

[Title](#) || Totò e Vicé, quadri d'universo

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Totò e Vicé. 1993.

directed by Antonella Di Salvo *and* Franco Scaldati

scenes Blasco Pitruzzella

costumes Laboratorio Femmine dell'Ombra

music consulting Gennaro Fucile

with Gaspare Cucinella, Antonella Di Salvo, Melino Imparato, Lucia Restifo Pecorella, Vito Savalli, Franco Scaldati

production Laboratorio Femmine dell'Ombra

premiere Gibellina, XII Orestyadi Edition of Gibellina, Case Di Lorenzo, 1-5 September 1993

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by *Viviana Raciti*

Franco Scaldati's *Totò and Vicé* is the result of an assemblage of various texts, collected between 1993 and most probably no later than 1995. The archive contains a number of titles which were merged in the final text: *Totò and Vicé* (1993, shown at the Orestyadi Festival in Gibellina that same year); *Totò and Vicé and the Angel of the Lanterns* (1994), staged differently to the one above and presented with this title in 1995; *Totò e Vicé are Really... two fireflies* (1995), and *Totò and Vicé Two Sugar-dolls* and *The Teacher and The Little Girl* (both also from 1995). Two versions have been published of the text so far, the latter of which, though posthumous, was edited with the author's permission and collaboration – it presents a number of variations in the placement and treatment of certain scenes.

Our object of analysis here however is the text's first edition, published in 2003: this version more accurately reflects the author's intentions for the text as it was being written and presented on stage, whereas its later edition tends to simplify some of its aspects, from the graphic presentation to the staging of certain scenes, to certain aspects of the language which appear thinned or clarified (for example the second edition cuts the 'h' in *pupiddhu*, Sicilian for 'little doll', which might appear look like an orthographic detail, but in fact signifies an important aspired 'h').

In an interview with Valentina Valentini entitled 'The Clear Shadow of Man', included in the text's first edition, Scaldati explains how Totò and Vicé were developed from two real-life characters who used to entertain people with crude and controversial fictional debates and staged arguments, for which they then asked for money, in the aftermath of WWII. Initially imagined by Scaldati in the 1980s as brief entr'actes to be interspersed through larger texts, in the 1990s the duo found an autonomous form.

Divided into seven parts which are successively subdivided into different headers, the text doesn't have a plot as such and, like many of Scaldati's works, it can't be neatly categorised into Aristotelian units. The interactions between the characters can be seen, as Valentini describes them, as 'erratic apparitions': *vannu Totò e Vicé; m'on sannu unni...* [Sicilian: 'Totò and Vicé go – but they don't know where...']. Their interactions are small, crystallised actions, whose purpose is for the characters to interrogate their own nature and the nature of what lies around them – a nocturnal environment which is cave, cemetery, sky and land, hell and heaven at the same time.

The duo's structure as a duo, the mechanism of duplication – used both to doubly affirm and to contradict – appears again and again both in the spaces the two inhabit and in the themes they discuss. Totò and Vicé are totally complementary to one another, inseparable to the point that one will follow the other's death, when it comes. The other couples – little boy / little girl, teacher / little girl – could be seen in a similar way, staged through a constant parallel between question and answer, between game and trick, between getting closer and moving back apart. Spatially too, we can easily observe the presence of extremes – sea / sky, hell / heaven – which are presented as specular more than opposed, loci connected to each other through a sort of mirroring: you can reach the moon by traversing the sea, you can throw a rope from the earth which will ring bells in heaven, and in heaven you can find a garden of illusions, populated by demons. Characters ask themselves whether sleep is in fact death, or if death is only sleep, and never find an answer. Similar connotations could be attributed to the conversations about sexual identity between the two, especially Vicé's: *i rriari / si comu 'na fimmina...* [Sicilian: 'from behind / you're like a women...']: the two wear women's clothes, look in the mirror and see themselves as men and viceversa. Even more telling in this respect is how the two speak of identity: whenever one speaks the name of the other, it has something to do with affirming his own existence.

The essence of the piece is devolved to animals, to things: the mute dog who, exemplarily, is he who watches the other dogs howling at the moon; the outdoor cinema which is really only a sheet upon silhouettes are projected; sugar-dolls made to be looked at more than to be eaten; lanterns in the night, intermittent in their brilliance. All of these delicate yet powerful images have something to do with vision, with seeing, which is a central element in Scaldati's work: appearances and disappearances have to do with vision, as do the references to blindness and to the infinite traversing of empty rooms, as does the window as 'the painting of the universe' or the observation of a chequered sheet of paper upon which something is written, but the characters don't know what that is because they don't know how to read. The word becomes a tear, and the writing becomes an image, a feeling, which cannot only be the graphed sign because it is devoid of orality, accomplished, finite: the written word is closened to death. Hence the sphere of writing and the sphere of sound are also put into intimate relation with each other: the author is *u cretino c'a penna 'n' manu* [Sicilian: 'the cretin with a pen in his hand']. *A ntisa so' [di Vicé] ogni scruscium è suonu* ['as he (Vicé) thinks, every noise is a sound']: we hear the typical shouts of market vendors, people imitating animal noises (which appear in many of Scaldati's characters), characters invoke the sound of bells, and we realise that the

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figures on stage define themselves according to sound more than to vision, because they are *corpo che po' muta 'n'luci, [...]* *po' muta 'n'vuci* ['bodies that can mutate in the light, can mutate in the voice'].

In fact, we can see in the paronomastic game between *luci and vuci* (light and voice) the string that holds all these images together, with that verb in the present (to mutate) which has to do as much with changing (to mutate) as it has to do with the absence of sound (to become mute). Besides, even the presence or absence of light (the moon, the lanterns, lightbulbs) is given as that something which makes us wait; not the Beckettian tension of emptiness, the darkness here is the chance to indulge in 'visions which the world has never had / visions in the darkness, this strange light': the dark is what illuminates the desire to reinvest these lost souls with their *lustru anticu* [ancient splendour]. At the same time, the search for light too can be dangerous, and Totò and Vicé's female versions, Titi and Vincenzina, warn us of this: the price to pay to exit the darkness is the death of the other, an unacceptable, yet unavoidable, price. All the characters fear death, and fear of death could be seen as the central theme of the entire piece: all sorts of stratagems are put in place to avoid the solitude which death would leave the characters with, from walking quickly to run away from old age, to living slowly so that time may crawl by, leaving them forever young. Death is a closed door, a new painting hung on the murderous prince's wall. The characters cry endlessly and desperately for the death of the other, but not out of a tension between the absence of the other and one's own wellbeing, like the characters of Aspano and Benedetto in the piece *Il Pozzo dei Pazzi*. In this case, the characters are ready to, themselves, die for the other. More than a reversible condition (as in Scaldati's *Lucio*), death becomes so important as to seem almost like an elite condition, one which paradoxically also takes on a bureaucratic aspect (Vicé, dead, tells his friend that they haven't 'let him in' because he doesn't have the right papers), or the sense that there's no place to die (in a moment of criticism towards an indifferent society, there's a sense that the world is too busy, and literally too occupied, to afford a place for a person to die: so it's better to come back and hide, like playing hide and seek).

The text contains many allusions to shadows, whose corporeal inconsistency seems to create a space for an echo of repeated voices: the shadows populate the houses, abandoned by any form of life or light like the cemetery or the alleyways only just picked up by the whiteness of the moon. The workers have the names of neighbourhoods, and the neighbourhoods are protected by angels: the dwarf Pupiddhu, who even as an old man never gave up on his angel costume worn as a child in procession; the old woman who sells holy pictures, able to give grace to anyone who gives her money. Made out of diaphanous cotton and fairy-like silk, we're unable to say whether these figures are angels, devils, or *o 'un signu supr' / 'a cart / e / nienti* ['a trace on a sheet of paper and nothing more'].

All of these characters, as Scaldati himself has observed, aren't afraid of asking the most basic, childish questions, even if they are questions which are tautological or 'forgotten': in the face of modern, rational adulthood each one of these characters maintains a charge of innocence. These questions, borne out of their own logic, allow the author to create a world in which it's true that in the dark the blind man no longer realises he's blind, in which it's true that the more water you drink the more you'll see everything as if it were transparent. Things done before – like chewing on a chewing gum or learning to ride a bike – take on a new sheen, which deserves a different attitude, a different posture. Looking at the sun which *araciu cala / araciu* ['slowly sets / slowly'], here as elsewhere, the repetition of words in the text seems to dictate a different rhythm, the rhythm of vision, in a night inhabited by moths, fireflies, cicadas, butterflies, in which workers unscrew stars out of the sky, in which laymen build houses for Bartali and Coppi, for saints and cyclists.