



LE SORELLE MACALUSO

INTERVIEW WITH EMMA DANTE

***Le sorelle Macaluso* tells the story of a family that seems to really exist. However, soon life and death become indistinguishable from each other, and your play veers away from realism.**

Emma Dante: Family is to me something that is both concrete and abstract. When I try to show a family in a play, I don't do it by setting up a kitchen or some living-room furniture on the stage, even though the kitchen might bring to mind images of daily life.

This family is a void, their house a state of mind rather than an actual house.

To a French audience, your play may be reminiscent of Sartre's *No Exit*. Yet you cite Camus.

In *Le sorelle Macaluso*, death isn't a clear thing. There is no clear sense of time and space, like there is in Camus's novels. Death here isn't really painful, but it is a necessary condition. I think Camus is the writer who best manages to describe this indifference, this impossibility to communicate.

Is showing this halfway state between life and death a way to represent Mediterranean culture? A way to suggest that the dead are, in a sense, still among us?

Everywhere in southern Italy, people practice the cult of the dead. It's almost a discipline. Death is a part of domestic life, it is present in every house, in the form of ubiquitous small shrines. It is a companion, neither hostile nor frightening. Families go so far as to colonise and privatise pieces of sidewalk, parts of the public space, to honour their dead... Death without a permit, almost like a squat!

If death can happen at any time, it creates a feeling of instability. Is this a way to represent the *Mezzogiorno*, with its social woes, its poverty?

Poverty is always there in this story. It's a living condition that turns everything a shade of gray. It leads to resignation and, in its radicalism, can be compared to death. But it is neither life nor death. Poor families are like condemned to live in a sort of halfway state, in limbo.

Your play mixes different genres – tragedy, comedy, mythology – but keeps coming back to social anecdotes, especially with the character of the father. Are you looking for a balance between two theatres, one that would be political, the other poetic?

To be more precise, I'm looking for a balance between the social truth of this proletariat and the poetry that arises from it. My characters aren't necessarily what you would call poetic characters, but their pain is so true and pure that we cannot help but feel for them. It is true that audiences tend to feel a strong empathy for the character of the father, who has no choice but to clean up everyone else's shit.

The father keeps justifying himself, the mother keeps rebuking others. Do you think those characters are archetypes?

The mother keeps chiding her daughters like she would children. When she comes back on stage, she is just as old as they are (forty-ish), yet she tells them to let their hair down, to put on some make-up, and to face life with a positive outlook.

My feeling is that the sisters are eternally stuck as girls, and that the mother invites them to grow past adolescence to become women.

There is a sort of back-and-forth between death, so colourful, and life, so muted and dull. The mother comes back from this dark beyond and encourages her daughters to just enjoy life. Which, in real life, isn't that easy to do. The sisters are trapped in their own memories. They keep coming back to that day at the beach, when the family was still together, before everything fell apart. The play opens with that childhood memory, that last moment together.

You play a lot with the idea of cross-dressing: the father wears a nightdress, women wear mourning pants. Is this a way to play with the concepts of virility and femininity, to capsize traditional gender roles?

The father isn't a cross-dresser, but he lives in a house full of destitute women. The elastic band of his pyjamas breaks, so one of his daughters lends him a nightdress. He is the one masculine figure of the play. Fragile and weak, he is actually a "son." Families in the south are almost all matriarchal. Men handle the public sphere, but in reality it is women who take all the important decisions. I always use the same example: it is the man who signs the check, but the woman who chooses who to make it out to.

In this new play, you have done a tremendous work on bodies. Some scenes are entirely danced. Did that force you to work differently?

In a general sense, my work is to write about bodies, using bodies as the main material. But in *Le sorelle Macaluso*, one of the actresses – Alessandra Fazzino – is a dancer, so dance plays a much more important role. Moreover, we studied Sicilian puppet theatre – l'Opera dei Pupi – this popular art form whose protagonists are knights from the Middle Ages. In Sicily, the character of the puppeteer – il Puparo – is central, and I wanted to feature swords and shields in this play in order to evoke an eternal duel. The characters slaughter and devour one another. We spent two months and countless hours rehearsing the first combat scene alone!

Crucifixes are present in all of your plays. But your use of the crucifix is removed from the idea of God, your attitude towards religion suspicious of dogma.

I don't believe in God. If I did, I would probably not dare use crucifixes as much as I do on the stage. It is, to me, a domestic symbol. It's something that's present in every school, in every house in the south of Italy. The overbearing presence of the church in Italian families has a large impact on morals. But I'm not interested in judgments – I never swear! I have a deep respect for all religions. I was born and still live in a Christian culture, so it is that iconography I grapple with. But I use the image of the crucifix as a provocation, I always try to put it where it will be the most disturbing: in the forestage, or hoisted up by a girl wearing a bikini.

In some scenes, the girls “touch” themselves. What is the place of sexuality in this play?

Yes, the sisters put their hands on their private parts. It looks like an innocent game, but in reality, there is a powerful sense of sexuality running through the whole family. The spinsters are clearly gay, although it isn't necessarily an aspect that's highlighted. The members of that family live cramped together, hanging onto each other. They can't even manage to die. They hang onto each other like clams or mussels! That may be one aspect of their sexuality.

Shoes, like crucifixes, come back time and again in your plays. Here, they always seem to fly across the stage.

Shoes are for me a way to talk about poverty. Today still, in some areas in Sicily, the poor don't have shoes. They remain precious and expensive items. *mPalermu* (2001) opened with a conflict about shoes, between a girl and her brother, who didn't want her to go out wearing slippers. Shoes and crucifixes are in this play interchangeable, and they do tend to fly across the stage a lot.

Why did you decide to go back to Palermo and work there?

Palermo is a surprising city, noisy, vulgar, and poetic. It's where I'm from, and I've made it a place of creation. Palermo writes my plays, not the other way around. For the past fifteen years, my company has rehearsed in a cellar I've called *La Vicaria*, after a former prison where witch trials were held. Even though we've toured the whole of Europe, we had never been invited to perform in Palermo, and we will be performing for the first time at the Teatro Stabile this year. A nice acknowledgment of our work, if a little belated.

What does it feel like to have your representation of Sicily shown on the European stage?

I am proud to be able to show my interpretation of Sicily. My plays are very critical, but also full of love for my homeland.

In a previous interview, you said that theatre is a social form of art, not a political one. What do you mean by social theatre?

I think theatre is about the artist staging his own reflection about the present, his own vision of the world he lives in. Social theatre is about revealing the malaise and the problems people have trouble holding back.

... which brings to mind the words of Romeo Castellucci about theatre: “The point of theatre is to lift the veil that has fallen on the world, just long enough to catch a glimpse of it.”

Exactly!

Pasolini predicted that the influence of television would lead to the disappearance of popular culture. Do you think there still is a popular culture? Can we still talk about a proletariat in Italy?

In certain areas of Sicily and of the south, yes. I use that word because it means what it means, but it is a little outdated. The proletariat is the level below the bourgeoisie. I think there still remains a popular culture in the south, with its families so deeply rooted in their own poverty. It is there, in poverty, that tradition sadly lives on. The poorer you are, the more attached to tradition you are.



In *Le sorelle Macaluso*, there is no scenery, and the audience is confronted to a very head-on, aggressive style, almost a “wall”...

There can be an exchange with the audience only if they are ready for it. It is uncomfortable to find oneself faced with this sort of human wall, this aggressive barrier created by the family, this border between fiction and the real, between fiction and truth. What I'm looking for is a direct confrontation.

Since there is no scenery, since the stage is empty, the audience and the actors have to meet directly, openly.

We have to be right there, on that border. And in a way, the scenery could be said to be the performance and the bodies of the actors. Their own bodies become like incarnations of the landscape, of the sea, the heat, the cold, death, life, love, and hate.

For the vast majority of the audience, the dialect in which the play is written is incomprehensible. Is forcing the audience to face this linguistic “wall” a political choice?

Dialects are considered mongrel languages, and I have a passion for everything that isn't purebred. Yes, maybe it is a political choice. And I realize I haven't exactly chosen the path of least resistance. The audience must really love us, to accept to come see a play in a language they don't understand!

The creation of *Le sorelle Macaluso* is part of the European project *Villes en scènes/Cities on Stage*. How did it enrich your approach and your artistic reflection?

The project *Villes en scènes/Cities on Stage* is a perfect match for our exploration that starts from a source very strong and deep-rooted tradition: the language of our land. Thanks to *Villes en scènes/Cities on Stage* we opened a window that looks out on the world. We are going to explore and discover many countries thanks to this European project. It is a necessary condition to allow us to grow and enrich our knowledge by comparing real and deep with other cultures.

Interview by Renan Benyamina.

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