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Misericordia (Mercy). Directed by Emma Dante. Interpreted by Italia Carroccio, Manuela Lo Sicco, Leonarda Saffi, Simone Zambelli. Piccolo Teatro di Milano – Teatro d'Europa, Teatro Biondo di Palermo, Atto Unico / Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale, 2020. 55 minutes.

Misericordia marks Emma Dante's second collaboration with Milan's Piccolo Teatro, Italy's first permanent playhouse and one of the country's most influential theatres at both national and European levels. After the wordless *Bestie di scena (Beasts on Stage)*, 2017), an upsetting and provocative play where naked performers are made to communicate only through their bodies, Dante returns to the motif of silence. This time, however, this is understood not as the absence of words, but rather as the emotional and existential vacuum of the women living on the fringe of society — a female underworld that the director brings to the surface whilst eschewing facile didacticism, moved as she is by a genuine interest in this marginal space and an urge to give voice to those who cannot speak.

Dante looks beyond the strictly biological family structure to explore female friendship — with all the inevitable tensions that this entails — and its power to unsettle conventional social arrangements. She does so by turning to a claustrophobic and “underground” environment, a sordid one-bedroom house that Anna (Leonarda Saffi), Bettina (Italia Carroccio) and Nuzza (Manuela Lo Sicco) share with *u picciinteddu* [a little one] Arturo (Simone Zambelli), the developmentally delayed orphan son they have taken in and raised as their own. This suffocating *milieu*, dark and windowless, acts as a protective embryo while the women's affection is a soothing balm to Arturo's otherwise grim existence. The storyline follows the three matriarchs going about their daily lives, working as knitters during the day and as prostitutes at night, providing for Arturo the best they can. While the play mostly consists of domestic scenes, the tales of the three women afford us an antecedent for the present narration. We learn of the death of their fellow prostitute and friend Lucia (this is Arturo's biological mother) at the hands of a violent client of hers and of their decision to raise the orphan boy. The moment we see him on stage, Arturo is about to break from this state of symbiotic mother(s)-child relationship. Anna, Bettina and Nuzza have arranged a better life for him, one where he will have “a room of his own, with a window where sunlight can enter the home.” What exactly this future will consist of we are not told, and the last glimpse we have of Arturo is one of him holding a suitcase full of life memories — his pillow, his toys, his goodnight books — while waiting for an unnamed “musical band” to come and pick him up.

Drawing on Dante's own words, the whole play symbolizes the act of “giving birth,” or at least reflects the maternal “womb.” What comes to mind is the image of the *chora*, which is notoriously used by Plato to characterize (essentialize) woman as a welcoming den of allegedly innate nurturing qualities. However, it is also true that *Misericordia* is far from a replication of the philosophical paradigm that seeks to entrap “woman” within her motherly potential, whether or not Anna, Bettina and Nuzza perform maternal functions. After staging childbirth in *Verso Medea (Towards Medea)*, 2016) as an orgiastic rite where the newly born are lulled to sleep by men, Dante both reiterates and builds on the idea of motherhood as a performance dislodged from the body that has given us birth.

None of the three women are Arturo's biological mother, their work as prostitutes further inflicting a blow to the patriarchal representation of motherhood and the paradigmatic Madonna-child imagery of familial organization. More in line with feminist psychoanalytical rewritings of the platonic *chora* as an instinctual phase in the child's psychosexual development, the narrative's liminal space

unfolds as a semiotic continuum where gender categories are yet to be activated. The fixed female universe in which Arturo lives is the only site within the broader social sphere where he is able to negotiate the self. Dressed in female attire, he shows no awareness of being male — confirming Dante's penchant for blurring gender.

Misericordia is filled with a most original musical palette, ranging from popular soundtracks (Fiorenzo Carpi's music for the film *Pinocchio*) to traditional nursery rhymes ("Oh che bel castello") and passing through a blend of klezmer. Characters react to the tunes until they stop (more or less abruptly), which leaves them disoriented while they seemingly listen to the fading notes that are still echoing in their ears. The interplay between sound (dialogue) and silence (aphasia) is of particular importance within the economy of the play. Arturo, for instance, does not talk — with silence effectively conveying the puppet-like status of the disabled, orphaned boy. He giggles, kisses, laughs and cries. Speech fails him, so he uses his body to communicate as he slips in and out of his clothes to engage in mind-blowing choreographies just like a puppet controlled by invisible threads. Performed with visceral expressivity and outstanding technical control, Arturo's dancing left the audience of the Piccolo Teatro so much in awe that they rose to their feet more than once for a well-deserved mid-show round of applause.

Contrastingly, the hermetic Palermo dialect spoken on stage is undoubtedly going to be mostly impenetrable by an unfamiliar audience. This might lead one to wonder what the rationale behind such a choice might have been. The answer may lie in the need to give prominence to the gestural sign, which potentially encourages the spectator to turn to the bodies, movements and facial expressions of the actors which, in Dante's theatre, have the power to make the unintelligible intelligible. At other times, verbal language is made redundant such as when, in the opening scene, Anna, Nuzza and Bettina are seen sitting in a row (face to the audience) while knitting. In this scene, the clashes of their hooks take the form of overlapping human voices as they each try to prevail over the other — an image that prefigures the women's occasional quibbling throughout the play.

When presenting *Misericordia* at the start of the new season at Piccolo Teatro last autumn, Dante argued that, for her, "motherhood" meant "shelter." This association is masterfully rendered in her play through the maternal metaphor of the slum/womb where the narration is set. It is here that the three women's love for Arturo is — borrowing from the play's script — a "ray of light" in a micro universe that is otherwise marred by abuse, misery and squalor. Framing the story in a culturally rich yet deeply traditional Sicily, Dante's play interrogates larger social issues related to gender and identity that go well beyond the strictly geographical. Despite the occasional squabble over stolen food or unpaid bills — which certainly provides moments of comic relief for the audience — the relationship between the three women is sustained by, and channeled towards, the good of Arturo.

The offspring of an abusive carpenter named Geppetto, the boy is a disabled Pinocchio who retains the wooden movements of his fictional counterpart, Collodi's well-known puppet. More importantly still, Arturo is the glue that holds Nuzza's, Anna's and Bettina's lives together. In broaching the issue of gender violence, *Misericordia* highlights the ongoing relevance of the recent and escalating phenomenon of *femminicidio* (femicide) in Italy. But *Misericordia* is also a story about family ties, gender boundaries, broken relationships and mental impairment. Furthermore, its representation

of aging women's bodies effectively conveys themes of social decay, social injustices, or gender violence that speak as much to an international audience as it does to a home audience.

A signature of Dante's theatre, mimicry is executed with painstaking research and copious detail. The actors often exaggerate their movements, which allows us to recall Sicilian marionette theatre. Here, however, the clash between the performers'/(puppets') comic and hyperbolic gestures, and the tragic nature of the narrated events, turns our laughter into compassion — indeed, *misericordia* (mercy). This mercy is felt towards Nuzza, Bettina and Anna whose bodies are shown in all their decadence and imperfection in a burlesque-like night-time parade as they sell themselves. Despite living in abject poverty, they do not forget what it means to be human. We also feel it towards Arturo, who addresses the women who have raised him as *mamma*. This word, uttered just a few moments before the end of the play, provides an interpretative key to Dante's ideological project as a whole. Dislodged from its biological ties, motherhood is posited as a performative identity — a doing rather than a being — and theatre as a performative means that opens it up to reconfiguration.

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