guinea pig Dorothy begun from Oz, having crossed the cardinal points, can finally return to Oz: covert manipulation, myths, images, power, ambiguity, all lead the entire theatrical material to the great huckster *Wizard of Oz*, “who invents eyeglasses that rivet people’s minds so that they only see what he regards as happiness, this green world”⁹, a world of happy families seated at dinner tables, of machines that make you free, cigarettes that make men more manly, and many other lies. Vance Packard’s fears are essentially substantiated in *West*, becoming even greater than they were in the early 1950’s, if we consider the invention and advent of the Internet, a new and powerful vehicle for all kinds of messages.

The company gave each spectator of *West* when they entered the theater a flier in the form of a remote control whose keys were replaced by far more profound and significant words such as *success, money, power, identity, sex, happiness*, pain that

⁵ The orders and text fragments transcribed here are taken from the video shot by Simone Carella on September 10, 2010 at Teatro La Pelanda, Rome. The complete video can be found at <http://etheatre.altervista.org/videos/fannyalexander-west/>

⁶ F. Spadoni, *Se la musica sconfinava nel teatro. Mirto Baliani, il sound della trama*, «La Voce di Romagna», Novembre 9, 2010.

⁷ R. H Thaler, C. R. Sunstein, *Nudge. La spinta gentile. La nuova strategia per migliorare le nostre decisioni su denaro, salute e felicità* [Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness], Feltrinelli, Milan 2009.

⁸ See L. Di Tommaso, *Il dispositivo dell'eterodirezione. Intervista a Chiara Lagani e Francesca Mazza su West di Fanny & Alexander*, SignificAzione //A column for rethinking the relationship between today’s semiotics and theater// in <http://www.cultureteatrari.org/significazione/1298-significazione12.html>

⁹ C. Lagani, *Intervista a Chiara Lagani*, released to the writer of this article, Rome September 12, 2014.

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almost seems accessible by remote control. But if Dorothy is the victim of a spell, imprisoned by its hidden persuaders, this also holds true for the spectators. The paper essence of the remote control highlights its actual powerlessness, for it too is controlled remotely, manipulated in turn.

In *West* Francesca Mazza may seem, at first glance, a kind of puppet audiocommanded by the two hetero-directors, but we soon realize that it is actually quite the opposite. Despite having a dictionary of gestures to refer to, Francesca Mazza adopts those actions, transforming them and intensifying their meaning. Her feeling of unease is accentuated by the sound component: electronic mixes halfway between experimentation and improvisation make *West* a comprehensive work of compositional sound. For the first time in eleven years of collaboration with Fanny & Alexander, the composer Mirto Baliani created for *West*, setting the pace and duration of the play, new music for every performance, and mixing them, transforming them in the same way Chiara Lagani changes the text score or Marco Cavalcoli the movement cues each time.

The live DJ set consists of a selection of songs by musicians and composers of the electronic music scene of the last fifteen years, such as Apparat, Murcof and Burnt Friedman, along with songs composed by Baliani himself. A selection of songs that, ranging from swing to drum & bass, manage to touch the main points: frequencies and speeds change at the composer's whim through reverbs and effects, emphasizing important moments, or transitions from one section to another, not only dramatically but also gesturally. What Mirto Baliani creates is a live composition. He can insist on a particular point, obsessively transform the rhythm, or conversely, "gradually [eliminate] the notes to leave only small sound sensations."¹⁰

And it's true that through reiterations, fragmented phrases and sound overlaps the music seems almost to reflect with its rhythm the stream of consciousness that Dorothy tries continually to externalize.

In the hetero-direction, "the pace is one of the most basic factors that ensure the preservation of a structure. Yet its nature is dynamic, and it can give birth continuously to new structures."¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ L. De Angelis, C. Lagani / Fanny & Alexander, *Eterodirezione: glossario in divenire*, in F. Acca, S. Mei (ed.), *Il teatro e il suo dopo. Un libro di artisti in omaggio a Marco De Marinis*, Editoria e Spettacolo, Spoleto 2014, pag. 69.