

Moby Dick

di *Mario Ricci*

He puts the end of the line down and begins to roll it up.

From his left, to the right of the spectator, Lillo-fish enters. Like Carlo-fish, he wears a black windbreaker of shiny plastic and knitted pants. On his head is the head of a fish. Like Carlo-fish, he walks with a slow sway. In his left arm he holds an object that seems at the moment to be a shield. In his right arm, he has another object that somewhat resembles a harpoon. He strikes the point of the harpoon against the floor of the stage.

When he appears, the cone of light becomes a little larger.

Lillo-fish crosses the stage.

Meanwhile Angela-fish and Deborah-fish enter from the back.

Like Lillo-fish, they wear windbreakers, etc. Each has a shield and a harpoon. They move like him.

At their appearance on the scene, the cone of light increases a little. They move downstage in a zig-zag pattern.

In the meantime, Carlo-fish has finished rolling up the rope. He picks it up and disappears behind the downstage wings.

Lillo-fish, Angela-fish and Deborah-fish advance toward the proscenium.

When they are in the middle of the stage, Carlo-fish enters from behind the set.

Like the others, he has a shield and harpoon. They advance together to the stagefront while the cone of light increases to the point that it renders them perfectly visible.

They stop, conversing as fish sometimes do.

From upstage, Claudio-Ahab yells something incomprehensible (a command?). Instantly, the fish-actors stiffen themselves and stare at the audience.

The cry of Claudio-Ahab is followed by that of a whale (Moby Dick?).

While the lights are lowered, the four move to the four corners of the stage. They put down the shields, which now appear as what they are: round standards about 20 inches in diameter with casters attached. Reversing the harpoons, they insert them in sections of pipe fixed at the center of the standards.

The sound of the sea continues.

This lasts about three minutes.

They rise. They move downstage center.

The cone of light increases.

They gather together and talk among themselves as before. Claudio-Ahab's cry makes them stiffen again.

The cone of light diminishes, and the four begin to leave the stage.

About a minute and a half passes.

Angela-fish and Deborah-fish re-enter upstage left. Angela-fish has a round tabletop in her hand. Deborah-fish carries the pedestal of the table. While Angela-fish puts the table at the exact center of the stage where Claudio-Ahab has stopped, Deborah-fish exits and returns with a stool.

At the same time, Lillo-fish and Carlo-fish re-enter downstage. Each one carries a ladder about seven feet tall. They lean the two ladders obliquely toward the center of the stage. Then they turn and go upstage. They stand the two ladders at the sides of the table where Claudio-Ahab is already sitting.

Pedestal-shields, harpoon poles, ladders, rope: all the objects are painted a shiny white.

In the half-darkness of the stage only the "movement" of these objects can be clearly perceived; the shine of the fish-actors' windbreakers and the silver outlines of the fish heads.

Claudio-Ahab, seated in the center, makes his presence felt.

In a "movement," during which the stage is never static, Carlo-, Lillo-, Angela-, and Deborah-fish, paired off in couples, come and go. First they bring white sails wrapped around poles, which they insert in other sections of pipe attached to the base-shields. Then they bring life-sized cardboard silhouettes of men and women.

These silhouettes, which are attached to the harpoons in standing position, are pictures of Lillo-, Carlo-, Angela-, and Deborah-sailors. In fact, the faces are life-size photographs of the actors glued onto the cardboard.

The bodies of the silhouettes are painted and covered with the same fabric as that used in the costumes worn by the actors.

When the last silhouette has been attached to a harpoon, all four actors are out of sight. The proscenium light is turned off, and another is lit toward the back to illuminate Claudio-Ahab, who is constructing houses of playing cards. The cards are not ordinary ones but reproductions of playing cards enlarged at least six times.

Meanwhile, the background sound of the sea ends, and a taped voice speaks of the discontent and anguish of Ahab-Ishmael.

Claudio-Ahab continues making houses of cards, which continually collapse. The offstage voice goes on speaking about the sea, whales, etc.

The house of cards collapses again. At the sound of the boatswain's pipe (taped), four sailors enter running. They go toward the four corners. They take hold of the sails and roll them on the wheeled bases toward the center, lining them up obliquely one behind the other. The silhouettes and harpoons, fixed like the sails on the moveable platforms, are all visible.

Deborah-sailor has taken the sail with the silhouette corresponding to her. The others have done the same.

Suddenly, the boatswain's pipe stops. The only light goes out. To the sound of a Strauss waltz, the sails open and a film is projected on them.

*The first time I used film in theatre was in 1966 in a production entitled **Gulliver's Travels**. I had experimented previously (toward the end of 1965 and the beginning of 1966) with partial fragments of images, but in those cases the images were not cinematographic but... more simply, graphic.*

Now I will explain briefly some experiments made in a production consisting of three pieces, two of which I consider decisive in the evolution of the research and experimentation that I have been conducting for some years.

*One of the pieces was entitled **Construction Sacrifice (Sacrificio Edilizio)**. Of extremely simple structure, the play referred to ancient legends that told of falling walls and bridges, and of human sacrifice made so that these structures would remain standing. Scenically, everything was solved with the construction, the collapse and the reconstruction of a wall made of cardboard cubes about 20 inches on a side. The story of **Construction Sacrifice** was painted on these cubes.*

This scenic plan worked well for initial, incomplete fragments of images; in this case, however, the images were not cinematographic but simply graphic, as previously stated.

Every time the wall fell, Claudio and Angela decided to reconstruct it, putting the cubes on top of each other and lining them up. As this action continued, the story developed more clearly on the wall: The boxes were not piled up in an orderly fashion but in disarray so that the "reading" of the story came by degrees, and the figures appeared in fragments.

*Another "piece" of this production was entitled **Salome**, a familiar story. In **Salome**, I confronted another problem for the first time: projecting images with shadow-puppets-in this case, two-dimensional actors and marionettes.*

If I speak of these first attempts with fragments of images and the use of shadow-puppets, it is because I believe that it is from these that I derived a rather particular way of inserting cinema into theatre presentations. I believe, in fact, that my first experiments with cinema in theatre began with shadow-puppets. Are we not dealing perhaps with figures projected on a screen?

*Naturally, I never considered using shadow-puppets in their classical sense. For example, in **Gulliver's Travels (I Viaggi di Gulliver)**, to show the approximate relationship in size between giant Gulliver and the Lilliputians, Claudio-painter drew an entire series of tiny men (mass-media style) and miniature houses on a small screen. The image of Claudio-Gulliver was then projected on the same screen so that only his legs and the lower portion of his body were visible. Since he was placed almost at the source of light, his figure was enlarged to the maximum on the screen.*

*But the action did not end here. To make even clearer the relationship in size between Claudio-Gulliver and the Lilliputian environment, Angela- and Sabina-Lilliputians were also projected in shadow on the screen, but in life size. They barely reached the height of Claudio-Gulliver's knees. It is precisely in this presentation of **Gulliver's Travels** that I began the actual utilization of film inside a theatrical structure.*

However, all things considered, it was a modest enough experiment. In fact, on that occasion the film was projected on Gulliver's stomach. There was a large panel of plywood on which was painted the figure of the giant stretched out on the grass. At a certain point, Claudio-Gulliver opened the stomach of the giant Gulliver-panel, which had a small door shaped like a television screen. Behind the small door there was a screen on which were projected two short 8mm films of about three minutes each. One was a western, the other a cloak-and-dagger-two shorts that we had bought.

*But already in the next presentation, **Edgar Allan Poe** in March of 1967, film as scenic element assumed a decisive importance for the meaning of theatre. In this production, the experiments done before-fragmentation of images and projected shadow silhouettes-became of great importance.*

The film, however, was still projected on a fixed screen. In fact, the figures appeared on the black backdrop of the stage and on a white canopy placed at the center of the stage. These images were already fragmented, however, or at least they became fragmented in the projection because parts of them went off the fixed screen and canopy, ending up on the background which, since it was farther away, enlarged them considerably.

The films, because they were two 8mm shorts, dealt in a certain sense with things the spectators had already seen or would see. In fact, the shorts told the story of the presentation, but, since they had been shot on the stage, they told the story in its more intimate particulars. There were closeups of hands, of faces, and of objects that in time would be used. On that occasion already had begun to confront the problem of a certain "movement" resulting from the superimposition and fragmentation of cinematographic images and real images (actors). In fact, the two films were shot with the same actors that were on the stage.

*With the following presentation, **Illumination (Illuminazione)** in 1967, I used slides in addition to film; for the first time the screen was not fixed in one spot. In fact, the films (three films of about 30 minutes each) and the slides were projected on ten parallelepipeds that revolved on their axes. Two of the three sides of the parallelepipeds were plain plywood painted white. On the third side, two mirrors were attached. It is easy to visualize the result.*

In James Joyce (1968), the possibilities of fragmentation, superimposition, and changing rhythms of cinematographic images were discovered and realized. The film definitely assumes a narrative, unfragmentary character. The movie camera descends from the stage and is placed in front of it so that the images become more definite and definable and the story they tell is clearer.

*In the following productions, from **Baron Munchausen (Il Barone di Munchausen)** and **King Lear** (1969-1970) to **Moby Dick** (1971), film has gradually involved scenic action to permit me to theorize a four-dimensional cinema. As I have said, after **Gulliver's Travels** (1966), I have not projected films on fixed screens in two dimensions but rather on screen-environments (the stage, scenic objects, and actors understood in this case as objects), having not two but three dimensions: depth, width, height. The fourth dimension, we can say, is represented by the movement inherent in the projected film thus superimposed on the movement of the scene. The superimposition and the concomitance of the two movements, especially when the two movements of the film and those of the scene on the stage are alike or almost alike, produce what I rather generally call "fourth dimension." The effect is often extraordinary because one sometimes completely loses the sense of orientation-whether it is cinematographic or theatrical-by having an original dimension in which the figures, the objects, and their colors are amalgamated into one whole, thus provoking what I cannot better define than "multiple movement."*

*I do not claim at all to have clarified sufficiently the data of this experience. I have only tried to approximate the results of all these years of work in order to be able to continue describing **MobyDick**.*

At the moment when the sails open, the projected film at first shows some scenes shot at sea, then, and this is the longer portion of the film, interior shots. One sees, meanwhile, Ahab with a part of his crew gazing at the strange fish-men emerging from the sea. Then the sailors put on the silhouettes and wander around the rocks. These are the same silhouettes as those on the sails.

(Depending on the size of the stage and on the distance of projection, the film does not strike just the moving sails but also the backdrop and sometimes the sides of the stage. Thus the images are composed and decomposed depending on the movement of the sails.) The sails continue to "sail," always accompanied by the music of Strauss, while Claudio-Ahab walks at the back of the stage, appearing and disappearing.

Carlo-, Lillo-, Angela- and Deborah-sailors are there to maneuver the sails. The silhouettes, hanging on hooks, do not move along with the sails but remain straight, thus giving the impression of sailing. (Someone said to me later that he suffered seasickness during this scene.)

At a certain signal, the sails pull apart and Claudio opens a curtain at the back. Behind the curtain is a hidden panel on which has been painted the snout and the tail of Moby Dick at sea during a storm. For the first time the Monster appears. A scene of Claudio-Ahab running in slow motion is projected on it.

The image changes and deals now with Lillo-fish who rises from the sea. As soon as this scene appears, the head of Moby Dick comes off the panel and moves forward toward the audience as far as the stage apron. The head is attached to the tail by a large piece of silk that forms the body of the Monster. The cinematographic Image, when the head arrives at the footlights, is that of Lillo-fish's head shown increasingly closer until the outlines disappear.

Then Moby Dick exists, and the image changes.

The sails close again, and on them is projected Claudio-Ahab as he arms his crew with harpoons.

Carlo-, Lilla-, Angela- and Deborah-sailors put their respective silhouettes on their backs. Thus they appear first in their real figures; then, after taking a harpoon, they turn and walk to the back, showing the silhouettes.

Once in a while the cinematographic sequences are interrupted. The sails open, and behind the panel in the space left free by the exit of the head and tail of Moby Dick one sees Claudio-Ahab with panels that represent other situations.

First we see the captain, with the port of Nantucket in the background. Then we see him seated in a tavern gulping a bottle of port. The third time he is in Tahiti. The fourth time, among blocks of ice in Alaska. When the sails open for the fifth time, the projection of the film ends; the curtain at the back closes, and the stage becomes dark.

Claudio-Ahab scans the horizon with his telescope. At the boatswain's whistle, Carlo-, Lilla-, Angela- and Deborah-sailors enter the stage, running. They place themselves in a compact group as in a rugby game, then, passing pieces from hand-to-hand, they build as rapidly as possible the table to which Ahab goes and seats himself to begin again his house of cards. Carlo- and Lillo-sailors turn the ladders around, putting one on top of the other on the stage apron. Placed in this way, they resemble the prow of the whale boat. The roar of a sea-storm is gradually replaced by a voice in the background that slowly begins to describe the physiological characteristics of the head of a leviathan.

Suddenly, the description is interrupted and replaced by a monotonous jazz rhythm. The house of cards collapses, and Claudio-Ahab seems to fall into a hypnotized state.

The two lights shining on the captain are extremely dim, in the half-shadow behind him, the silhouette-sailors emerge very slowly from behind the sails. They place themselves one beside the other in an oblique line. Beginning with Carlo-silhouette-sailor, they begin to pass the rope among themselves, moving in a wavelike motion.

Each time they tilt, they all take half a step toward the exit, forming a tight group which, undulating from left to right, approaches the exit pulling the rope behind it.

The movement is extremely slow, just as the motions of Claudio-Ahab are very slow as he now begins to gather up the cards and deal them out on the table in a game for three.

The four silhouette-sailors exit. The music changes. There are some very short drum beats for a few seconds and then absolute silence.

During this silence, Angela- and Deborah-fish enter. They walk extremely slowly. All movements, including those of Claudio-Ahab, are as slow as possible. Angela- and Deborah-fish approach the captain's table. They pick up the cards. And so begins a strange game played with exposed cards, since all three are showing the faces of their cards to the audience. In the middle of this game, the music changes again. In place of long silences and a few seconds of drumming, the jazz piece returns. Slowly the curtain that covers the panel at the back opens and reveals Moby Dick, which Lilla and Carlo have put back in his place.

The game continues for awhile. Then, with another change of music, the two lights go out. Angela- and Deborah-fish leave. The projection of a second film begins. This film deals with the same Moby Dick, shot while he was detached from the panel. The film repeats exactly the movements occurring on the stage. Initially, the two figures are superimposed in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish the real from the cinematographic.

Then slowly the cinematographic image becomes larger until it completely fills the stage, while the head of Moby Dick swallows Claudio-Ahab who remains at his place with the cards. Claudio-Ahab, slipping under the "silk" of the whale, reappears at its side near the head. He brandishes the harpoon, with which he very slowly strikes the Monster.

The film now shows the battle that Claudio-Ahab and his crew wage against the Monster.

The film was made to reproduce approximately the sequence that is developing on the stage. In fact, at the two sides of the monstrous whale, Angela- and Deborah-silhouette-sailors now reappear. They are armed with harpoons. Angela- and Deborah-silhouette-sailors insert themselves in the film. Their movements, as they strike the Monster, are very slow. At the point of striking, they suddenly turn to show their other sides. That is to say, they repeatedly show first the real side and then the silhouette-photograph side. (Sometimes, when certain combinations appear, the effect is disconcerting because one can begin to believe that there is a defect in the film.)

The struggle continues to become more violent and chaotic. The roar of the sea, the cry of Moby Dick and the powerful voice (taped) of Claudio-Ahab support this action until the point at which the Monster leaves and the tape changes. Once again there is the jazz rhythm.

The two figures of Moby Dick, the real one and the cinematographic one, turn toward the panel at the rear. Withdrawing the plywood head discovers Claudio-Ahab again seated at his table, intent on his house of cards. The dream is finished and reality returns.

The head re-enters the panel. The projection finishes. The curtain at the rear closes. Claudio-Ahab is aroused by a louder wave on the tape. He puts the cards in order, rises and goes toward the back. He takes his telescope out and begins to scan the horizon again.

The boatswain's pipe calls the sailors to attention. Carlo-, Lillo-, Angela- and Deborah-sailors re-enter at a run in their gaudy costumes. They huddle together and put their arms around each other like a rugby team. Then they go to the sails.

Lillo- and Carlo-sailors first raise the ladders and put them near the poles of two sails.

In pairs, they climb the ladders. They unhook the sails. They let them drop. Then they go to the other two sails. In the same way all four sails are struck. Still in pairs, they remove the poles from the standards and put them at the side of the stage.

Then, in one movement that becomes increasingly frenetic, they pass some of the remaining objects, piece-by-piece from hand-to-hand: table, stool, cards, etc., are taken off the stage. Only the two ladders, two sails and one moveable base remain.

Claudio-Ahab watches all the operations, dragging his wooden leg heavily behind him. The sea (taped) rages while the usual background voice repeats what it previously said.

Now Carlo- and Lillo-sailors take the two A-frame ladders upstage and place them on the floor so that the feet, which are usually put on the ground, touch each other. With bolts, the two ladders are joined to each other. While Carlo and Lillo-sailors are putting the ladders together, Angela- and Deborah-sailors attach the four sails to the four upstage sides of the ladders. When the operation is finished, Lillo-sailor places the remaining base-shield exactly at the center where the two ladders meet.

All four return to the center of the stage and again embrace to form a compact group. They move around the stage shouting, laughing and talking together. Then in one jump, they leave. Claudio-Ahab, who has followed their movements, stopping now and then to scan the horizon, watches them as they leave.

The background voice is still. The sea roars more loudly. Claudio-Ahab, remaining alone, continues to drag his heavy wooden leg. He stops. He takes out his telescope. He gazes for a long time at the horizon-in effect, the audience.

Finally he, too, exits.

Suddenly the scene changes completely. The initial half-darkness returns. The loudspeakers emit some harsh music by the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Carlo-, Lillo-, Angela- and Deborah-fish re-enter. They carry an eight-foot cylinder of heavy paper that has been rolled up. They move with the same slowness of the first scene: like people walking in water.

They place the roll of heavy paper upstage center. Without ceasing their aquatic body movements, they unroll the paper, which is about 13 feet long, down the center of the stage.

They stand at the four sides of the paper. Now Carlo-fish holds down the middle of the paper while Lillo- and Angela-fish double it; they fold the corners toward the center until they touch and form an equilateral triangle.

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The music changes. Now there are only short drumbeats and long silences.

Making a pivot on the point of the triangle, they turn the folded paper to produce a rumbling sound. After another long pause following the drumbeats, the harsh theme of the Modern jazz Quartet is heard. They continue to fold the paper.

In the silence that follows the end of the jazz theme, Angela- and Deborah-fish pull the corners of the heavy paper toward themselves, and a stupendous boat appears on the stage apron.

Now the four move upstage. The heavy footsteps of Claudio-Ahab are heard as he re-enters. He goes toward the paper boat and climbs into it. He takes his telescope out and looks straight ahead. All this occurs in deep silence.

Carlo-, Lillo-, Angela- and Deborah-fish bend over the ladders, which are now joined together. They lift the two upper parts and simultaneously go toward the boat and the Captain.

The upper parts of the two ladders are rhythmically raised and lowered; the sections below are attached to the wheeled base. Thus the ladders look like the monstrous mouth of Moby Dick, while the sails, attached to the four sides, above and below, represent the immense jaws.

Thus the immense mouth of the white whale advances, and his ominous bellow is heard. He comes forward and swallows the boat and the captain.

The lights go out, and in total darkness we hear Moby Dick's cry as it gradually becomes softer-and sometimes the hurried steps of Angela, Deborah, Claudio, Carlo and Lillo as they leave the stage.