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Notes on Mario Ricci's *Moby Dick*: figures of actors and cinema in four dimensions

by Cristina Grazioli

The theatrical vocation of one of the 'founding fathers' of New Italian Theatre takes shape in the area of a visual practice riddled with the presence of the 'artificial'. Educated in the visual arts, since the beginnings of his creative practice Mario Ricci invited a number of collaborators, amongst whom Pasquale Santoro, Nato Frascà, Achille Perilli, Gastone Novelli, Claudio Previtera, Franco Libertucci, Umberto Bignardi. After a stint in Paris in 1959, he consolidated his practice working at Michael Meschke's Marionettentheater in Stockholm between 1960 and 1962. Here he also got to know Harry Kramer's mechanical theatre.

Two fundamental coordinates guide our reading of *Moby Dick*: the visual arts and the marionette theatre as every avantgarde has confronted it, that is as the terrain where the human encounters mechanical and artificial presences. The circumstances of *Moby Dick* allow for an analysis guided by the piece's reception and its resonance. Firstly, because Ricci himself made available a number of materials that describe both how the piece was made and how its poetic apparatus functioned. Secondly, because this 1971 work opens up to a spectatorial panorama which since its inception was international in scope: before unveiling the performance in Italy, Ricci published his description of *Moby Dick* in a special issue of *The Drama Review* dedicated to puppets and marionettes. The piece was also presented at the Edinburgh Festival, at the Bitef in Belgrade, and in Munich.

Ricci's critical writings on the piece, produced in the years that immediately followed its making, significantly foreground the formative experiences discussed above: he recognises the influence of his time with Meschke and often mentions his knowledge of Kramer's work (see also the section on Ricci's work in Quadri's 1977 volume). While at this time Meschke was on the cusp of becoming an internationally recognised reference point in what concerns the art of puppetry, Harry Kramer's work offers an example of a mechanical stage dominated by the dynamism of light and by the simultaneous rhythm of image and sound, a kind of practice inherited directly from the avantgardes of the early 20th century.

These are practices that will have a strong impact on Ricci's future work: opposed to the idea of naturalist portrayals, to the aim of conferring a message, to text-based theatre and to psychological explorations, Ricci's first performances utilise material techniques as a renewal of theatrical languages. Titles such as *Movimento numero uno per marionetta sola* ('Movement Number One for a Single Marionette', 1962), *Spettacolo di tre pezzi, Movimento per marionetta sola numero 2* ('Performance in three pieces, movement for single marionette number two', 1964) or *Movimento uno e due (1965)* ('Movements one and two', 1965) also point to Ricci's interest in the 'structural' elements of scenic production.

This tendency thus marks the beginnings of Ricci's theatrical production as well as his later works, with results that varied over time. Almost all of Ricci's shows include what he termed 'figures' – there are doubles of the human that take the form of puppets, marionettes, cardboard shapes, de-materialised actors that appear in the cinematic image or in the image projected by light. Examples of these figures appear clearly in *Salomé*, *Sacrificio Edizilio*, *Amleto*, *Macbeth*, *Re Lear*.

In *Moby Dick* the composition relies on two principal *motifs*: the light-image of the film projector and the reinvention of figures (actors and characters) according to a 'marionettean' paradigm.

The actors multiply their identity in the characters, which Ricci always addresses in his writings with both their real and their dramaturgical names: Claudio/Ahab, Carlo/Fish, Angela/Fish, Lillo/Fish, Deborah/Fish. They stage their doubles or their characters 'as effigies', with cardboard cut-outs. The assembly of the parts, the composition of the actors' bodies, is also reminiscent of puppet theatre: we have scenes in which the head of the character has been replaced by a photograph, upon which clothing has been stitched, or figures such as the whale, composed of different materials (including projections). On a dramaturgical level, what dominates is the metaphor – typical of puppet theatre – of a character at the mercy of fate (such as the sea or the whale), a metaphor that also allows for a number of meta-theatrical tropes (for example the puppet master will 'unmask' the characters mid-narration). From a technical point of view, all of these solutions present an elementary, firmly artisanal character.

Objects act as part of the same stage-world, becoming characters yet always remaining semantically fluid and multi-functional (shields become skates for the actors to glide on, or two pieces of wood become the prow of *Moby Dick*).

Even more than the marionette-based experiences proper with Meschke, it is Kramer's mechanical theatre that has an influence on Ricci. His interest was sparked by its 'machines', by the idea of the 'contraption', a term Ricci himself uses ('clockwork contraptions'). As Paolo Ricci writes in the newspaper *l'Unità*, the process of assembly is designed as a 'perfect device which, once put in motion, performs its actions with the simplicity and the automaticity of a natural gestural succession [...], all in all it is a spectacular clockwork device'.

Perhaps this 'contraption' was too stubbornly analytical a device to entirely impress Ripellino, a critic more inclined to appreciate the vaguely "circus tent" flavour of shows like *A Dog's Heart* by Bulgakov staged by Viveca Melander and Mario Moretti, which the critic refers to at the beginning of his review of *Moby Dick* ('the dogs with the metamorphosis of the white whales'). Ripellino defines Ricci as a 'square' director, whose theatre unravels as 'an unnerving test of patience, a tireless sequence of construction and ruination that shows the vanity of human endeavours and the incongruous nature of stage-time, which is seen an indolent "lentissimo" that evades rhythm and lingers, as if stunned, at every corner of the stage.' The critic identifies three moments that recur in all of Ricci's shows: 'construction, swing, ruination'.

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As usual, the critic appropriately interprets the provenance of Ricci's stylistic arsenal, and the review takes into account the breadth of Ricci's inventions. What doesn't seduce him is Ricci's lack of levity, which he calls a lack of 'wind of Fate'. According to the critic, Ricci's works doesn't have the explosive pace of the Russian avantgarde (or of the myth of the Russian avantgarde).

Yet, it seems that this may have been precisely Ricci's intention: to portray the inexorability of the 'all-swallowing machine'. The article Ricci signed as 'Vice' (in *L'Unità*, 24 December 1971) identifies Melville's text as an excuse to give body to the character of Ahab as metaphor of the artist: 'at the mercy of the monsters generated by the (bourgeois) theatre and by its language, by the elusive white whale'. It is curious to note (without wanting to draw too direct a parallel) that various articles of the 1971-1973 period (for example in the newspaper *L'Unità*) systematically refer to Moby Dick, who is identified either with the Christian Democracy or with the monster of capitalism.

A detail of the Ripellino review allows us to shed light on a specific point, which is interesting precisely because it escapes the critic: he calls the actors 'kurombo', referring to the 'stage servants' of the Japanese kabuki, 'all in black' and masked so as to not reveal their presence and function. But in fact Ricci's interest in this kind of mechanism lies in revealing, rather than hiding, the performers, who are at the same time actors, characters and part of the stage machinery.

Looking at other reviews from the time, Mario Raimondo emphasises the specific use of film ('not projections but authentic linguistic signals') and Ricci's capacity to avoid the trap of intellectualism; according to Mario Raimondo, Ricci does this by allowing every object to 'transmit without mediation', thanks to its movements, so that objects follow the same mechanism of identification that occurs in child-play.

Edoardo Fadini also highlights Ricci's increasingly renovated work on language, which in his view manages to scenographically relate materials at their most essential level. Fadini points his finger towards the short-sightedness of Italian theatre for insufficiently praising Ricci, who was nevertheless accumulating a certain international renown having, amongst other things, been invited to Munich for the Olympics, alongside well-known international groups (such as Bread and Puppet, Open Theater, Magic Circus).

The conception of the theatre as *game-theatre-ritual* formulated by Ricci in 1967 also imbues the creation of *Moby Dick*: 'when I say "game", I mean the rediscovery and reproduction of what we call child-play, which – precisely because of its "content" – is, I think, incapable of signifying anything other than itself'. Ricci's games and rituals want to arouse reactions in the audience, not feelings. Another important thread that helps put the show into focus is an idea of a 'theatre of vision', which is what also led him to formulate the principle of 'film in four dimensions', to be considered in close connection (and interaction) with the live presence of the actor.

Mario Ricci sees the actor as an open 'scenic object', available to embodying any kind of meaning. In shows like *Varietà* ('Variety', 1965), *Sacrificio Edilizio* ('Construction Sacrifice'), *I viaggi di Gulliver* ('Gulliver's Travels' 1966), *Edgar Allan Poe* (1967), he combined the actor's real presence with sculptural elements, theatre and film. In *I viaggi di Gulliver* (1966) he explored the technical relationship between different objects, rather than focusing on the story's plot: projections appear on screen-spaces which are also spectacular materials (Ricci explicitly states that he prefers to talk of 'props' rather than 'scenography'), or on the bodies of the actors.

In *Moby Dick* the image, projected on the sails of a boat, is both reinforced and contradicted by the real presence of actor-objects that show their true faces one minute, their face on cut-out pictures placed on life-size cardboard silhouettes another. The film image is not autonomous on the stage: rather, it serves to add movement to the dynamics of the stage as a whole, it produces more and more shapes. It is this that Ricci sought to do in elaborating on the idea of a cinema in four dimensions: his main concern was not to film images of 'signifiers' which in any case already 'signified' in and of themselves, but rather to use images as integrated in the economy of the show.