

ERMANNIA MONTANARI'S VOICES
CROSSING THE BORDERS BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND MAGIC

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In 1983, Ermanna Montanari, together with Luigi Dadina, Marco Martinelli, and Marcella Nonni co-founded the Teatro delle Albe in Ravenna, one of Italy's foremost theatre companies, as Montanari numbers among the most distinguished actors on the contemporary Italian stage. While virtually incomprehensible to even native speakers of Italian, outside the limited territory around Ravenna, *Lus*, a monologue in Romagnolo dialect, has the intelligibility and immediacy of the universal language that is music. It seems natural therefore that *Lus*, a play performed in a very marginal and disappearing regional Italian dialect, should serve as Ermanna Montanari's introduction to an American audience.

Lus serves as the centerpiece through which Montanari skillfully expresses the most renowned aspect of her work; that is, her work on voice and the Romagnolo dialect, which places her in the foreground of performers in Italy who engage in *teatro di ricerca*, or research-based avant-garde theatre. The recently issued *Dizionario dello spettacolo del Novecento* sums up Montanari's engagement and commitment: "all'interno di un itinerario che sposa ricerca e sperimentazione linguistica all'attenzione per il proprio patrimonio etnico e antropologico."¹ Montanari was the first of the avant-gardes to introduce the Romagnolo dialect as a poetic language for the stage, and with it captures a unique range of expression. We might ask at this point why should theatre in Italian dialect be an important and representative aspect of Italian cultural studies?

¹"inside an itinerary that weds research and linguistic experimentation with attentiveness to her own ethnic and anthropological patrimony" (translations are mine, unless otherwise stated). *Dizionario dello spettacolo del '900*, Felice Cappa and Piero Gelli, eds. (Milano: Baldini e Castoldi, 1998) 723.

While Italy has a great tradition of theatre in dialect, from Ruzante, Goldoni, and DeFilippo, to the more recent work of DeBerardinis and Enzo Moscato, one might also ask what sense it makes to pursue theatre in dialect in a country where the standard Italian has become the norm? A possible answer could be found in relating Montanari's work to a phenomenon that has come about in Italy in the last ten-fifteen years, and that is the emergence of dialect in the different forms of popular music — pop, rock, and rap. In an essay entitled "Per una storia linguistica della canzone italiana,"² Lorenzo Coveri talks about a number of groups like Pitura Freska, Sa Razza, Sud Sound System, Mau Mau, Ustmamò (the last two being particularly interesting for the purpose of this essay). All these groups, in different ways, express "una condizione giovanile marginale, protestataria e di opposizione" (21)³ and their use of the dialect is functional to two main objectives. The first one is connected to style and poetics, the dialect being a language much richer in monosyllabic expressions and guttural sounds than the standard Italian. The second has a political nature since "la scelta dialettale è una scelta ideologica forte nei gruppi più sensibili all'autonomismo anche linguistico,"⁴ which, in the case of the musical groups at least, does not have anything to do with the phenomenon of the political secessionism of the Leghe "che infatti vengono attaccate da più di un rapper nostrano" (21).⁵

The use of dialect in the work of the young avant-garde, becomes both an aesthetic and an ideological choice, one of linguistic experimentation and one of opposition and protest. The dialect itself provides a greater range of rhythmic and metric possibilities than does standard Italian. In the case of

²Lorenzo Coveri, ed., *Parole in musica. Lingua e poesia nella canzone d'autore italiana*. (Novara: Interlinea, 1996). The following reflection on dialect in music and theatre is borne out of a long dialogue with Franco Nasi.

³"a young condition that is marginal, of protest, and oppositional."

⁴"the choice of dialect is a strong ideological choice by the groups who are the most sensitive to autonomy, even linguistic autonomy."

⁵"who are attacked by more than one of our own rappers."

Ermanna Montanari the Romagnolo dialect is more aggressive and explicit with a great variety of harsh and onomatopoeic sounds, and contains as well a lexicon and a repertoire of proverbial and idiomatic expressions that are rich in images of the human bodies and of the countryside. This earthy language is moreover the more powerful one for expressing the personality of the people of Romagna, the ones who are still viscerally tied to the traditions, history, and magic of their land, as opposed to the homologous and conventional imperialism of the "global village" with all of its hypocrisy and certainty that the media and television feed us. The Romagnolo dialect effectively brings peripheries and margins — both geographic and historic — into the center, on stage, under the reflectors' lights.

In short, we can view Ermanna Montanari's work with dialect in many ways: from the dialect tradition in Italian theatre; from an aesthetic point of view (for its musicality, rhythm and expression); from a political standpoint (for the ideas it raises concerning center/periphery/globalism); as a language of the "mothers" (as closed and dark versus the spic and span conventional Italian); and from a feminist vantage point, as a singular experience of a woman who creates female characters by digging in archives and memories, puts them on stage by offering them her voice and her body, controls them with the rational eye of the director, with the results of illuminating and poetic pieces of prose, without ever accepting the conventional attitude of the female victim. This approach will be privileged in the following discussion even if, clearly, aesthetics, language, politics, psychology are all different patterns of the same living tapestry.⁶

Montanari's performance in *Luś* has won her acclaim from theatre critics, who in 1997 nominated her as a candidate for best Italian actress in the prestigious Ubu prize, as well as abroad, where most recently Montanari spent a period

⁶It is important to note that Montanari's feminism is not stereotypical or conventional, just as her companion in the Albe, Marco Martinelli, who while working with multicultural issues in an engaged interethnic theatre cannot be called "politically correct."

of time performing *Luś* with Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret in Denmark. This play, like all of the plays that the Albe perform, paradigmatically exists inasmuch as it is performed by Montanari: it was written for Montanari by the well-known Romagnolo poet Nevio Spadoni. Carlo Goldoni wrote: "Tutte le opere teatrali che ho poi composte, le ho scritte per quelle persone ch'io conosceva, col carattere sotto gli occhi di quegli attori che dovevano rappresentarle. . . ."⁷ Marco Martinelli says that this rule is central to the history of theatre in the Western world, which he calls much more than a "teatro di parola": "Il teatro occidentale è un'altra cosa: è carne, sono corpi vivi sui quali l'autore scrive le proprie visioni."⁸

Although Montanari tells us in her article "I Got to the Point of Thinking That I'm Not All There"⁹ that Spadoni showed her the text of *Luś* and she immediately accepted to represent the figure of Bêlda. The process was much more like the ones described by Goldoni and Martinelli above: that is, a "theatre of flesh." The story of the witch Bêlda was written into a poem for Montanari by Spadoni. Before looking at the figure of Bêlda and the play *Luś*, it is interesting to contextualize them alongside Montanari's other work.

In Bêlda, the witch whom Montanari represents in *Luś*, one can trace the figures of the other female characters whom Montanari has unearthed, researched, studied, interrogated, and brought to life in that moment of time and space where words and flesh come together on stage. These women figures include Beatrice Cenci, a noblewoman who lived in the Cinquecento, in the play *Cenci* (1993), based in part on Artaud and Shelley's reading of the story; the play

⁷"All of the plays that I have written I have written for those people who I knew, with the actors who had to represent them in mind." Carlo Goldoni, "Prefazione," *Tutte le opere di Carlo Goldoni I* (Milano: Mondadori, 1935) 694.

⁸"theatre of words": "Western theatre is something else; it is flesh, the live bodies upon which the author writes his own vision." Marco Martinelli, "Luce e mondo," in Nevio Spadoni, *Luś* (Faenza: Mobydick, 1995) 7.

⁹"Mi sono ridotta a credere di non esserci neanche tutta," *Il Semplice 4* (1996) 54-63: translation here included, and henceforth referred to in this article as "Not All There."

Rosvita (1991), based on the writings of the tenth-century Saxon nun Rosvita of Gandersheim; and the tragic figure of Fedra in the play *Ippolito* (1995), based on both Euripides and Marina Cvetaeva. These female characters share a chiaro-scuro existence, and the plays express dark violence, incest, murder, and suicide, not through action but through Montanari's voice, which lends itself to the enactment or confession of the narrative.¹⁰ We might also consider the psychoanalytic undertones in the recurring themes in these dramas that take place in dreamlike sequences as Montanari's own continuous reckoning of self and origins in what one theatre scholar calls "the reliance of theatrical narratives on the discovery of identity."¹¹ A point in common between the above-mentioned works is that, together with the figure of Bêlda, they serve as the expression of poetic identity and voice, as the unique aesthetic experience based on the meshing of autobiographical expression with history and fantasy. In all of her work there is considerable projection and identification. But as Louis Althusser has pointed out:

It is not enough to know that the Western family is patriarchal and exogamic . . . we must also work out the ideological formations that govern paternity, maternity, conjugality, and childhood.¹²

One first important point to consider is history, and the representation of women in history through theatre. As Elin Diamond has theorized, when one understands history as narrative, one can also understand such a narrative as a scenario in which "the parts for women are written by patriarchal law," and consequently that such parts can be rewritten and recast. Here we should ask ourselves whether Montanari

¹⁰While this essay will not go into Oedipus and incest, it would be interesting to note that these paradigms offered by Western theatre might also serve as a point of departure in reading Montanari's work.

¹¹Barbara Freedman, "Frame-Up: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre," in Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Feminisms* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 58.

¹²Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 211; cited in Freedman 62.

reinscribes her women characters into male authored roles, or if and how she reassembles female identity of women not as victims, but as heroines in their own liberation. Montanari's reflections on the feminine do not fall reductively into the either/or of reinscribed patriarchal/liberational roles.¹³ She has created an uneasy balance between the two, between silence and voice, between impotence and violent rage against the Other (whether that Other be a male figure or one's own passion).

While Montanari does not romanticize reconfigured women's roles, she does empower her characters by arming them with emblematic weapons that remain in their hands throughout the performance: Beatrice Cenci holds the hammer with which she confesses to having driven a nail through her father's throat and head; Rosvita the playwright holds her pen as her forceful weapon; Fedra carries a myrtle branch, symbol of Proserpina, of Eros and Thanatos; and Bêlda has in her hand a small farm hatchet. Montanari acts as the shamanistic medium through which these women come alive and recount themselves; and through her voice they speak and tell the stories that perhaps they were not allowed to divulge at the time, and to enact their rage. In part seven of the article "Not All There," Montanari tells us: "I too am like Bêlda, I'm never all there. A piece is always missing . . . the whole is somewhere else." When I asked Montanari in an interview what she means by this statement she talked about her work as actor, which always includes a medianic and separate experience; that is, of the person Ermanna who goes elsewhere, and of the character who takes over that body. Another important key is that her plays take place in the netherworld of dreams and nightmares, that is, the place of the unknown and of the unexplainable, which gives us a theatre made more of images and archetypes rather than clearly articulated messages and solutions.

¹³See where Diamond continues this discussion: "To reinscribe a historical narrative in which the woman is the signifier of power and authority would be to romanticize her, to remove her from history" ("Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmussa, Duras") in Case 97.

These women figures also share the fact that they were written and/or directed by Montanari, and as such reflect her spirit. In a published interview Montanari explains the profound difference between writing for and directing oneself, and in being directed and written by another, doubling between self as actor and self as *metteuse en scène*:

Esser diretti da un altro vuole dire lavorare all'interno della sua visione, dentro una gabbia che dà regole, limiti e disciplina e che proprio per questo si può arrivare a forzare. Dirigersi dà il grande piacere di guardarsi da dentro il gioco scenico, ma impedisce la distanza indispensabile alla recitazione, per questo lavorerò presto sui personaggi in cui non mi identifico, sulla lontananza da me.¹⁴

This doubling suggests, however, the impossibility of being inside and outside of the scene at the same time. The theme of doubling, or of a self divided from itself, from its center, recurs in Montanari's critical writings, for example in the essays "Not all There," and that "desiderio di un altrove perduto," which appears in several writings in connection with the play *Ippolito*. That is, the sense of a self that can never be perceived wholly but only in parts, of that desire that is always elsewhere (as Lacan tells us as well). Directing oneself can be potentially freeing to one's muse by appropriating both subjectivity and displacing the gaze that is manipulated, of woman who becomes both subject and object of her own narrative.

Montanari's self-authored and self-directed works, of course, do not include the entire spectrum of her craft: as mentioned above, she is also the principal actor in the plays written and directed by Marco Martinelli, artistic director of the Albe. In Martinelli's works, in the roles that he has writ-

¹⁴"Being directed by someone else means working inside of that person's vision, inside of a cage that sets rules, limits, and discipline, and this makes me challenge myself. Directing myself offers me the distinct pleasure of looking at myself from within the scene, but it impedes the necessary distance required for acting. Because of this I am going to work some day on characters with whom I don't identify and who are not like me." Stefania Chinzi, "Teatro, roba da maschi," *l'Unità* (14 Sept. 1995).

ten precisely for her and together with her, Montanari also explores issues of identity, gender, and transvestism. Her transvestism as an androgynous donkey has been a decisive experience in her evolution as an actor; through it Montanari experiences a different type of doubling (see list of plays in "Theatre Performances") — from *Siamo asini o pedanti?* (1989) to the god of poverty in *All'inferno!* (1996); she also plays the androgynous chauffeur Spinetta, who is a young man in drag who would like to be like men, in Martinelli's well-known *22 infortuni di Mor Arlecchino*. Theatre scholar Laura Mariani refers to Montanari's "figura sdoppiata" [split self] in this transvestism that crosses over with the animal (37).¹⁵ Montanari explains to us that the donkey is a "fantastic" animal, without sexual contours;

grazie al quale contiene in te l'attore, l'autore, la luce, per cui sei confuso. Il travestimento — dice — ti dona una maggiore credibilità, necessaria, perché l'artificio crea distanza, e bastano per attivarlo un cappello, un paio di pantaloni, un nonnulla: *l'essenziale è altrove, nella mente e nella voce*. E' quest'ultima, con la sua carnalità, a travestirsi adottando dialetti stranieri; mentre è irrealizzabile per Ermanna il travestimento dal contorno unitario. (35; emphasis mine)¹⁶

None of the above pretends to place a reductive and essentialized label on Montanari's poetics or philosophy: at most, it is an attempt to highlight some of the facets of one multifaceted figure of contemporary Italian culture by using the metaphor of the fragmented self that the author/actor herself gives us. As such we approach her work in part, and attempt to establish thematic threads, such as the armed

female figures, the women taken from history, transvestism, and voice and dialect, carnality and autobiography.

The dialectic between silence and voice, and identity, and the tensions generated by them, is another of the markers of Montanari's work with clear autobiographical echoes: Montanari's first language was the Romagnolo dialect; she learned Italian the way one learns a foreign language at school. In many of her writings Montanari tells us about her relationship to language and speech, of her history with what she calls repeatedly "il mio mutismo" [next to speechlessness], stemming from childhood (evoking in many ways the title of Marie Cardinal's autobiographical writing of a self in *The Words to Say It*), of recurring problems in finding a voice and language with which to express herself. The theme of the autobiographical essay "Not All There" is the importance of language and voice in a world in which silence is imposed by her patriarchal grandfather who alone was the arbiter of what words could be said. Included in the formative moments of her life is the painful recognition of a self as an outsider at school, as foreigner because she speaks a different language and because she does not wear the same mini-skirts and clear stockings as classmates — a "toad," out of place, and ridiculed for being different. Even more formative than her encounter with the outside world, however, is Montanari's conflictual relationship with her family, especially with her grandfather, from and for whom she felt conflictual feelings of love and violence. At the age of 20 she abandons her family in the countryside and its expectations of her, together with the mother tongue that ties her to her countryside and family: the Romagnolo dialect. Despite her attempt to please both grandfather and father, she inevitably disappoints them through her life choice of the theatre. This choice will forever mark the impossibility of a return to the family fold, and more importantly, its repercussions will have echoes in all of her subsequent work in a profession and an existence that the family does not acknowledge. While this recognition from her family does not come, the language for which Montanari was searching will ultimately entail a return to that which she

¹⁵Laura Mariani, *Sarah Bernhardt, Colette, e L'Arte del Travestimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996).

¹⁶"within which you have the actor, the author, and the light, which blurs things. Transvestism — she says — gives you more credibility, which is necessary because of the distance that artifice creates. The only thing that you need to make it happen is a hat, a pair of pants, a trifle: what is essential however is elsewhere, in the mind and in the voice."

had tried repressing and denying, the dialect, and the affects associated with it and her past will also form one of thematic axes of her work. Montanari's work thus repeatedly raises the following crucial question: with which voice can a silenced daughter speak, from what point can she act?

Which brings us to another consistent theme in her work, that of the conflictual relationship between the patriarchal figure, the word of the father, and the daughter, most clearly articulated in the figure and voice of Beatrice Cenci, written into the archetypal figures of father and daughter, but reimagined, with the father Francesco as a young lover, and recast into an indeterminate rural present. The father is silent; he (the Word of the Father) has been silenced. Montanari's *Cenci* provides us with the story from the daughter's perspective, as the play is narrated entirely by Beatrice/Montanari. Montanari tells us "ho creato un incubo."¹⁷ Let us review the story of Beatrice Cenci: in 1598 Count Francesco Cenci is murdered, with a nail to his head and throat; Beatrice and her brothers are imprisoned, tortured, confess, and sentenced by Pope Clement in 1599. The story of Beatrice, the daughter who was abused by her father and who eventually helped to murder him only to end up in prison, had previously captured the imagination of Stendhal, Shelley, and Artaud. After reading and digesting the texts by Shelley and Artaud, and after inspirational readings of Alda Merini's poetry, Montanari decides that in order to represent this incestual relationship between father and daughter, she must return to her own patriarchal origins, and contextualize the drama of the Renaissance father and daughter, Francesco and Beatrice into the rural present day. The patriarch becomes the grandfather whose words and looks the young Ermanna craved with the longing of a lover, the one from whom she felt a "violent love." He is the inspiration behind the ambivalent and ambiguous feelings of attraction and repulsion between father and daughter: "Il padre mostra la violenza implicita nel suo portare doni (latte e oro), nel suo farsi

¹⁷"I created a nightmare." Ermanna Montanari, "Figlia e attrice," *Lapis* 20 (Dec. 1993) 45.

misura della Legge e dell'Autorità, la figlia alterna ingiunzioni e rivolta" (46).¹⁸

At the opening of the play, Artaud's drama is already played out, and we have the figure of Beatrice, already in jail, yet the indeterminacy of place in the play is the neverland of a nightmare, of an internal turmoil: "Beatrice fa esplodere tutta l'impotenza di una esistenza privata della parola."¹⁹ The figure of the father, Francesco lies dead in one corner of the stage, and as she speaks he comes to life, not as an old man, but as a young lover, whom Montanari casts as Marco Martinelli: "Lo era già. Esile e scuro come il nonno. Un corto circuito: padre, amante, regista, dallo sguardo amoroso e feroce. . . ."²⁰ The father figure presented here is complex: he is one who takes, he is killed; a father who is inexorably tied to his own origins of religion and patriarchy, note the concluding words of Beatrice before dying beside her father, Montanari's *Cenci*: "Io so bene cosa dice la Bibbia: una figlia è per il padre un affanno segreto che ella gli dà non lo lascia dormire. E' la Bibbia . . . è parola di Dio."²¹

Montanari also wrote and acted in the play *Rosvita*, based on the works of Rosvita of Gandersheim (1000 AD), the first woman playwright about whom we have any news and about whose life we know very little. She took her plays and cut and paste, inserted her own words ("Ho saccheggiato i drammi di Rosvita. Ho preso le sue parole, le sue frasi, i suoi personaggi infuocati"), creating seven short powerful vi-

¹⁸"There is an implied violence in the father's giving of gifts (milk and gold), and in his role as judge of both Law and Authority; the daughter alternates between devotion and revolt."

¹⁹"In the figure of Beatrice there explodes all of the impotence of an existence that has been deprived of voice." Cristina Gualandi, "Noi e il teatro," *Leggere donna* 38.

²⁰"He already was him. Slim and dark like my grandfather. A short circuit: father, lover, director, and with a look that was both loving and ferocious." Op. cit. 46.

²¹"I know well what the Bible says. For a father a daughter is a hidden worry that keeps him from sleeping. That is the Bible...It is the word of God." Ermanna Montanari, *Cenci*, in *Monna Vanna e Monna Lagia: brevi racconti inediti di 31 scrittrici italiane contemporanee* (Ravenna: Edizioni Girasole) 92.

gnettes.²² This ties the act of writing to the evocation of voice:

Rosvita è un lavoro orfano. Qui le mie nonne, più che nei gesti, le ho nella testa, come ho nella testa tutte quelle nonne, tutte quelle madri, tutte quelle donne, nascoste, sepolte, senza aria. Il gemito di un abisso. (18)²³

The play *Rosvita* is a seminal work in Montanari's development: she comes to this figure after a long illness and also from the point of departure of voicelessness. The silence in her was like the so many pieces of crumpled papers with prayers and words written on them that she had seen some Jewish women placing in the bricks of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. This metaphor of the bricks reads in Ermanna's work as a recurring idea of a repressed text, a silenced voice, an inner self, as well as a meditation on language itself.

The story that unfolds in *Ippolito* also has autobiographical undertones, yet its drama is one of a collective state of desire, demonstrated by Fedra's access to and exclusion from language at the same time: in this play Fedra cannot articulate herself or her desire. Once again we think of Lacan's writing on the subject's entry into language from a presymbolic state as the "point" which inaugurates the condition of desire. Fedra's drama/conflict is the drama of one who must function in society. Juliet Mitchell's reading of Lacan is illuminating in this regard:

If language enables the subject to constitute a position in culture, access to culture also means permanent separation from instinctual drives; desire, then persists "as an effect of primordial absence": regardless of the object chosen, desire

refers to the impossibility of satisfaction, to the endless displacements impelled by an originary loss.²⁴

If Fedra's position is inside of culture, then Ippolito represents the primordial and the instinctual: her drama is the collective drama of those who function inside of society, inside language and the Law.

Fedra is enclosed within the prison of her roles of queen, mother and wife, bound by her name and by her reputation, as she oscillates between her passion and fear of the outside world's judgement. Here Montanari explores the conflict between issues of fame and the desire for nothingness, "endless displacements," the desire for that somewhere else that can never be: "Il continuo desiderio di un altrove che non può esserci mai."²⁵ That "altrove," that desire, is represented in the figure of Ippolito who is free to live in the woods, free of desire of conventional restraints, free of the weight of society's expectations. The play is characterized by that underteminal, undefinable, unreachable elsewhere, and nothingness — it, too unfolds like a dream/nightmare in the imaginary of Fedra, whose only solution in the end will be to hang herself. Montanari tells us that this play has something to do with

un gonfiore che mi sentivo dentro. Il gonfiore della reputazione, della fama, del valore del nome. Un frastornante rumore, per me, attrice venuta dalla campagna che lotta ogni volta per vincere le proprie timidezze e la paura del giudizio degli altri.²⁶

²²"I pillaged Rosvita's sorks, taking her words, her sentences, her inflamed characters." Ermanna Montanari, "Per Rosvita," in *Rosvita* (Ravenna: Essegi, 1992) 17.

²³"*Rosvita* is an orphan work. In this play I have more than my grandmothers' gestures in my head: I have all of those grandmothers, all of those women who are hidden, buried, and without air. The abyss of a wail."

²⁴Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York: Pantheon, 1982) 6; cited in Diamond 102.

²⁵"The continuous desire of that somewhere else that can never be." Cristina Piccino, "Cercare un altro teatro," *il Manifesto* (7 April 1995).

²⁶"A swelling that I felt in side of me. The swelling of reputation, of fame, of the value of a name. It was a disturbing sound, against which I — an actress who had come from the countryside — had to struggle each time to overcome my own shyness and fear of being judged by others." Massimo Marino, "Tutti i linguaggi di Fedra," *l'Unità* (16 April 1995).

Montanari also founded the annual "Linguaggio della dea" conference in Ravenna, which took place between 1991-1995. This conference focused on various aspects of women's experience by opening up a dialogue with other women and men participants in theatre, with the invitation to think of them not as a "rassegna di donne," but as women in the plural, in dialogue with each other. The title of the conference is based on a book by Maria Gimbutas that talks about Gillanic society, inspiring Montanari's own reflections "sul femminile." While we should be mindful in referring to her to a woman writer, we should also mention that as a part of the "Linguaggio della dea" a few years back she invited several prominent actors (women) of the avant-garde to put on one-woman *autoritratti* or self-portraits that considered the relationship of theatre to autobiography. She says:

La scrittura femminile dunque? Anche ma non solo, perché [...] prendere il "femminile" come chiave (unica) interpretativa diventa un limite per autolimitarsi, per costruire ghetti.²⁷

This brings us to a reading of the play *Lus* that will consider both the text and performance.²⁸ In *Lus* the interplay between light and dark becomes one of the keys of the play, as this play too unfolds in the oneiric shadows of the unconscious: it is uncertain if the time is the present, if the play takes place on earth or in hell, or in the trance that the witch Bêlda has gone into in order to cast her malediction — it is from that place though, that the narrative unfolds, and remains. Montanari's face and body remain in shadow throughout, the priest who she has killed is at her feet: the

²⁷"And what about 'female writing'? There is that, but not only that, because to take the 'female' (feminine) as the only interpretative key becomes a way to limit yourself and to create ghettos." Cristina Piccino, "Fedra, il desiderio di un altrove perduto," *il Manifesto* (12 April 1995).

²⁸Nevio Spadoni, "Nota," in *Lus*, 39. Spadoni tells us that the idea for this work came from reading about the story of Bêlda as recounted by Ermanno Silvestroni and Eraldo Baldini, in *Tradizioni e memorie di Romagna. Materiali folklorici raccolti negli anni Venti e Trenta* (Ravenna: Longo, 1990).

ideal place for this performance is a small dark cellar, a deconsecrated chapel, a cave, a *trullo*. Montanari as Bêlda is suspended on a small saddle and it is from that axis that she recites: there is no action outside of the voice of Bêlda, and the spasmodic actions of the priest who initially lies dead at the witch's feet. The choice of music also contributes to the mood of a nightmare, of a stain that does not come clean: "A sostenere il maleficio ho messo le note della Gran scena del sonnambulismo del Macbeth di Verdi. . . ."²⁹ In this work, as in previous ones, the action — in this case the murder — has already occurred.

Montanari and Spadoni have with this piece given voice to the actual Bêlda who left no written record. Who is Bêlda and how does she define herself? She identifies herself first along matrilineal lines: daughter of mother Armida, she is heir to her legacy of witch and healer, but also to the stigma of outcast. As a witch healer she is sought after by night by the neighbors, the same neighbors who shun and scorn her by day. They seek her out to cure all ills, physical and mental, lovesickness, and to cast love spells; Bêlda is a sponge who absorbs these ills. The only time that she uses her powers to perform black magic is to cast a spell on the parish priest who had had her mother Armida's bones disinterred because of a rumor that says she was a whore. To vindicate her mother Bêlda casts the spell of the "orma tagliata," or cut footprint, on the priest. She waits for him one night to pass by, gathers up some of the earth of this footprint, and puts it into a small sack through which she pierces three thorns. She catches a toad, and pierces him through with the same three thorns, and then buries both.

Again in this text we have an example of a woman who is telling us her story, of a woman who identifies herself as daughter, at odds with a patriarchal figure, in this case the priest, the return of the repressed. Bêlda's is an uncertain patrimony: she tells us in the play that she does not know who

²⁹"In order to prop up the curse I placed alongside it the notes of Verdi's great scene of Macbeth's sleep-walking." Ermanna Montanari, in *il Patalogo* 1997, Franco Quadri, ed. (Milano: Ubulibri, 1998) 65.

her father was, and we know that her mother was the priest's housekeeper. One possible reading could suggest that Bêlda has killed her own father in the figure of the priest. Whether her biological father or not, however, he is a paternal patriarchal figure. The point that this play raises is that of the subordination of women with perceived power and unconventional sexuality, women who are tagged as witches in a classic example of the fear toward these women, and of a hypocrisy-filled society that publicly shuns them. *Luś* is another example along the continuum of Montanari's interest in female figures who negotiate between voice and subjectivity in the articulation of identity: from Fedra to Rosvita to Bêlda, to her own grandmothers who also serve as poetic sources (the ones who are hidden and buried, without air), and whose attempts at finding their words, and finding their voices, is like pulling out those little hidden scraps of papers from the walls.

One important thing to note about women healers in the Romagnolo tradition, is that they themselves believed in the efficaciousness and in the power of the spoken word, in a mixture of incantations and prayers to saints, which they used along with special herbs in casting spells, as does Bêlda in the spell that we have here in the text of *Luś*, which begins with the words "Burning herb, herb that burns. . . ." This makes evident the belief that a linguistic act could actually modify reality, and also ties us in with the oral nature, and strength of that voice, uttered by Montanari in *Luś*.³⁰ The figure of the witch in Romagna is a common enough figure and has been documented as such.³¹ As "guaritrici stregoni," these women healers were the custodians of women's knowledge and medicine, passed down along female lines, oral tradition, and experience, as opposed to the so-called male-learned medicine in history. Because of this, their medicine was sus-

pect, even though people of all classes sought their help. As such these women were persecuted as witches during the inquisition in the Cinque and Seicento. Likewise, Bêlda learns her craft from a woman, her brother's sister; she is visited by night by all — pharmacist, mayor, rich and poor; and she is reviled.

Nevio Spadoni tells us that the figure Bêlda actually existed at the turn of the century as a witch and healer. And while Spadoni wrote the poem for Montanari, the actual script and performance are imbued with her vision of Bêlda. For example, the figure of the witch that Spadoni created is that of an old woman. When Montanari sets out to research and to understand this witch figure she harkens back to the figures of the shamans whom she encountered in Senegal, and she decides that Bêlda would be a shaman who goes into a trance-like state to perform her magic. Another important innovation to the text is the concept of place, as demonstrated by the stage set and lighting. One of the images that inspired Montanari in the incarnation of the figure of Bêlda are the small kiosks that one sees at crossroads in Italy: a small chapel with candles inside and often a figure of the Madonna. In one of her writings Montanari tells us that she discovered that it is there that witches used to meet each other.³² Montanari's position throughout the play is static, and eerily reminiscent of one of those Madonnas of the kiosks, an icon, a perverse saint-like figure.³³

³²Ermanna Montanari, "Erano gli inguini che dovevo toccare," in *Il Punto*, Elio Grazioli, ed. (San Gimignano: Galleria Continua, 1997) 78. Inspired by a poem by Alda Merini entitled "Gli inguini sono la forza dell'anima," Montanari told me in an unpublished interview that the "inguini" or inner thighs or rather, her sexuality, is one of the driving forces in her work; this center of sexuality between her legs is intimately connected to her voice and throat.

³³It is interesting to note that since viewing *Luś* for the first time in 1997, I have seen two other avant-garde groups borrow Montanari's icon-kiosk type stage design: I should also mention that Montanari has been the influential source of at least two younger avant-garde and emerging groups who have already received critical acclaim: Il Teatro Clandestino, and Fanny and Alexander.

³⁰See Zanelli (20) for an example of one of the spells used in the Cinquecento.

³¹See Eraldo Baldini, *Paura e "maraviglia" in Romagna. Il prodigioso, il soprannaturale, il magico tra cultura dotta e cultura popolare* (Ravenna: Longo, 1998); and Giuliana Zanelli, *Streghe e società nell'Emilia e Romagna del Cinque-Seicento* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1992).

But what is *Lus*, what does this evocation of light suggest? Paolo Ruffini has called it "La luce, una giustizia invocata"³⁴ and Rossella Battisti

Voce di menade offesa e infuria con l'accento aspro e gutturale del dialetto. Voce addensata di echi che vengono dalle viscere e quel che la donna Belda non ha potuto fare — difendersi dalla maldicenza, dalla vulnerabilità di femmina figlia di un'altra femmina umiliata.³⁵

Cristina Ventrucchi defines this light as the following: "*Lus* è una sete di luce, di amore, e nello stesso tempo è la dannazione della luce e dell'amore."³⁶

The sentiments and the emotions that we feel in hearing Montanari utter the imprecation in dialect reach us in the place of the pre-conscious, or pre-linguistic pre-symbolic reign of the mother tongue, the dialect, the silences surrounding that dialect, the images evoked by it, in what Franco Quadri, Italy's most influential theatre critic has called "a universal language." Which brings us back to where we began in this essay:

In bocca a lei, e in gara con brani del Macbeth verdiano, la parola più che musica diviene reparto di natura, che da matrici oscure insegue il grido animale per coincidere con l'essenza dei sentimenti, in un linguaggio universale.³⁷

³⁴"the light, invoked justice." Paolo Ruffini, "Il parroco e la guaritrice," *Avvenimenti* (25 June 1997).

³⁵"The voice of an offended and outraged Bacchante with the harsh and guttural accents of dialect. A voice that is condensed in echoes that come from the viscera and that express that which Bêlda was incapable of doing — to defend herself against slander and vulnerability as the daughter of another humiliated woman." Rossella Battisti, "Bêlda, voce di strega. . .," *l'Unità* (14 July, 1997).

³⁶"*Lus* is the thirst for light and for love, and at the same time it is the damnation of light and love." Cristina Ventrucchi, "Tutti, di giorno, odiano la strega. E la cercano di notte," *Il Resto del Carlino* (28 May 1997).

³⁷"In her mouth, and in competition with passages from Verdi's *Macbeth* her words, which are more than music, become a part of nature, which from deep matrices resemble an animal's howl. This converges with the essence of feelings, in a universal language." Franco Quadri, "Nel labirinto della libertà," *la Repubblica* (29 July 1998).