



Brave New Worlds. Shakespearean Tempests in Italian Prisons

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1. COAL SHAKESPEARES

“Shakespeare is a piece of coal that is inert. I can write books and give public lectures about where this coal comes from – but I’m really interested in coal on a cold evening, when I need to be warm and I put it on the fire and it becomes itself. Then it re-lives its virtue” (Brook 1994: 96). Borrowing Peter Brook’s image, one could convincingly suggest without fear of contradiction, that it is in Italian prisons that we find the most innovative and vibrant theatrical practice capable of “re-living” Shakespeare’s “virtue” and turning the Elizabethan playwright into a glowing “piece of coal” (Brook 1994: 96). It suffices here to mention Fabio Cavalli’s work with serious offenders often involved in criminal organizations at the maximum-security unit at the Rebibbia theatre, in Rome, which became the screenplay for Paolo and Vittorio Taviani’s internationally acclaimed film *Cesare deve morire* (2012, *Caesar Must Die*), or the productions in the Volterra high-security prison directed by Armando Punzo, a pioneer in Italy of theatre in prison, who founded the Fortress Company in 1987 and whose productions have won several Ubu Prize, one of the most prestigious national theatre prizes.

Indeed, Shakespeare has recently become a pivotal and often staged playwright among theatre companies of prisoners in Italy (Pedullà 2012: 77), even though the



practice of theatre in prison in Italy has a much shorter tradition than in the Anglo-Saxon world.¹ It is however worth remembering that an actor performing Shakespeare in prison made his appearance as early as 1960 in Dino Risi's film *Il mattatore (Love and Larceny)*,² even though the episode was neither inspired by the actual practice of theatre in prison in Italy, nor was it intended to propose anything of the kind; on the contrary, rather than a link between acting and redemption it seemed to suggest a link between the art of acting and the skills of cheating and larceny – a feature not uncommon in the Italian comedy of the Sixties, which reappears in Gianfranco Cabiddu's cinema version comedy *La stoffa dei sogni* (2016, *The Stuff of Dreams*), again loosely inspired by Eduardo de Filippo's adaptation of *The Tempest*. Because of a shipwreck, a family theatre company and a Mafia gang meet on the prison-island Asinara, in the middle of the Mediterranean, and they are involved in a production of *The Tempest* for the convicts and guards of the prison, during which it is difficult to distinguish between actors and criminals. The film, which has won the David di Donatello Award for the Best Adapted Screenplay, underscores that the bond prison/Shakespeare is not a matter just for practitioners or drama therapists, but, on the contrary, a fairly widespread contemporary issue which, through the light tones of a comedy, contributes to trigger reflection upon important topics such as detention, sentences, and punishment. As a matter of fact, there is an urgent cultural and political need for a re-engagement with the ideas of prison and theatre, and Shakespeare can provide a unique opportunity for this re-engagement.

Among the many Shakespearean plays that have been performed in prison, *The Tempest* is a favourite, being obviously able to shine a new light on those themes of revenge, freedom and forgiveness that are central issues in a detention context. Moreover, it offers a challenging meta-dramatic reflection upon the relationships between the artist, the work of art and the spectator as well as the tendency to combine different spheres of reality or illusions; it ultimately encourages actors and spectators to consider art as a means to earn one's own freedom (metaphorical and psychological, if not literal). It is not by chance that in Hank Rogerson's award-winning documentary *Shakespeare Behind Bars* (2005), dedicated to SBB (Shakespeare Behind Bars), "the longest-running, highest profile and most documented of all Prison

¹Rob Pensalfini writes that the specific phenomenon of Shakespeare's plays being performed by prisoners has its recorded origins in the mid-1980s (Pensalfini 2016: 9), which means roughly at the same time as the birth of theatre practice in Italian prisons.

²As Mariangela Tempera writes, the sketch is obviously parodistic since the protagonist, Gerardo Latini, who was played by Vittorio Gassman, impersonates an unsuccessful vaudeville performer, incapable of entertaining his audience, who discovers that his acting abilities can be used far more successfully for less legitimate purposes, among which cheating people. Once in prison, he successfully performs Mark Anthony's funeral oration for Caesar - a demanding piece for a hard-to-please audience and yet, as he confesses in the voice-over, he is counting on the fact that "in any case [his] spectators could not leave the auditorium". Thanks to his over the top acting style, which includes physical contact with his spectators and a high degree of mimicry, he wins over the inmates, who naturally know nothing of both the play and the historical episode, so that when one of them asks the question, "Who is this Caesar he is talking about?" another answers that "he must be a friend of his," and the conclusion reached in the end is that Brutus must have been "a real-son-of-a-bitch" (Tempera 2009: 305).



Shakespeare projects" (Pensalfini 2016: 23), directed since 1995 by Curt Tofteland at the Luther Luckett Correctional Facility in Louisville, Kentucky, the convicts' individual stories, including information about their crimes, are interwoven with the plot of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the company's website we read that, "as the inmates delve deeply into the characters they portray, they are forced to confront their personal demons" and that the result is "an extraordinary story about the creative process and the power of art to heal and redeem—in a place where the very act of participation in theatre is a human triumph and a means of personal liberation".³

The marriage between prison and *The Tempest* also lies at the core of Margaret Atwood's adaptation for the Hogarth Shakespeare series, *Hag-Seed* (2016). In this work Canadian theatre director Felix Phillips is not only the wizard Prospero experiencing the plot of Shakespeare's play by being thrown out of the theatre he is the artistic director of, but he is also a Prospero-like director staging a production of *The Tempest* at a local prison, with a cast of inmates, which offers new insight into the play and its relationship with the actors. It is through his resolute guidance that his actors/inmates discover all the prisoners and jailers in the text (Atwood 2016: 125), and learn how to gain freedom from their own prisons and jailers, while inviting the readers to reflect on the Shakespeare/prison relationship. Confirming the general interest in *The Tempest* in prisons, and also the increasing connection between Prison Shakespeare and Academic Shakespeare (Herold 2016: 1205-6), one might mention Phyllida Lloyd's multi-ethnic, all-women cast in *The Tempest* at the Donmar Warehouse, London, in 2016, where, at one point, a copy of Atwood's novel is handed to Harriet Walter, who impersonates a prisoner serving a long sentence who plays Prospero.

Undeniably, in Italy, too, productions of *The Tempest* in prison have deeply instilled new life in the staging of the Elizabethan playwright. The list includes different kinds of experiences ranging from drama therapy, where the process towards rehabilitation and reintegration is more important than the finished aesthetic product, to productions by theatre directors who are primarily concerned with "the artistic medium of the theatre, its aesthetic qualities, and how such an art form operates in the unique setting of prisons" (Tocci 2007: 13). Quite often, in Italy, the Shakespearean play is mediated through Eduardo de Filippo's translations into the old Neapolitan dialect: this was the case with Gianfranco Pedullà's *La tempesta* (1997) and Fabio Cavalli's *La tempesta, ovvero colpa, perdono e libertà* (2015), which appeared respectively in the Arezzo⁴ and Rome Rebibbia prisons. Last year, Fabrizio Arcuri, the founder and artistic director of the Accademia degli Artefatti, a Rome-based theatre company, which has made a reputation for importing cutting-edge UK theatre-making,⁵ directed a *mise en espace* of *La tempesta – Omaggio a Eduardo* based once again on Eduardo's

³"Shakespeare Behind Bars" website at <<http://shakespearebehindbars.vhx.tv/>> (7 July 2017). It is a story well described in Scott-Douglas' *Shakespeare Inside. The Bard Behind Bars* (Scott-Douglas 2007).

⁴A video of the performance *La tempesta* (1997) directed by Mario Alves Rebehy, Atlantide Audiovisivi is available.

⁵Sara Soncini has dedicated part of her essay in this volume to the productions of Tim Crouch's *I, Shakespeare* plays by Accademia degli Artefatti.



translation, which he presented at the Juvenile Penitentiary Insititute on Nisida Island, a prison island in the Naples Gulf for youths convicted of serious crimes, generally associated with local Mafia, *Camorra*; here, the young offenders who participated in the theatrical writing workshop acted in choral scenes as chorus or seamen. Nor should one forget Caterina Galloni's workshop and production of *La tempesta a Regina Coeli* in 2014/15, involving the convicts of Sections I, III and IV of Rome's Regina Coeli; Davide Ferrari's and Riccardo Rigamonti's "*La tempesta di William Shakespeare*" (2010),⁶ enriched with Neapolitan popular songs by the actors of the Compagnia Maliminori at Voghera Casa Circondariale, and Donatella Massimilla's *San Vittore Globe Theatre Atto II: Le Tempeste* (2016), with the actress-prisoners of Milan's San Vittore prison interpreting it as a dream devoted to love, waiting, change and dedicated to the women who survive against all odds. The recent Armando Punzo's *Dopo la tempesta* at the Volterra Fortress prison (2016) closes the list, since it was the last to be staged (and, in fact, it is still touring in Italy) and its action is a kind of sequel to *The Tempest*.

Italian prisons have therefore become an unpredictable Shakespearean laboratory, so far largely neglected by Italian Shakespeareans, even if, in my opinion, worthy of critical attention since these almost invisible productions, as Manfred Pfister writes, "are not marginal but crucial to the total impact of Shakespeare worldwide" (Pfister 2013: 187). In fact, to my knowledge, there are still no studies or databases devoted to Shakespeare in Italian prisons. This could indeed become another domain of intercultural Shakespeare remediation well worth investigating, since, undeniably, Prison Shakespeare has reinvented and reinvigorated the work of the Elizabethan playwright, as well as launched questions such as: Why Shakespeare? Why does Shakespeare work so well in the prison context? Does Shakespearean drama and "its characterological focus on metamorphosis" afford the sort of redemption the inmate actors seek "more readily than the works of almost any other playwright", as Niels Herold sustains (Herold 2016: 1201)?

First and foremost, the study of the relationship between Shakespeare and prison would allow us to gain better understanding of the "process of negotiation, transposition, cooperation, revision, and contestation" (Lanier 2016: 132) between Shakespeare and marginal subcultures.

On the one hand, it has given a voice to people who have been excluded from theatrical experience, thus raising the question of who is licensed to make theatre nowadays. Whose Shakespeare today? Whose theatre? These are the very important questions we have to ask nowadays, at a time when thousands of convicts demand less humiliating living conditions in our chronically overcrowded prisons, and thousands of immigrants are unable to manifest their disappointment at the conditions in the reception camps where they are forced to stay. What is our responsibility as Shakespearean scholars and teachers today? Prison Shakespeare

⁶See the company's website at <<https://maliminori.wordpress.com/spettacoli/la-tempesta/>> (7 July 2017).



offers us the occasion to ponder the ethical responsibility we have to the emergencies in our contemporary society and to our students and younger scholars.

On the other hand, in prison, theatrical work, conventions and languages have to be recast specifically for a precise site-specific place and for a cast of non-professional actors, some of whom might have very little formal education. Moreover, some of them are not Italian native speakers; others are serving long sentences for very serious offences. When in his film director Tofteland tries to explain why the Shakespeare Behind Bars group is “very true to Shakespeare” to the point that Shakespeare “would have adored” it, he means that in Elizabethan times “people in the theatre were thought of as pickpockets, thieves, rapers, murderers,” and that Shakespeare “learnt a lot with these guys, with what society would say it is the dreg, the lowest of the low.” Inevitably, the convicts’ act of appropriation has restored the subversive and destabilizing nature to the Bard’s plays as well as their capacity to articulate a wide variety of complementary/conflicting meanings, some of which challenge the establishment and the common way of perceiving the penal institution itself. Of course, as Niels Herold, the American author of *Prison Shakespeare and the Purpose of Performance* (2014) explains, “understanding the role theatre can play in the reformation of the incarcerated self must start in our understanding of these mechanisms of institutionalization and prisonization” (Herold 2016: 1202), which means that, perhaps, this understanding might sow the seeds for a cultural revolution which would pull down physical and metaphorical barriers. Thus, in Italy, some prisons headed by enlightened directors have become sites of fertile exchanges between people from different cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds.⁷ Without doubt, in our country (even though not in every prison yet) a prison, a place that according to Foucault is something like a “counter-site”, “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault 1984: 3), might nowadays be considered as the modern equivalent of the “liberties” of Elizabethan London, places that were similarly transformed into spaces of free expression and beauty by the creative outburst of theatre productions.

Moreover, while it is site-specific and therefore deals with local laws, rules and values, Prison Shakespeare also seems to be a truly global phenomenon. It is precisely thanks to its double nature that this area of investigation may contribute to exploring the way Shakespeare’s work negotiates between global and local politics and aesthetics. Most theatre directors and practitioners are concerned with the physical and socio-political nature of their locations and their aim is often to create a link between inside and outside prisons; at the same time, however, some practices and some assumptions of their work are somehow similar and universal. It is perhaps not accidental that, wherever they are, directors encourage their actors/convicts to adopt

⁷Lucia Castellano describes the metamorphosis of the Milano-Bollate prison, where she directed for nine years, from “a grey giant of cement” into a “human giant”: a place where, today, one can work, study, cultivate culture and grow, where every day people from outside go in and people from inside go out; “a place that throbs with the life of the city itself” (Castellano 2011: 17).



the Shakespearean texts “to their set of dire predicaments” (Herold 2016: 1201), or opt for a theatre of gestures and of the body suitable for the inmates. It is also true that one of the ways in which convicts/actors address their condition of homelessness is that they “feel they can at least own, however ephemerally, their performative experience of Shakespeare” (Herold 2016: 1201). It is furthermore widely recognised that, for those who return to live out of prison, “their experiences with Shakespeare behind bars have put them in a position to help effect important changes on the outside, in both the way we understand ‘the cultural uses of Shakespeare’ and in the way we as a society conceive and administer justice” (Herold 2016: 1205).

Indisputably, theatre has brought its art of action, gestures and communication into prison, which by definition is a place of non-action and of suspended time, and has proven itself capable of questioning the very premises for fruitful collaboration between the cast and the audience. Not for nothing, Pedullà remarks that prison theatre “tends to adopt the techniques and artistic references of 20th century avant-garde theatre. It creates a performance by directing the use of space, movements, improvisations, vocal and body gestures. It is theatre that goes beyond prose with a parlance as a crossroads for different cultures and languages, a new alchemy for the stage” (Pedullà 2012: 80).

Finally, as this essay will show, some Italian Prison Shakespeare productions, such as Punzo’s, have distinguished themselves for both their experimental and artistic qualities within the more general context of Italian theatre (and not only of prison theatre) and are therefore particularly important from the point of view of the theatre critic. Punzo has achieved major aesthetic results which, apart from their importance in the field of prison theatre, are worth investigating, representing perhaps a rather unique case worldwide.

2. BETWEEN CATHARSIS AND ESCAPISM

In attempting to chart the map of those “coal Shakespeares” that have burned bright inside prison walls, the voices of the actor-prisoners can be precious guides to understanding the different approaches to Shakespeare. These can be defined as oscillating between “cathartic” and “escapist.”

La tempesta di Sasà (2016, *Sasà’s Tempest*) by Salvatore Striano, one of the actor-prisoners in Fabio Cavalli’s “Compagnia di teatro libero” at Rome’s Rebibbia prison and now a successful professional actor, is an inspirational autobiography on his criminal experiences redeemed through Shakespeare. Striano, who interpreted the role of Ariel in Cavalli’s *La tempesta, ovvero colpa, perdono e libertà* (2015), interweaves his autobiographical story as Sasà with speculations on his theatrical experience and role; at the same time, he also shows the inevitable overlapping between his onstage and offstage lives. He writes that in his everyday routine he started to behave in the way Ariel would behave (Striano 2016: 125) and to read his real life in the light of the play. As a matter of fact, he claims that the Shakespearean play can be read as a portrait of his native town, Naples, where the criminality rate is high and where people are split



either into Prosperos, who discipline and punish, or into Calibans; according to him, all prisoners are like Caliban, “deformed, violent, capable only of distorted and dark thought” but, still, “they cannot be kept inside the prison, the island, only to serve their sentences.” On the contrary, they have to be taught the meaning of forgiveness (Striano 2016: 189-90):

[...] prisons [...] are deserts. Sure they are crowded with criminals, but nothing else, no one else. We need the elves, the spirits called by Prospero: the social workers, the volunteers, the educators. That is the magic that works [...] together with books. It is thanks to books that Prospero has become a magician [...] Basically, as a ruler, he has failed, [...] he has to leave, [...] abandon [...] his own role [...] and learn that revenge is useless[...] He has to found a new dukedom on the island with different rules. And then he has to forgive.

But forgiveness is not an acquittal. It is someone who shows you the doors and explains to you how to open them. [...] I needed someone who believed in me and introduced new content into the poverty of prison. [...] This is Shakespearean forgiveness, and this is freedom. [...] I found [my freedom] inside a prison. Although still inside, I was already out. But just one Sasà does not move a thing, one is not enough: we must let many out of prison to change the way of thinking, to really change things.

Give freedom to the thousands of Ariels locked up in the prisons of the world. Give them the words to tell us about it. (Striano 2016: 201-3)⁸

As Cavalli himself has often acknowledged, his actors develop a deep relationship with the characters they play, which brings them to understand their own motivations and behaviours, so that they “stage Shakespeare but they are also ‘staged’ by Shakespeare. In other words, the [...] Shakespearean script raises specters from the actors’ past, and forces them to come to terms with these specters” (Calbi 2014: 242-3). Cavalli, who has directed productions with serious offenders often involved in criminal organizations (‘Ndrangheta, Cosa Nostra, Camorra) in Rome’s Rebibbia prison since 2003 and also teaches a course in “Prison Theatre – Ethic, Aesthetic and Social Theatre Practice” at the University of Rome 3, asserts that he is not engaged in drama therapy even though he encourages his actors to use their criminal experience to interpret their roles and is particularly interested in the neuroscience research in the field of drama therapy (Lòtano 2015). He strongly asserted his belief in the cathartic power of the theatre and of Shakespeare in particular (Di Fabio 2015), and repeatedly highlighted the process of mediation between his own knowledge and cultural awareness, “the high word of poetry,” and his actor-prisoners’ low literacy level, but also humanity and life experience, their “visceral word of life:”

⁸If not differently specified, all the translations from the Italian are mine.



My actors, however, happen to have accumulated, sadly for them, life experiences that I would not dream of going through or wish to have. When you face them and discuss Shakespeare [...] you discover that what you know of the concept of justice, revenge, brotherhood, betrayal and conspiracy you have learned from literature, while they have experimented it the hard way and at their own expense. As a result, you bring, so to speak, the high word of poetry and they bring the visceral word of life. When these two things meet, when mutual esteem is formed, the outcome is fruitful. Spoken by them, some words are extraordinarily powerful and express a depth professional actors are not able to reach. (Cavalli in Canessa 2012)

Whereas Cavalli never forgets that his actors are men with a troublesome past, Armando Punzo, who in 1987 took over the artistic direction of the Company of the Fortress, attempts to make his actors and audience forget they are in a prison, as one of his actors, Aniello Arena, a former Mafia hit man on parole, confirms in his autobiography, *L'aria è ottima (quando riesce a passare)* (2016, *The Air is fine (when it manages to get inside)*). He writes that to Punzo theatre is "the practice of freedom. The freedom of thinking that you are different from what you have always been, from the way you have always seen yourself" (Arena and Olati 2013: 198). In fact, Punzo has never been inspired by notions of psychological and social assistance or therapy, and yet he has been able to link drama with biographies without ever revealing the prisoners/actors' lives. As he writes,

I try to create an island inside the prison: the theatre is a way to get rid of the prison. My aim is to transform the place. [...] On entering prison with theatre one has to, I believe, destroy the very idea of prison, the stereotype in the spectator's mind, and in the opinion of the public, but also to destroy the idea which lives in the prisoners, guards, directors, judges [...] I do not believe in theatre used for other aims, in the theatres for the elderly, children, the insane, prisoners; I do not believe in the theatre used as an instrument for obtaining something. If one puts theatre directly into the centre, one can have indirect effects. Social effects or consequences are 'collateral effects'; the main objective is to open up a new time, a new space. (Punzo in Marino 2006)

Thus, the Company of the Fortress has become a professional company set up in an uncommon place by people who are not professionals, but who have discovered opportunities for change onstage, where they have learnt to demolish the commonplaces of theatre and reality, where everybody alike has to wear masks and play roles – a reality that, especially in prison, constantly reminds you of who you are and prevents any possible metamorphosis.

Punzo regards Shakespeare's plays as deadening prisons of meaning, and, in the wake of poets and intellectuals such as Majakovskij, Marinetti, Artaud, Müller, he urges the actors and the spectators to escape from what has become the untouchable and unquestionable Western canon. As he explained in his conversation with Renato Palazzi, when invited to speak at the festival "Shakespeare 400 – Will forever Young"



(2016, Milan), "Shakespeare's works were drawn from other stories, and so we likewise have to move on from what he gave us and not to get stuck on the reality he depicted". At the same time, precisely because they are considered as unchangeable, Shakespeare's plays offer Punzo and his company the opportunity to challenge them and to question that "fresco of humanity" they have depicted.⁹ As a matter of fact, Punzo's "carnavalesque" poetics of the upside-down invites spectators to deepen their perceptions and think differently about what they believe to be unchanging, if not impossible. Indeed, by undermining rules and conventions, Punzo morphs prison into a place of creative anarchy and freedom, a world apart from the constraints of the sclerotic and deadening theatres outside.

3. EXECUTING AND ACQUITTING SHAKESPEARE IN VOLTERRA PRISON

The shadow of *The Tempest* haunts Punzo's composition of *Mercuzio non vuole morire* (2012, *Mercutio does not want to die*) and inspires his last production *Dopo la tempesta. L'opera segreta di Shakespeare* (2016, *After the Tempest. The Secret Work by Shakespeare*).

Like other Shakespearean plays, *The Tempest*, too, allows the actors of the Company of the Fortress to push the boundaries of different codes and languages and to create alternative scenarios to Shakespeare's script and to life in prison. Besides, while *The Tempest* is especially relevant to the utopic and political dimension of his theatre, the power-defined relationship that it charts raises issues concerning the multicultural origins of most of his actors.

Thus, fragments of *The Tempest* surface in his performances as screams of anguish and despair after many (metaphorical) shipwrecks, cries against abuse and coercion, as well as promises of freedom, words of forgiveness and calls for rebirth.

Whereas in *Mercutio*, the Shakespearean hypo-text is violently torn to pieces and "destroyed" so that *Mercutio* and other Shakespearean characters are actually set free from mere repetition and prejudices as "thinking spirits undergoing a continuous transformation" through contamination with other books by other authors (Punzo 2013: 196), in *Dopo la tempesta* Punzo moves on, and instead of killing "father Shakespeare" (Punzo 2013: 213), he tries to reconsider his work. Partly inspired by Nietzsche's remarks regarding the influence of *Macbeth* on human behaviour,¹⁰ he is persuaded that the Elizabethan playwright committed a "dramaturgic mistake" by

⁹Punzo explains his idea that Shakespeare's work has given us a "fresco of mankind" where everybody can recognise his/her place and role in his conversation with Renato Palazzi at the University of Milan on the occasion of the conference "Shakespeare 400 – Will Forever Young" (18 November 2016). The conversation is published at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4ru2uNBOh0>> (7 July 2017).

¹⁰When I met Punzo in October 2015 in his office in Volterra, he acknowledged that he had been deeply impressed by Nietzsche's reflections on Shakespeare and that the German philosopher's conviction that whoever thinks Shakespeare's theatre has a moral effect and the sight of *Macbeth* irresistibly repels one from the evil of ambition is wrong, since, on the contrary, anyone who is truly possessed by raging ambition sees this character as a model to imitate.



giving form to the very idea of man that he himself wanted to deny. As he writes in the director's notes to the performance, Shakespeare "missed the creative force" to give birth to that new man whom he hinted at in the form of "the spirits wandering in his plays." Such spirits should be considered the Elizabethan playwright's attempt at giving life to "still un-expressed, in-existent possibilities" (Punzo 2016). Punzo imagines that Shakespeare wrote a "secret text" between the lines of his plays that can be deciphered only by means of a completely new grammar and approach. His purpose as a director is therefore to guide his actors to discover that "meta-text" which, he believes, Shakespeare hid in his works and served as "an antidote to the superficiality of the lives described and lived by his characters." This cryptic text can be found only by paying attention to the gaps between the words, so that he and his actors re-read Shakespeare's works as if they were "archaeologists" digging up new words, actions and gestures (Punzo 2017). He searches for what is "unsaid" (Punzo 2016) and stages "a spirit who yearns to be set free and who wanders through a forest of dead and powerful statues," thus accomplishing "the apotheosis of that utopia of being free to rewrite everything, even what appears impossible to change and reinvent" (Punzo 2016).

The Fortress's Brave New World

"Oh! ... Oh! Meraviglia. Quante perfette creature son qui. Com'è bello il genere umano. Oh! Magnifico, magnifico, nuovo mondo che contiene simili abitatori. Oh! Meraviglia. Oh! Meraviglia. Oh! Meraviglia."¹¹ At the very end of *Mercutio*, Mercurio/Punzo, who is "the poet, the actor, the artist, the philosopher" standing for "all those things that nowadays appear useless" such as "imagination, lightness, culture" (Punzo 2013: 231), borrows Miranda's words to voice his amazement at the scene he, as a new Prospero, has just created thanks to the magic of his art (*The Tempest*, 5.1.182-4). It is the grand finale of a performance staging Mercurio's rebellion against his own death, when all the 'ghosts' of his fellow travellers, who share and fight for his dream of a new ending and, possibly, new world, fill the prison courtyard, which thus comes to represent the "brave new world" he has conjured up.

¹¹"O wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, / That has such people in 't" (*The Tempest*, 5.1.182-4).



Mercuzio non vuole morire. La vera tragedia in Romeo e Giulietta (Volterra Prison, July 2012). Photograph by Stefano Vaja.

In front of this crowd made up of characters who have escaped from other plays, books and paintings, and in front of spectators who have been invited to join the actors and to hold open in their hands the books they were given at the beginning of the performance, Mercutio/Punzo/Prospero invokes Majakovskij's dream of "a revolution of the spirit" that might clear away the "ragged vestments" of previous art, (Majakovskij in Brown 1973: 192). At the same time, by appropriating Miranda's lines, he evokes the utopia of a new world made possible by the joint action of actors and spectators, convicts and non-convicts. All morphed into Mercutios, they can therefore cry out with him, "I do not want to die!" and thereby strongly reaffirm that stories and histories can be changed thanks to a common joint effort.

It is interesting that Punzo clarifies and defines the nature of his utopic island by brooding over *The Tempest* and by conjuring up a ship onstage: a small single bed on casters morphs into a ship, as a clown holding a huge white paper model of the sails of a galley on his shoulders sits on it next to Punzo/Mercutio.



Mercuzio non vuole morire. La vera tragedia in Romeo e Giulietta (Teatro Persio Flacco, Volterra, luglio 2013). Photograph by Stefano Vaja.

This extravagant bed/boat, a space of sexual deprivation and therefore possibly even to be interpreted as a synecdoche of the prison itself,¹² becomes also a stage-within-the-stage from where Punzo/Mercutio reads passages from Antonin Artaud's *For the Illiterates* where the French artist unmasks the false myths of our Western culture in favour of much deeper and truer forms of knowledge and life. Onstage the bed/galera becomes therefore the materialisation of that "Galera Ideale" (where the pun on the Italian word "galera" refers both to a ship - a galley - and a prison) Punzo speaks about when he describes his dream of a first repertory theatre in a prison, "the most extraordinary (permanent) theatre ever imagined or seen in the world" (Punzo 2013: 279): "a theatre ship nestling in the Tuscan hills – which, in its essence, will be the transformation of a prison into a theatre" (Punzo 2013: 279).¹³ Thus, the coincidence of the two spaces of theatre and prison finally accomplishes what Michel Foucault

¹²In *Mercutio*, Punzo's single bed, where the two star-crossed lovers are never seen lying, is not a place where passions and transgression are secretly consumed as in *Romeo and Juliet*, but a place that marks the absence of them. Yet, it resonates with the memory of their bodily presence so that it ends up pointing to the issue of sexuality in prison and perhaps highlighting the inmates' enforced repressed sexuality. The bed is thus transformed into an object in which the convicts' desire of a proper sexual life is embedded (Cavecchi 2016: 138-42).

¹³In his manifesto, *Verso la Galera Ideale (Towards the Ideal Prison/Galley)*, which he signed as "The Architect of the Impossible", Punzo writes that "a prestigious, multiracial theatre", actors, singers, ballet dancers, musicians, technicians and organisers will be cast on a national level with auditions taking place in prisons all over Italy." Despite all the difficulties and resistance, Punzo stubbornly continues his work on projects aimed at awakening public opinion about the dream he shares with the Compagnia della Fortezza; *Mercutio non vuole morire* has offered him a very good opportunity to share his dream with the whole community of Volterra.



pointed out in his seminal work *Discipline and punish* (1975), when he links the two spaces first in “the spectacle of the scaffolds” (Foucault 1995: 32-72) and then in “the many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” in Bentham’s Panopticon penitentiary (Foucault 1995: 195-230). Unlike Foucault, though, the director rereads this coincidence in positive terms to reaffirm the extraordinary potential of prison as a place where creativity and experimenting can lead to utopic outcomes.

The ship, which according to Foucault is the heterotopia par excellence, “a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea” (Foucault 1984: 9) becomes in Punzo’s production a heterotopia at the nth power, where the prison (an exemplary heterotopia of deviation) and the theatre (a heterotopia capable of bringing “onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another”, Foucault 1984: 6) come to coincide. Indeed, the ship, “the greatest reserve of the imagination” (Foucault 1984: 9), is a compelling visual and symbolic stage prop setting out the prison’s potentiality as a place for change and metamorphosis (Cavecchi 2016: 138-42).

Intriguingly, Punzo challenges the sacredness of Shakespeare, as he tries to “disentangle [his] work from the apparent authority of the text” (Worthe 1998: 1102) and to conceive the performance as “transformational”, rather than merely transpositional (Worthe 1998: 1102); it is a space for the audience’s and the actor’s co-authorship and co-authority.

The actors are free to “escape” from their imposed roles both as characters and as convicts. The director does not impose on them a predetermined vision of the performance, which, on the contrary, unfolds cooperatively during a process of rehearsals conceived as a stimulating and unpredictable space of collaborative experimentation. In his introduction to Punzo’s volume *È ai vinti che va il suo amore. I primi venticinque anni di autoreclusione con la Compagnia della Fortezza di Volterra* (2013, *His Love Goes to Losers. The First Twenty-Five Years of Self-Confinement with Volterra’s Fortress Company*), Massimo Marino, who has often worked with Punzo’s company, writes that the actors work as actors of the *commedia dell’arte* or as members of a gang planning a robbery: each actor has a personal repertoire of parts, cues and gestures, from which, at the moment of the performance, he selects what he needs in accordance with a given *canovaccio*, which has previously been built up collectively by the company, so that, undeniably, the performance is permeated with all the actors’ personal motivations.

At the same time, the spectators are recognized as “individuals plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts, and signs that confront or surround them” (Rancière 2011: 16); they are therefore allowed the freedom to experience individually and independently the fragments the performance is made of, and to translate what they perceive in their own way, to link it “to [their] unique intellectual adventures” (Rancière 2011: 16-7). This also means that the spectators are not “prompted to process the perceived instantaneously but to postpone the production of meaning [...] and to store the sensory impressions with ‘evenly hovering attention’” (Lehmann



2006: 87), and that, sometimes, they can feel frustrated since their “desire for orientation turns out to be disavowed” (Lehmann 2006: 88).

An isle full of noises, crosses and ladders

Whereas fragments from *The Tempest* migrate into *Mercutio*, imprinting and colouring Punzo’s utopian impulse, in *Dopo la tempesta* the debt to the Shakespearean romance is to be found in the general design of the performance, perceived as a dream/creation of a *capocomico*, Punzo/Shakespeare (and Prospero, too?), who is the performer and the actor manager lending dramaturgical as well as organizational unity in art comedy to the company.¹⁴ He is also the “Actor in Revolt” who, according to Punzo, is capable of staging new life and refuses “to re-represent what he does not love or should not love” (Punzo 2016). In his notes Punzo writes that it is now urgent to stop any reverent approach to Shakespeare and to “betray the form” of his plays in order to keep their spirits alive. He claims that each creative moment originates from a tempest, a moment of crisis: in *Dopo la tempesta* he stages both the crisis of the demiurge author, who, impotent, watches the characters he has created, acknowledging that, like the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s novel, he is himself a prisoner inside his own play (Atwood 2016: 257); he also stages the crisis of the characters that are incapable of escaping their own stories, and try to convince him to bring them back to life.

Visually powerful, evocatively indeterminate, and reflecting a rich polyphony of allusions and meanings the audience needs to identify, the set is conceived by Silvia Bertoni, Alessandro Marzetti and Punzo himself, as a rectangle closed between the walls of the fortress and a railing that has been placed to form a particular kind of arena scattered with many wooden crosses and a few high ladders driven into the sand. Indeed, one might be tempted to consider the more than two hundred crosses of different sizes leaning one against the other or against the wall, or laid on the floor, as a spectral landscape that provides access to the spirit of Punzo’s rewriting process, a visual materialisation of the cemetery that, according to him, the theatre outside the Fortress has become: a theatre by actors, who are “gravediggers,” who “accompany the dead through their short life” (Punzo 2013: 213). It is a strong stage image which, literally and metaphorically, conveys the sense of the immobility of inmates condemned to their role of deviants and of characters frozen in their repetitive stage actions, and which also obliquely unmasks “the veiled prison in which we are all held,” to use Punzo’s words in one of his manifestos, *Per un teatro stabile in carcere (Towards a permanent theatre in prison)* (Punzo in Ciari 2011: 91-4).

¹⁴*Dopo la tempesta* comes as a summa after Shakespeare. *Know Well. Tragedia onirica didattica con morte innaturale dei protagonisti (Shakespeare. Know Well. Oneiric didactic tragedy with unnatural death)*, the company’s “investigation of the whole body of Shakespeare’s work from the perspective of its cultural and philosophical legacy” (VolterraTeatro 2015) which opened in the Volterra prison in July 2015.



Dopo la tempesta. L'opera segreta di Shakespeare (Volterra Prison, July 2015).
Photograph by Stefano Vaja.

It is perhaps not by chance that, at the very beginning, the *capocomico* Punzo, dressed in black, extrapolates the lines describing the scene of the battle from *Macbeth*: “As whence the sun ‘gins his reflection, Shipwrecking storms and direful thunders break, / So from that spring, whence comfort seem’d to come, / Discomfort swells” (*Macbeth*, 1.2.25-28). On the one hand, he starts spinning a semantic thread dealing with shipwrecks, storms and direful thunders which the performance is made of, and on the other, he questions the borders between what is conventionally perceived as good or bad, alive or dead, free or trapped, as well as the aesthetic boundaries between the image and the living reality, the collective and the individual, activity and passivity.

Furthermore, as one watches a performance that refers from its very title to *The Tempest* – a play which has made “seminal contributions to the development of the colonialist ideology through which it is read” (Cartelli 1987: 101) – one inevitably links the many crosses to the tragedy of the many migrants who die while trying to reach their utopic land and eventually one is led to thinking about the inmates’ stories of migration and integration (or rather mis-integration) since many of them are from different countries. The prison courtyard comes therefore to represent not only an island, but also the sea surrounding it, and perhaps the Mediterranean that has turned into a marine cemetery. It may be significant that this “place of wrath and tears” is referred to by a black actor who recites William Earnest Henley’s *Invictus*, a poem that is immediately recognizable as the one Nelson Mandela recited as a form of resistance to apartheid for the benefit of his imprisoned mates while he was detained at Robben Island prison: a poem that easily resonates as particularly significant in this site-specific context.



It is equally meaningful that, in addition to the crosses, the stage is full of wooden ladders leaning against the wall, which perhaps symbolize a possible escape from the confinement within the Volterra prison, as well as from the prison of theatre realism and conventions, and from all the other prisons we are unaware of, such as the prisons of prejudice, ignorance, false certainties, and intellectual and emotional laziness, which prevent us from looking out for a different, utopic land. Punzo refuses to stage Shakespearean texts according to the traditional principles of the “theatre of representation” and aims to dissolve the logocentric hierarchy by means of those stylistic traits that define the postdramatic theatre: parataxis, simultaneity, play with the density of signs (Lehmann 2006: 93). The Shakespearean hypo-texts are therefore dissolved in a complex hypertext of quotations, enigmatic patterns, processes and stories, but with hardly any plot or dialogue in the conventional sense, where the Shakespearean lines and words work as “reagents” (Punzo 2013: 290) in a new grammar where they sound new and meaningful in spite of their recognisability (even if most of them are from the less staged plays and quite unknown).

Describing Punzo as one who gives life to the characters onstage, critics have convincingly recalled Carmelo Bene and Leo de Berardinis; I would add that Punzo, sitting at his desk at the beginning of the performance, and the cross-identification between him, Shakespeare and Prospero, also remind us of John Gielgud’s interpretation in Peter Greenaway’s film *Prospero’s Books* (1991). Like Gielgud, Punzo plays “not just as the master manipulator of people and events but as their prime originator” (Greenaway, 1991: 9), and, even if in a very different way, he likewise creates the soundscape (Lehmann 2006: 148) with the enthralling music by Andrea Salvatori and offstage noises of blowing winds, stormy seas, and women crying and sobbing. As a matter of fact, while waiting for the audience to take a seat, Punzo starts recreating “the strange sounds” “the isle is full of” (*The Tempest*, 3.2.133) by composing a cacophonous symphony, alternating the resonant, metallic sounds he produces by repeatedly letting fall pieces of silverware with the sinister bangs resulting from his slamming the desk drawers. Far from the “sounds and sweet airs, that give delight” that Caliban speaks of (*Tempest*, 3.2.134), the fortress/island resonates with a harsh and disturbing polyphony which is produced by the improper use of stage props and which secretly undermines articulate language. It is a completely new palette of noise-sounds that one might interpret as a sort of aphasia that paralyses the Shakespearean characters, who seem unable to formulate their own inner thoughts and emotions and therefore speak through a different emotional grammar made up of the noises of drawers and silverware, but also of those made by the dragging of a cuirass on the floor; of the limping sounds of the footsteps of Richard III or of a glass harmonium played by Salvatori. In Foucault’s words, this aphasic polyphony destroys “not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’”; as he concludes, “they dissolve our myths” (Foucault 1966: XVIII).

Indeed, the performance accomplishes the dissolution of that “fresco” of virtues, passions, weaknesses and aspirations that, according to the director, have made our “humanity,” just to quote Harold Bloom’s well-known title (Bloom 1998): black Othello,



Desdemona busy with her handkerchief, Brutus on the point of committing suicide, hunchback Richard III incessantly walking up and down, Romeo and Juliet, Lady Anne, Caliban, King Lear, and Pericles. All these Shakespearean characters milling around in Punzo's mind appear onstage for the last time, one after the other, before disappearing forever, thus fulfilling a destiny described by Prospero in *The Tempest*: "These our actors, /As I foretold you, were all spirits, and /Are melted into air, into thin air" (*The Tempest*, 4.1.148-50).

Punzo's relationship with the characters onstage is often contradictory and not always easy to grasp.¹⁵ Some of them try to persuade him to go on staging the same old stories and stir the stage props as a handkerchief, a crown or a cuirass work as visual synecdoches of the protagonists' stories in the hope they can work as "baits"; others want to abandon him; still others accuse him of jailing them. Some of them are shaped by the words he whispers into their mouths that they repeat speaking into his microphone, such as the lines of Salvatore Altieri/Pericles to calm the furious elements creating the storm (*Pericles*, 2.1), so like the words in *The Tempest*, or of Apemantus's satiric harangue (*Timon of Athens*, 1.2.127-41).



Shakespeare. Know Well (Volterra Prison, July 2015). Photograph by Stefano Vaja

Other creatures of Shakespeare's imagination, spirits in white or black costumes, created by Emanuela Dall'Aglio and inspired by long African skirts, walk hieratically and bare-chested, showing their fit and tattooed muscles while accusing Punzo/Shakespeare, albeit softly, of bringing them on stage to perform primarily

¹⁵The role of the women dressed according to the fashion of the 1950s is quite obscure; their ineffective efforts to draw Punzo/Shakespeare's attention and Punzo's failure to toast with them might be interpreted as his impossibility and/or incapability to enjoy a full life of love and passion.



violence, hateful deeds, conspiracies, and misdeeds. By re-appropriating lines from Shakespearean texts, which when extrapolated from their context bring not only different meanings but also a possible counter canon, they fulfil the destiny revealed by Fabio Valentino/Caliban: "You taught me language; and my profit on't / is, I know how to curse" (*The Tempest*, 1.2.365-6).

At the end of the performance, among this crowd of characters, either endlessly entrapped or craving for freedom, Ivan Chepiga stands at the top of a ladder kept up by other actors entrapped in books/ruffs, and announces to Punzo/Shakespeare/Prospero the end of everything. By borrowing scraps from *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Henry IV part I*, *Henry VI*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*,¹⁶ he gives voice to Shakespeare's hidden text: he thus concludes, with Polixenes' words, that to stay is impossible (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.14) and invites him to "find out new heaven, new earth" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.1.17) as "the world were now but to begin" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.77). It is at this point that after Punzo/Shakespeare, a second Prospero, has torn the pages from the book on his desk in a crescendo mix of music and off-stage weeping, a boy enters with a huge globe and takes him by the hand. The boy leads him outside the railings, far from that island that he wanted to be the uncontested duke of, and that, finally, has come to reveal itself as his own prison, leaving the spectators the freedom to play the role of active interpreters who link their experience of the play to their unique intellectual adventures (Rancière 2011: 16-7).

The prison of Volterra Fortress is not a stage full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, but an island, where professional actors, prisoner actors and spectators as well as guards at the performance are all alike: players ready for a new intellectual and experiential adventure.

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¹⁶Il sole è tramontato, finito è il nostro giorno, le nostre azioni sono terminate. [*Julius Caesar*, 5.3] Ti conosco bene, anche se non ti ho mai visto. Nulla mi è nascosto. [*Henry VI*, part I, 1.2] Tu non possiedi specchi tali da riversare nel tuo occhio il tuo valore nascosto, da farti vedere la tua ombra. Io, il tuo specchio, mostrerò a te stesso quello che di te non conosci. [*Julius Caesar*, 1.2] L'universo mondo è addormentato. [*King Lear*, 1.4] Tutta la mole della terra si muove come una cosa malferma. [*Julius Caesar*, 1.3] Qui è il mio spazio. I regni sono argilla. [*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.1] Mai, fino ad ora, avevi attraversato un uragano che fa piovere fuoco. In cielo si combatte una guerra civile. [*Julius Caesar*, 1.3] Corvi, cornacchie e avvoltoi volano sulle nostre teste, le loro ombre sembrano un fatale baldacchino, sotto il quale sta il nostro esercito. [*Julius Caesar*, 5.1] Noi tutti combattiamo lo spirito e nello spirito degli uomini non c'è sangue. [*Julius Caesar*, 2.1] Combatte come se fosse stanco della vita. [*Henry VI*, 1.2] Chiunque ti aiuti, sei tu che devi aiutare me, per te brucia il mio desio [*Henry VI*, 5.2]."



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