

“Actions from the South”:
Teatro delle Albe and Takku Ligey Théâtre

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This story begins in Ravenna:¹ a town with a long history, an imperial tradition, and new narratives to tell. As a seaport on the Adriatic Sea, it is a place of departures, arrivals and encounters: a site of fights, negotiations, and love. It is a threshold of worlds left behind and of new beginnings – one side of a bridge stretching South and East across seas; a site of passage, border-crossings, and migration. Set within this context of movement and transformation, the present essay engages with two main areas and ideas: Africa and Italy, joined by the sea. They will be observed through the double lens of immigration and performance, focusing on African immigrants to Italy and on acting in the present, whether in the sense of artistic creation on the stage or common daily actions. Chaos, understood as chance, contingency, fortuitous happenings, will be an illuminating additional notion for this purpose. It will also be recognised as hybridisation: a creative force that facilitates the mingling of actions and ideas. As applied to live performances and staged identities, chaos refers to deeds and facts occurring unpredictably, and will be seen as a process of imaginative elaboration.

For this analysis the theoretical approach of Cultural Studies is appropriate as it explores agency and the construction of identities in everyday cultural practices. Rooted in the English empiricist philosophical tradition, the logic of culturalism erases the canonical distinction between high and low cultures to include the particular and the

¹ Ravenna is located in Romagna, the Eastern part of the Po Valley facing the Adriatic Sea. The social and cultural history of the area relates fundamentally to peasant culture. Myriad dialects still help to preserve local traditions and to express communal bonds.

local. Theory and praxis intertwine in the production and understanding of culture. Acts, events and signs are perceived and interpreted daily in time and locally in space; they are common, simple, and seemingly irrelevant. Central importance is given to the notion of practice, as established in the field of Social Sciences through the writing of theorists as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu (1995, 2003) and Michel de Certeau (2010). The ideological and pragmatic move towards popular forms of culture also affects the outcomes of cultural productions (including labour, leisure, and entertainment), the cultural use of objects, and the diversity of the actors involved (minorities, women, youth, heterogeneous gatherings and individuals). Along these methodological lines, immigrants will be envisaged here as producers of culture.

In keeping with the ideas advanced by Jean and John Comaroff in *Theory from the South. Or, How Euro-America is Evolving toward Africa* (2012) and anticipated by Jean Comaroff in her keynote address at the EACLALS Conference in Istanbul in 2011, this essay also wishes to promote a perspective from the South. The Comaroffs argue that as the global South is now the source of ex-centric theories, Europe is moving toward Africa in order to face contemporary challenges in different fields. Problematising the superficial, stereotyping glance and dominant attitude of the global North toward Africa, they investigate how new ideological perspectives may stem from accepting theories from the South. In a dialogue between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe, a divergent and imaginative view of human practices, productions, and feelings is proposed, foregrounding the potentiality of African civil societies to imagine innovative cultural productions and to invent original solutions for present living. In Mbembe's words:

[...] there is no better terrain than Africa for a scholarship keen to describe novelty, originality, and complexity. Those of us who live and work in Africa know first-hand that the ways in which societies compose and invent themselves in the present – what we could call the creativity of practice – is always ahead of the knowledge we can ever produce about them. (in Shipley 2010: 655)

Warning against the risk of underestimating what Africa has to teach

us and its power “to renew contemporary social theory”, Mbembe finds “the condition of possibility of social theorizing” in

[...] the understanding that “the social” is less a matter of order and contract than a matter of composition and experiment; that what ultimately binds societies might be some kind of artifice they have come to believe in; the realization that societies’ capacity to continually produce something new and singular, as yet unthought, which is yet to be accommodated within established conceptual systems and languages – this is indeed the condition of possibility of social theorizing as such. Africa teaches us this and much more, yet we underestimate the power of Africa to renew contemporary social theory at our expense. (in Shipley 2010: 655)

Africa and the Africans’ participation in modernity, already the main point in Mbembe’s *In the Postcolony* (2001), returns in particular in *Sortir de la Grande Nuit* (2010), where the idea of decolonized Africa helps both to trace independent paths of self-affirmation and dialogue in the global world and to devise new, locally-based but exportable strategies of collaboration and interaction. It is hoped that this essay will offer further endorsement for Mbembe’s arguments, since its theorising is offered as learning from Africa and from the African immigrants’ aptitude to produce something new to be adjusted and housed within existing social structures and worldviews.

Thought-provoking scholarly literature is being produced on these issues in various fields of research, as African societies seem to offer possible complementary answers to global systems and capitalist economies (Latouche 2009). The focus on the here and now, especially on individual ordinary actions contributing to popular, shared experiences, helps to underline the active participation of ordinary individuals in the making of history. In *In the Postcolony*, Mbembe examines contemporary Western discourse on Africa, identifying ongoing colonial prejudices with regard to Africa and launching the proposition of an African independent subject who acts from within specific histories and produces multiple trajectories of signification in the global world. Mbembe roots his investigation of the postcolonial African subject and of his/her current presence in modernity in the materiality of African societies and the specificity of their concrete daily life, a presence that is not only spatially located in Africa, but is physically

visible, perceivable and active in other parts of the world, including Italy. Therefore, African immigrants in Italy may be taken as active examples of African worldviews. In Mbembe's words, the African subject – the migrant – represents, constitutes and *is* himself/herself through significant and signifying human expressions and actions. His/her subjectivity is rooted in the specific history of the different African societies in their relations with the Western colonial world, but the possibility for the African subject to participate in modernity depends on his/her innovatively disentangling his/her language and action from the weight of colonial oppression and representational categories.

Along these lines and drawing on the theoretical standpoints and methodological paths of inquiry presented above, the purpose of this essay will be more about observing practices and actions from the South, than identifying well-structured models and coherent systems of thought. This will be done by presenting the work of the Teatro delle Albe (or Le Albe²), based in Ravenna, and of the Takku Ligey Théâtre, set in Diol Kadd in Senegal. The former was one of the first avantgarde companies in Italy working with African immigrants as actors, and the latter was founded by a Senegalese actor and playwright member of Le Albe, Mandiaye N'Diaye. A contemporary African immigrant to Italy, Mandiaye will be taken as an example of an African subject (with reference to Mbembe's theory) who speaks with an autonomous voice, imagination and vision.

The Teatro delle Albe was established in Ravenna by Marco Martinielli, Marcella Nonni, Ermanna Montanari and Luigi Dadina in 1983. Organized as a commune, it is inspired by the concept of *asinità* (donkey-ness), borrowed from the philosophy of Giordano Bruno, and by Alfred Jarry's idea of "pataphysics". *Asinità* is a complex philosophical attitude indicating a drift away from dogmatism and in favour of a constant search for knowledge and truth rooted in humility, tolerance, and hard work, often against prejudice and ignorance (Bruno 1585). The classical reference for this donkey is 'the golden ass' in Lucius Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*. In this text, the ass is a figure of transformation, since the human protagonist accidentally turns into a don-

² 'Dawn' or dawns in Italian.

key due to his insatiable curiosity and his wish to practice magic. The change he is forced to endure gives him a unique, alternative perspective on human beings, but it also obliges him to come to terms with his asinine form while preserving human intellectual qualities. Therefore, transformation brings liberation from constraints but also other limitations that need to be overcome. Moreover, it entails negotiating with factual conditions and predicaments by devising creative solutions. Elsewhere, in Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1883), the donkey is a figure of punishment and resurrection. Lucignolo, Pinocchio's friend, is turned into a donkey, as he always prefers to play and refuses to study. Pinocchio himself runs the risk of being transformed into a donkey when long ears appear on his head. In Pinocchio's case, the partially asinine form induces repentance and encourages a cathartic transformation.³

Teatro delle Albe adopted the notion of *asinità* as a praxis for looking beyond imposed and apparent limits. While *asinità* provides a metaphorical explanation of Le Albe's ideological standpoint, Jarry's pataphysics offers an appropriate definition for their work on the stage. Formulated by Jarry with reference to Aristotle, the term pataphysics comes from the Greek and means 'beyond metaphysics'. It might be broadly explained as the science of imaginary solutions. On these lines, imaginatively, Le Albe's explanation of their style of dramatic composition is that of 'politttttttical theatre', with seven 'ts', each 't' hinting at a specific figure, sign, or performance, suggesting

³ Of course, Romagna is the case in point in this essay and Ravenna is the locality being examined. However the experiment of hybridisation realised in Ravenna by Teatro delle Albe was not unique. In various parts of Italy numerous theatrical performances presented the phenomenon of hybridisation happening all over the country. Marco Baliani produced a play titled *Pinocchio nero* [*Black Pinocchio*] (2004) working with street children from Nairobi, and Nigerian-Yoruba playwright Bode Sowande wrote *À Jàntálá – Pinocchio* (1992) when he was researching and teaching in Italy.

the purpose of moving ahead of, and beyond, conventional political drama (Martinelli 1988b).⁴

Drawing on the established theatrical canon (Brecht and others), however, Le Albe's artistic project adopts an anthropological point of view. They include details evoking local life, the city of Ravenna, the simple and marvellous imagination of the oppressed, the pleasure of discovery and knowledge, and anti-heroism. The language adopted in the plays is often the dialect of Ravenna. Le Albe's self-definition also includes an evaluation of their performance as a wild, stubborn, non-conformist, eccentric, funny and experimental game. The extraordinary combination of ludic and political inspirations also comes from Jarry's figure of father Ubu or Ubu the king, an eccentric parody of human arrogance and greed for power coupled with stupidity. Jarry's view of the world and his main characters re-live in Le Albe's play *I polacchi. Dall'irriducibile Ubu di Alfred Jarry* [*The Poles. From Alfred Jarry's Irreducible Ubu*] (1998).

A key event which marked a swerve and acquired focus in Teatro delle Albe's dramatic approach took place in 1988, when the company discovered and adopted geologist Alfred Lothard Wegener's theory of continental drift. According to Wegener (as illustrated by geologist Franco Ricci Lucchi), a piece of African land, broken away from the original supercontinent of Pangaea, had drifted until it got stuck where the Po Valley is today. This intriguing view of Romagna as a fragment of Africa signalled the entrance of Senegalese "griots" – Mandiaye N'Diaye, Mor Awa Niang, El Hadji Niang – and their stories and imagination in the programme of Teatro delle Albe. *Ruh. Romagna più Africa uguale (commedia nera)* [*Ruh. Romagna plus Africa is (black comedy)*], the first play born out of this encounter, written and

⁴ The meanings of the 7 'ts' in the word polittttttico, as stated on the Albe's website, are: a polyptych or traditional form of multi-panel sacred art a typo, poetic licence, a sound produced inside the mouth (a metaphor for a theatre of flesh), a form of revolution, desperate poetics, black humour.

performed in 1988, became a sort of manifesto for Romagna as Africa.

The company confronted the emerging process of African immigration to Italy by developing brand-new plays, re-writing and mixing texts belonging to the European and African classical canons and oral traditions. They were shaped on local and contingent elements including the presence of immigrants, as in *Siamo asini o pedanti? (farsa filosofica)* [*Are we donkeys or pedants? (philosophical farce)*] (1989), *Lunga vita all'albero (maggio epico)* [*Long live the tree (epic May)*] (1990), and *I ventidue infortuni di Mor Arlecchino (tre atti impuri)* [*Moor Harlequin's 22 Misfortunes (three impure acts)*] (1993). Inspired by one of Carlo Goldoni's scenarios, the adventure of a black Harlequin in Milan is in fact a mimetic and symbolic metaphor for contemporary African immigration to Italy. After two centuries, the scenario is shifted to the city of Milan and transformed into the story of Mor Awa Niang, an immigrant from Senegal. In Le Albe's "theatre of flesh", the character and the actor on stage are both representations of an individual in flesh and blood, enacting a personal and collective experience.

Migration from Africa to Italy was becoming momentous in the 1980's. Both the national communities and the migrants became involved in the effort to negotiate their encounter. Moor Harlequin is black: "mor" meaning "black" in the Ravenna dialect. The role is played by Mor Awa Niang, a Senegalese actor and formerly a seller of cigarette lighters. By focusing on the idea of the migrant's impossible return home, the play elicits an exploration of both the present and past life story of each character and, on a more general level, hints at past and present national political histories. The play also traces a movement in time and a dialogue between cultures along the lines of hybridisation ("meticciato") and solidarity. The search for past individual histories participating in the present narratives of communities and groups is a distinctive feature of Le Albe's artistic creation and political belief.

Contesting Eurocentric hegemonic discourses of nationalism, racial identity and belonging, Le Albe's work aims at disavowing the audience's expectations, carving out a new aesthetic language. This is often achieved through the transcultural re-inscription of texts from

various traditions and by employing different languages and dialects according to the needs and abilities of the individual actors. Wolof, Italian, French, plus dialects from specific areas of Lombardy and Romagna manifest a creative reconciliation that replaces the imposition of colonial idioms with a reinvention of language. As Le Albe's playwright Marco Martinelli confirms, the text is imagined for the person who will enact it, and is tested and modified on the stage with the whole company, in a community-based work.

Martinelli's English version of *Moor Harlequin's 22 Misfortunes* was performed at the 2012 Lagos Black Heritage Festival by the Renegade Theatre Company of Lagos under the direction of Wolé Uguntokun. As Wole Soyinka once maintained, Harlequin must have been born in Yorubaland,⁵ considering the similarities between the Italian "Commedia dell'Arte" and the Yoruba masked comedy of stereotypes resulting from the secularised outgrowths of the *egungun*, the ancestral masquerade.⁶ On returning to Africa, Moor Harlequin's story turned the audience's expectations upside down yet again, displacing the Venetian masks from their supposedly original environment while staging Harlequin in Lagos as a migrant in Milan. The hybridisation woven into the texts uses intertextuality, time, and space as sites of encounter and dialogue, making the African Harlequin a figure of creative adaptation.

Between 1988 and 1996, a flourishing of masks and characters in Teatro delle Albe's productions expressed the transfiguration of Romagna into Africa and the contamination of Romagna and Senegal, connoting what was called the experiment of African Dawns in Ro-

⁵ I wish to thank Itala Vivan for this reference coming from an interview she had with Soyinka.

⁶ For an endorsement and daring explanation of this hypothesis see the Lagos Black Heritage Festival website: "[...] the question of cultural correlations proves most fascinating. Indeed, it gives some consideration to the whimsical notion once voiced by a Nigerian drama critic that the character of Arlecchino (Harlequin) for instance, was probably an import from the West African coast. Our theatre historian speculated that it was perhaps the work of some escaped slaves who crossed the Mediterranean in a hi-jacked sailing boat and set up a wandering troupe on the southern coast of Italy, pushing steadily inland until it fused with the country-yokel comedy of the Bergamasco. Improbable? Perhaps. Of real cultural interest is that the notion obtains a kind of artistic compliment in the reverse journey of Arlecchino to his African 'origins' via Senegal, in the contemporary working of Goldoni's play by the Marco Martinelli Afro-Italian theatre group [...]". (www.lagosblackheritagefestival.com).

magna (“Le Albe afro-romagnole”). The spectacular effect of the plays rested on individual characters, puppets and real people at the same time, in a mythical and concrete world. Their individual stories tackled the emerging issue of increasing numbers of Africans (mainly from Senegal) who had made their home in Romagna and were working as peddlers on the beaches of Ravenna and its vicinity.

Meanwhile, a new phase began with the founding of the Ravenna Teatro [Ravenna Theatre] in 1991, the *non-scuola project* [non-school project] in 1992, and the representation of the play *I polacchi* in 1998 (an adaptation of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* in the dialect of Ravenna with Mandiaye N’Diaye as Father Ubu/Pedar Ubu). This new phase started a process of unstructured artistic creation, when the community and the city itself became central to the plays and the chorus was in fact the dramatic expression of the collective. Marco Martinelli, the artistic director of Ravenna Teatro and playwright of Teatro delle Albe, writes: “Inventing a chorus is a heretical act in a society that wants us to be part of a stupid mass or desperate monads. To invent a chorus means to imagine a possible world” (Martinelli 2006b: back cover, my translation).

The city provides the spatial frame and the specific locations – roads, street corners, rooms, harbours, beaches and fields – for imagination and action, while the stage widens to include a multitude of performers. In the *non-scuola project*, teenagers become cultural producers through the experience of acting. The experiment is based on the idea of game-playing and discipline without rules, in order to concentrate and explode the creative energy of youth by generating a short circuit in the act of reading canonical texts and then manipulating them. A multitude provides the force to let the imagination burst and run free. It also offers unthinkable cultural associations and a plurality of lives and stories to be hybridised.

Connected to this is the issue of language. In the *non-scuola project*, in the production of African Albe in Romagna, and in Mandiaye N’Diaye’s project of Takku Ligey Théâtre in Diol Kadd, languages and dialects coexist as significant musical and dramatic expressions of both the personal and the communal. The metaphor of ‘land’ is used by Mandiaye N’Diaye to explain how action on the stage may bloom spontaneously, ploughing the soil of ancestral memory and taking the

lead from the emotion and music of language. It is not the creation of imaginary language, nor is it a play on sounds or a search for poetic effects. It is the language of life and people: the language of each land and of each person's story.

Now over twenty years old, the *non-scuola project* brought together two hundred teenagers from all over the world to rehearse, dance, and sing as a choir in *Eresia della felicità. Creazione a cielo aperto per Vladimir Majakovskij* [*Heresy of happiness. Open air creation for Vladimir Majakovskij*] at the 2011 International Festival of Santarcangelo di Romagna (Festival Internazionale del Teatro in Piazza). It was a free, improvised, unexpected, rebellious, happy and chaotic performance. Gestures, sounds and languages merged and lost their conventional meaning while acquiring new emotional sense in action. The *non-scuola project* operates as a non-academic drama school in Italy, Belgium, Brazil, Senegal and the United States. Its philosophy draws, here too, on Giordano Bruno's characterisation of the donkey, now taken as being a young student. For Le Albe, providing theatrical education for a heterogeneous multitude helps to promote a circuit of actions that, from different localities, will be able to spread in an ex-centric move towards new encounters, life stories, political engagement and inventions.

The Teatro delle Albe's work with Senegalese immigrants and the *non-scuola project* have been presented as a case in point for the creative encounter between Africa and Italy. They suggest the possibility of adopting a different point of view in addressing the daily events that take place in common circumstances, in order to intervene actively and usefully for the common good. This modified perspective has allowed Le Albe to participate in the local political and artistic scene, and export their message through their plays and the *non-scuola project*. Mandiaye N'Diaye's work allows us to examine imaginative performance and unexpected occurrences from the perspective of an African immigrant to Italy.

N'Diaye started as an actor in Teatro delle Albe in 1989. A young man coming from a traditional family of tailors, he had left Diol Kadd in Senegal a year before to migrate to Italy with the dream of becoming a soccer player. His illusions were failing when he met Marco Martinelli. Out of this accidental encounter (when he made people be-

lieve that he was an actor because he did not want to be a *vu cumprà* or peddler on the beaches of Romagna) he became one of the first storytellers on the stage of African Romagna. For N'Diaye, acting was in itself a transgression, a defiance of traditional norms. Because he did not belong by birth to a family of griots, he was not entitled to investigate into, narrate or enact traditional knowledge. However, from then on, his actions in Ravenna and in Diol Kadd would gradually modify the village people's understanding of their tradition and of N'Diaye's imported knowledge. Meanwhile, his acquired proficiency in the dialect of Ravenna made him active in rescuing oral stories of Romagna, as well as in composing new plays in dialect, like *Le due calebasse* [*The two calabasses*] (1990), a re-elaboration of Birago Diop's fable. As N'Diaye himself maintained in a conversation with the writer of this essay, he defines himself as coming from both Romagna and Senegal. Tracing the various paths of his identity also means unveiling and gathering the threads of past histories, both in Africa and in Italy. Interestingly for the argument of this essay, African immigrants in Ravenna, like Mandiaye N'Diaye and Algeria-born Tahar Lamri, contribute to reclaiming local cultural forms and oral traditions that had often been forgotten. In *A casa del padrone* [*The caregiver*] (Lamri 2009), Lamri unravels a popular love song in the dialect of Ravenna for the foreign caregiver of an elderly Italian man. The art of storytelling is central to the play *Griot Fûler* (1993) (*fûler* means storyteller in the dialect of Ravenna), in which Mandiaye N'Diaye and Luigi Dadina tell of storytellers who belong to different traditions and yet fight together against the oblivion of words.

The fruitful exchange between Africa and Italy, Ravenna and Diol Kadd, in N'Diaye's life had a dramatic turn in 2003. Regularly employed in the staff of Teatro delle Albe, he decided to go back to his village and establish the Takku Ligei Théâtre. There he developed a project around three Ts: *terra/turismo/teatro* [land/tourism/theatre], and employed the people of the village as *coltiv-attori* [cultiv-actors].⁷

⁷ Reportages of this experiment are the film '*Diol Kadd*'. *Vita, diari e riprese in un villaggio del Senegal*, directed by Gianni Celati and presented in Rome in 2010, and the book *Takku Ligei: un cortile nella savana. Il teatro di Mandiaye N'Diaye* by Linda Pasina (2011).

Mandiaye N'Diaye's interests and the themes of his plays draw inspiration from apparently well-known, canonical features of African arts of expression: orality, fables and drumming. However, it is his dramatic style of composition that most deserves attention. It is based on improvisation, suggestions from storytellers, and the encounter between classical texts and ordinary daily life. *Leebu Nawet ak Noor*, produced by Mandiaye in 2006, was composed after a dispute in Diol Kadd around the appropriate time to sow seeds. The play was first performed in Wolof and later in Wolof and Italian as *Il gioco della ricchezza e della povertà* [*The game of wealth and poverty*]. Following the legacy of Le Albe, Mandiaye N'Diaye's dramaturgy draws on classical texts from his diverse cultural traditions and observes the present from a perspective that focuses on both the particular and the general. Aristophanes' *Plutus* provided the classical reference for the play. On the national stages familiar to N'Diaye, two political leaders unable to use their power ethically offered a contemporary reference: the president of Senegal (Abdullaye Wade) and the prime minister of Italy (Silvio Berlusconi).

Sundiata, written in 2009 and clearly inspired by the African epic, was a reworking of tradition to interpret and understand the present. With explicit reference to the unbalanced relations between Africa and technologically and financially advanced countries, *Sundiata* actualises the problems between Africa and Western nations, and within African societies themselves. It ponders on the role of elders and polygamy, and on the function of the World Bank and of multinationals in Africa.

Finally, *Nessuno può coprire l'ombra* [*Nobody can cover the shadow*], first performed in June 2011 at Teatro Rasi in Ravenna, is N'Diaye's production of a 1991 play by Marco Martinelli, in which he had painted himself black to mimic an African man. Performed in Wolof and Italian by Senegalese actors of the Takku Ligej Théâtre, entirely rehearsed in Diol Kadd by young performers who had never been to Italy, N'Diaye's re-elaboration is the result of a special experiment. It expresses a "mélange d'utopie et de pragmatisme", to use Mbembe's words in *Sortir de la grande nuit* (2010: 23), as, too, do the actions of Mandiaye N'Diaye as actor, playwright, founder and artistic director of the Takku Ligej Théâtre. In Mbembe's words, the aspira-

tions of Africa will be realised through effective practices and actions born out of the creativity and daily difficulties of peoples who share solidarity and exchange traditions, memories, experiences, feelings and goals. As Africa is not only a place, it may guide a re-discussion of what Mbembe calls “la question de l’homme” (2010: 17), quoting Senghor in arguing that Africa may help Europe to rescue “le supplément d’humanité qu’elle avait perdu” (18). Teatro delle Albe has attempted to enact a form of “Afropolitanism” (221) in its practice of working with African immigrants, spreading the *non-scuola project*, and developing an acute investigation into the evolving social dynamics of the city of Ravenna. Diol Kadd Mandiaye N’Diaye’s work both with Le Albe and with the Takku Ligey Théâtre shows the inventive “Afropolitanism” produced by Africa and the Africans.⁸

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⁸ Mandiaye N’Diaye is presently working on a project aimed at establishing a Network for Young African Talents (N.A.T.) sponsored by the European Community. Initially developed in Italy, Senegal, Mozambique and Cameroon, the linkage will include Kenya, since N’Diaye will meet Marco Baliani in Nairobi in January 2013 to start a collaboration within the N.A.T. The network will operate with children and teenagers in order to fight against their vulnerability through promoting their artistic gifts.

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