

[Title](#) || Sacco (“Sack”): the Victim and the Executioner

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## **Sacco (1974)**

by and with Claudio Remondi and Riccardo Caporossi

First performance Club teatro, Rome February 1974

New production, year 2003

written and directed by Claudio Remondi and Riccardo Caporossi

with Armando Sanna and Pasquale Scalzi

## **Sacco (“Sack”): the Victim and the Executioner**

by Sabrina Galasso

Having sold their previously acquired space, the Leopardo Theatre, to pay their debts, Remondi and Caporossi invest the remaining cash in renting out a basement in Via Sant’Agata de’ Goti in the Roman area of Suburra, a venue which becomes the Club Teatro. In 1972, the duo begin work on a new piece which will be shown here in 1974.

*Sacco* (“Sack”) ties the artistic knot between the two collaborators; because of the organicity of the work, because of its resonance at the time in the context of Italian experimental theatre, and because of its success over the years<sup>1</sup>. The “plot” is as follows: there’s a sack on stage, which is cruelly tormented by a ruthless executioner, whose instruments of torture are frightening and bizarre; the sack begins to emit inarticulate sounds, starts to move, begins to sing. Slowly, a semi-naked man appears from the sack: first his limbs, then his head, then his body. The man is free to roam on stage for a while, until the executioner captures him once more in a green cape, dragging him away.

Although the staging of *Sacco* differs slightly from its play-text, the script is important in as much as it is the first visual score Remondi and Caporossi produced. Akin to a storyboard, the text consists of over 200 pages’ worth of sketched, comic strip-like material which delineates actions, movements and props along with a score of words and sounds<sup>2</sup>. Having internalised the figurative nature of their previous pieces, and having tweaked and dramaturgically functionalised the pictorial mould of their performances *Giorni Felici* and *Terote*, the text for *Sacco* inaugurates a phase during which the duo works on the detailed, finely-honed drawn image as representational code. Even the vocal score – which is performed by Remondi only – is painstakingly devised so as to indicate tones and expressions through the quality of the drawn line: the text includes lines in waves, curves, and spirals, and at times entire sentences are written in shape of an object.

The stage design is extremely minimal: the audience is on two sides and on the same level as the performers, and a strong homogenous wash makes for a total lack of shadow. There is no decoration as such, no scenography, and no “theatrical” elements such as wings, backdrops or curtains; the only furnishing is provided by the props which are disseminated on the bare walls and floor, at the centre and at the corners of the stage<sup>3</sup>. Some of these are fantastical, others are recognisable everyday objects presented radically out of scale with their habitual size, and employed by the mute executioner as instruments of torture: a winch, a pair of pliers, a lathe, a rope, a dagger, a harpoon, a periscope – there is also a giant syringe, a large spear, a pile of inner tubes closed by a lid fitted with viewfinders, and a half-sphere of metal with a hole in the middle of it. These are not props designed to reference a certain environment, but images from reality treated with a perverse rationality – objects from different contexts coexist in a collective ex-novo functionality unbound to their differing uses in the everyday. The presence of these objects dominates the picture – alone on the naked stage, they assemble as a surreal landscape. These props are not the centre of the action but the very bearers of action and meaning onstage: the relationships that occur throughout the performance are wholly dependent on, and mediated by, these objects. Alongside these many props, the absolute object: the sack, the primitive element, shapeless and shape-shifting, at once a uterus and an embryo.

The stage has an explicit ritualistic character given, at the beginning, by two sheets enveloping the sack, which is floating mid-air; one on the floor and one encompassing the sack from beneath, in the shape of an upside-down triangle. The sheets

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<sup>1</sup> Remondi and Caporossi’s *Sacco* toured extensively in and outside of Italy (France, Spain, Israel, Russia).

<sup>2</sup> The main changes *Sacco* underwent between text and mise en scène had to do with a long monologue performed by the sack, who therein declared his desire for individual affirmation and power, which was later cut because it was regarded superfluous, and the bodily aspect of the Executioner, which was only vaguely described in the text. *Sacco* as a text was published in “Il Trovarobe I” (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi editore, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> All of the duo’s pieces of the 1970s and ‘80s occur lit by this white wash defined by the artists themselves as ‘midday light’ or ‘midday sun’. Probably a Beckettian inheritance, the group saw this white shadowless light as essential to the creation of a unnatural, suspended space-time inhabited by unnatural characters, as well as to the brutal illumination of the body’s raw presence and the poverty of the stage materials.

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create a sort of sacred space around the sack, called ‘the Sacred’ in the text. The sack produces some drops of blood, which fall onto the sacred space, followed by a sprinkle of sawdust, indicating the symbolic sacrifice of the birth of the sack.

A large part of the sonorous universe of the show works on the rhythmic patters produced by the objects: we hear the rattle of a chain, the beating of a stick on the metallic hemisphere, sounds of objects being hit or smacked.

The progression of time in the less-than-an-hour show is suspended, non-linear, dilated in a continuous midday: not a dramatic time but a circular time, which begins and ends in the same way, with a man dragging a sack onto and off of the stage, perhaps to go and re-propose the same series of events elsewhere: the action is illuminated as solutionless. The true time of the performance is the time of the human condition, from a birth to a death and from another birth to another death. But the executioner’s gestures carry openings onto another kind of time, his manoeuvring with instruments provides glimpses onto a different temporal level: the level on which theatrical action and real action coincide, the time to make or to build, non-fictional theatrical “real time”.

Devoid of traditional psychological, social, or historical character connotations, Remondi and Caporossi ‘play’ abstract roles. Caporossi-as-executioner has his mouth covered by a plaster and his bust imprisoned in a corset, he wears what look like square plaster-casts on his feet and blindingly white trousers, a knife and a gun dangling from his waistline. In the final scene he sports a green cape and a mask which – as Remondi rips it off his face – is revealed to be made out of layers of aluminium. Remondi’s shape, on the other hand, is hardly distinguishable through the jute of the sack – we catch glimpses of him when he shows an emerging arm or leg and, for a brief moment, his entire body, clad only in a pair of long johns before he is immediately swallowed up by Caporossi’s green cape. Riccardo is the Executioner; the mental figure, the rational one. Claudio is the man of birth and death, dominated by nature and by instinct, who emerges from a shapelessness he eventually returns to. The path out of the jute bag is long and marked by a primitive, defenceless world of primary needs and desires, which only very briefly find an outcome in an affirmation of his individuality – as he emerges from the sack for one brief instant, he declares: “I, I, I”. A gerbil in a cage (the first of a long series of animals which will appear in the duo’s performance works) is the third character on stage, and its presence intensifies the sense of oppression which pervades the entire piece.

The analytical research of *Giorni Felici* and *Terote* brings the duo to a recomposition of dramatis personae in *Sacco*. In spite of a certain interchangeability – the Victim and the Oppressor are so interdependent that we could imagine the possibility of a reversal of roles – the two characters are nevertheless marked out and defined in their singularity. Actor and character, on the other hand, appear in interaction, never completely separated one from the other. The abstract nature of Remondi and Caporossi’s score allows the two performers to also open up to interventions by members of the audience, who are explicitly invited onto the stage to observe the sack’s actions from the viewfinders positioned on top of the pile of inner tubes.

In opposition to their previous works, Remondi and Caporossi allow *Sacco* to be dominated by a gestural / visual code, only partly foreshadowed by earlier performances. This passage of code is clearly exemplified by the plaster covering Caporossi’s mouth, along with the fact that Remondi’s ‘text’ is effectively an agony of the verbal; a further indication of this passage is the fact that the one long monologue written into the original score for Claudio was successively cut, leaving a final text pertaining more to the realm of the sonic than to that of the verbal. The death of the verbal is shown initially through a regression, which is then followed by a silence; all that is left of the logical or ordered word is a series of low, corporeal gestures: screams, giggles, gargles, whimpers, grumbles, blows and sort of litany, an indecipherable prayer which emerges from the deep and gets louder and louder as the piece progresses. The sonic world of *Sacco* is one made up of shapeless sounds, in which ancient memories return to the surface, biblical fragments occur side by side with childish expressions, as if to indicate a linguistic return towards an origin, a genesis: a nursery rhyme about the number seven, the repeated line “I am not my brother’s keeper” pronounced by Cain after Abel’s assassination. The end to all these words occurs only through silence, pierced, in the end, by Caporossi’s heavy footsteps. Gesture is the true bearer of actions here: while it follows a detailed and carefully composed score, it is also open enough to generate a plurality of meanings which strengthens the piece rather than weakening it; the piece allows for multiple readings without falling into a mere matter of ambiguity<sup>4</sup>.

Two gestural registers are at play: Caporossi’s slow, strict, calculated cruelty and Remondi’s corpulent, animalesque, instinctual shapelessness. Caporossi’s lean physicality finds its counterpart in a robotic rigidity, a controlled, cold violence, given also by the costume which impedes his movements. Conversely, Remondi’s gestures are gestures of discovery,

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<sup>4</sup> When the performance toured to Moscow in 1990, a moment in which a fist emerges from the sack and struggles with the hand of the oppressor, the scene was applauded and read in light of Russia’s political context of the time, an episode which testifies to the piece’s openness to interpretation.

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liberations: his legs begin to move, his hands explore his arms, his face, his features, and it is these gestures that carry the true signifying load of the piece. This division of roles is mirrored also by an autobiographical set-up: Caporossi’s past as an architect locates him as the measurer, the person in charge of structuring space, whereas Remondi’s career of experimentation with gestures, with sound, with words is reflected in his role as the ‘discoverer’. Besides, some of the principal themes of the duo’s work are clearly dealt with here: the dramatic relationship between the I and the Other, the presence of the Double, the polarisation between Victim and Oppressor which culminates in the sack’s attempt to split itself in two, rendered explicit in Remondi’s beautiful final monologue in which he speaks from inside his jute encasing of a ‘violent quarrel between two beings’. Other themes are the exasperated and ambiguous relationship between object and subject, given here by the opposition between sack and human being; the piece also treats objects themselves as available to the sadomasochism of the characters on stage – objects alarmingly dilate and deform, but never with enough autonomy to undo the relationships between the human figures, a condition which will develop into the dystopian machines which appear in Remondi and Caporossi’s later works. Finally, two metatheatrical aspects resound from this performance: firstly, the problem of the tension between actor and character, the actor’s impossibility to play psychologically determined figures and the abstraction of the role; secondly, the production of a dramaturgy which descends from forcing open the verbal in order to find its reification in the realm of the visual.