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## **Améba (1986)**

*Written and directed by* Claudio Remondi *and* Riccardo Caporossi  
*With* Claudio Remondi, Riccardo Caporossi, Piero Cegalin, Lillo Monachesi  
*Light* Antonio Longo  
*Chief electrician* Americo Varese  
*Electrical equipment* Art Sound  
*Company organization* Carla Ortelli  
*Set photographer* Cesare Accetta  
*Coproduction* Ente Teatro romano di Fiesole  
*Information center* Drammaturgia Club Teatro  
*The Améba object was conceived and designed by* Claudio Raimondi *and* Riccardo Caporossi  
*Realized by* Sarplast *and* Scenotecnica  
*First performance* Roman Theater of Fiesole September 1986

## **Améba: the looming object**

by *Sabrina Galasso*

In September 1986, after a series of vicissitudes, Remondi and Caporossi created the piece *Améba*. For the original project, which was supposed to be staged as part of Florence Capital of Culture's 'Estate Fiesolana' Festival in 1986, the authors had penned a "dynamic machine". This was a shape-shifting contraption designed to travel through streets and squares: it could walk on water and it was capable of interacting with other festival events. The idea of the "dynamic machine" was that of an itinerant scenography capable of establishing a real physical contact with the city. Because of its inherent capacity for metamorphosis, the authors had identified the machine with the idea of the amoeba, as unicellular organism always on the verge of a form yet always in flux. Given the organisational impossibility of staging the piece as part of the Fiesole Festival, the two had been given the opportunity to work on the project as part of a workshop at Fiesole's International Centre For Dramaturgy, directed by Siro Ferrone. Here the traits of the work changed, and a new central theme emerged: the antagonism between two twin machines<sup>1</sup>. As the machine's capacity for movement became secondary, what took centre stage was an idea of battle or struggle; the original idea of the amoeba, in turn, remained in a split, doubled form. Four men, placed facing each other in groups of two, begin a race whose objective is to ram forty poles, lifted from a large wheel-like structure placed centre-stage, into two perforated trunks. This process leads to the creation of two twin structures, 'the Amoebas', who the men go on to set in motion closing one amoeba to the other, making them mate. The union of the two structures and their subsequent separation precedes a struggle between two of the men, 'the Predestined', whose battle ends in the sacrifice of both characters and in the destruction of the amoebas. What happens next is a sort of variation on the opening scene: the remaining men pick up the scattered sticks left after the destruction and rebuild the amoebas, but this time they are intertwined – and at their centre, the bodies of the two Predestined men are placed.

The text of *Améba* is divided into seven parts, which are in turn made up of seven scenes. Each one of these units refers to a moment in the existence of the two twin creatures: Birth, Movement of the Amoebas, Mating, Separation and Departure, Struggle, Amoeba eats Amoeba, Sebastian. The text works on a double and parallel codification, which is both visual and verbal. The central characters here are the amoebas, represented and described in great details and in every evocative aspect of their being – they are 'similar to peacocks, to porcupines, to starfish'; beside these beings, the scale and importance of the human body is supplementary, secondary, an extension. The text goes into precise descriptions of the gestures and dimensions of the two structures, and of the movements and the distances kept by the characters – these culminate in a series of 'technical descriptions', which close each one of the seven sections of the text<sup>2</sup>.

The dominating presence in the piece is undoubtedly the amoeba: the machines are identical and over two metres and a half tall, they have a diameter of a half a metre and they are pierced by forty sticks, the position of which makes them look as if they are continuously changing shape. Unlike Remondi and Caporossi's previous pieces, often populated by a series of stage objects, here there is nothing but the two towering creatures; and the space they inhabit is a space of nothingness, a black truly empty space – the only thing the audience can catch a glimpse of is the shadowy Tuscan countryside behind the stage. No objects pertaining to the human or to the quotidian are visible on stage; and the only sounds we hear are those of the men shouting at each other to coordinate their movements and the sound of a bell, which seems to underline the presence of an outside necessity determining the entire affair. The triumph of the 'Thing' is visible not only in the massive difference in scale between the structures and the human beings, but also in the fact that the twin structures are double, they are two, and this hints to a sort of seriality which the human cannot hope to prefigure or control. In the mating scene, the twin amoebas seem to

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1 The initial rehearsals for the piece were made with 1:10 scale models. The difficulties in realising the machines in true size in resin – a material chosen for its combination of strength and flexibility – caused delays, and *Améba*, which was supposed to debut in July, only opened in September.

2 The complete text of *Améba* is available in Remondi and Caporossi. *Améba*. Fiesole: Centro Internazionale di Drammaturgia, 1986.

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take an almost human behaviour: in the text, the authors speak of ‘exaltation’, ‘fulfilment’, ‘obeisance’, ‘exhaustion’. In describing the separation of the two after the mating scene, they speak of one of the twins being ‘petrified’ – the text is reminiscent of the behaviour of the ‘One’ and ‘Two’ characters in the duo’s previous *Spéra*.

Although the presence of these mechanised contraptions takes us back to an older work, *Richiamo*, there are many differences between the two pieces. In *Richiamo*, fifteen years earlier, the presence of the machine had been redeemed in the final act, in a final sacrifice which symbolised a return to life. But here, the object looms and develops, and it is displayed as a monstrous hybrid between the natural and the artificial which has grown too much, deformed, which has become alien even to itself. It isn’t by chance that there is a fifth character on stage, a woman clad in black seated on a step just before the lip of the stage who, rope in hand, repeatedly rings a bell. The woman isn’t young – her hair is grey and her physique is slightly heavy. A metaphor of nature, the woman underlines the climaxes of the show at each sounding out of the bell: the birth scene, the mating scene. But this image of nature is a pain-ridden one, in line with the themes of the piece. In the text she is described as an old woman in sandals, her faces riddled with lines, seated with a child in her arms, like a Madonna in sacred iconography.

The doubleness seen in the two twin structures is replicated and mirrored also in the male figures on stage: they too are two couples – the two Predestined ones and the two ‘Copies’, characters whose function is to take care of the machines’ movements. The seriality of these human figures is another effect of the tyranny of the amoeba: apart from appearing tiny compared to the two giant structures, Remondi, Caporossi and the two actors Piero Cegalin and Lillo Monachesi are invested by a sameness in the way they are dressed, the four wearing identical costumes of pale cotton, identical black sandals at their feet. They perform the exact same gestures, with freezing, meticulous precision and synchrony. It is also the four men who produce the movement of the amoebas, piercing them with the sticks and then retracting then, pushing the sticks on to the floor and then manoeuvring them with micro-rotations. In this respect, the men look like yoked animals, whose gestures are predetermined, whose slow, complex movements – untransformative, blocked in energy – produce overwhelming effects. Although the entrance of the four seems to invest them with some importance (it looks like the opening of a medieval tournament: Riccardo saddling one of the trunks in a feathered hat, carried by the two Copies, and Claudio entering with the other Trunk on his back), the situation is immediately overthrown by the evident preponderance of the machines. As soon as the four are on their knees, making the trunks roll on the ground, their gestures are reduced to those of robots. The two Predestined figures are puppets, guided in their battle by mysterious outside forces: they are blindfolded and dressed in a sort of sack-like habit, of which one corner is attached to a stick manoeuvred by one of the Copies. Blindness disorients them. Their movements are totally controlled by the copy up until the end of the struggle, when the victim, hanging from a stick, is lifted as one of the amoebas falls to the ground, and the winner’s ‘fatuous flag’ is treaded upon. The effort of the men – which in the previous *Spéra* was finally annihilated in an ungraspable universe – concludes here with a closure of the victim-oppressor circle, and the duel between characters doesn’t serve the purpose of regeneration but the sole purpose of ‘keeping man engaged in something, keeping him alive’.