

In Dante's Footsteps: From Ravenna to Timișoara

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The shady *Zona Dantesca/del Silenzio* around the poet's local church, Basilica of San Francesco, quickly became my favourite refuge from the sun during my charmed visits to Ravenna. Of course there's the wonder of the tomb itself, a symbol of the ongoing homages to the master. Just looking at the small garden to the monument's right filled me with peace of mind. Growing up in Romania and then living more than half of my life in Austria, I was not familiar with the verses of *The Divine Comedy*. Needless to say that I had knowledge of the contents of Dante's Masterpiece, but it was never part of the program I studied in school, like e.g. Goethe's *Faust* or Mihai Eminescu's *The Evening Star* (Luceafărul), a narrative poem in 98 strophes – my mother knew them all by heart.

So it was in Ravenna that my deepening trip into Dante's work started thanks to Marco Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari. Their choice of quotation from The Divine Comedy enticed me to want to try to read the whole. I was always fearful without a guide, that I would fail. But Marco and Ermanna proved to be the perfect guides.

Vita... oscura... smarrita...

with these words whispered by Ermanna in 2017 in front of Dante's tomb, followed by the famous verses from the *Inferno*

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,

che la diritta via era smarrita

rendered by the choir formed by citizens began my fascinating voyage.

I had heard of the *chiamata pubblica*, but didn't think that the energy of the crowd surrounding me could be so intense. Once we started moving, total strangers emerged from buildings and joined the street procession. This invoked a bizarre but powerful feeling of 'being in it together'. "This can be done only in Italy", said a French journalist walking besides me. I still wonder if he might have been right, though I dare say it has more to do with the concept of the founders of the Teatro delle Albe of staging The Divine Comedy by asking for the complicity of the Ravenna people. Actually, "staging" is not the correct word. Marco and Ermanna's work is not "brought on stage", but "brought to life" so as to build a true community theatre.

The idea of touching each and every one of the spectators/participants – there were quite a few hundreds of us on that serene summer evening in Ravenna – seems unmatched to me. No wonder that my strongest emotion was the one felt when Ermanna took my hands and made me cross the threshold of Hell, or more precisely of the ancient church of Santa Chiara aka Teatro Rasi. *PER ME SI VA* said the inscription above the door.

The beautiful theatre hall of the Rasi was well-known to me, but its transformation for *The Inferno* was quite astonishing. With remarkable attention to detail Ermanna and Marco managed to create a real hellish ambience. Although I do understand and speak Italian well enough, it was mainly the visual part that remained engraved in my memory. What struck me most of all were the ladders, not only the ones hanging on the sidewalls of the entirely unrecognizable hall, rather the painting on the wall in the corridor leading to the gallery. There was never much time left to study it in detail, as we had to continue our tour at fast pace. However, by going past it a couple of times, I couldn't keep visualising the "Stairway to Heaven" fresco painted on the exterior of the Sucevița Monastery in Northern Romania sometime in the early 1600s. And then of course there was the illuminated blue ladder leaning against the tree trunk in the garden behind the ancient church of Santa Chiara when, at the end of the performance we all went out *a riveder le stelle*.

But, besides the visuals there is the story of Dante's voyage through Hell which was made comprehensible by Marco's interventions. He is a master story teller. The notes he kept pulling out of his pockets, reading thereof the commentaries on *The Divine Comedy* amassed along the years, enticed me to further exploring Dante's masterpiece long after the performance in Ravenna was over. So it was two years later during *The Purgatorio* that I became aware of the way Ermanna and Marco show us that *The Divine Comedy* is still up-to-date even 700 years after its creation. They infuse the "fantasies" Dante imagined in afterlife with 21st Century anxieties, musing on the comparison between the divinely created Hell and the hell mankind has created for itself. Stinging with social criticism, *The Inferno* and *The Purgatorio* come across as a contemporary rendering full of surprise and wit for those familiar with Dante's original as well as for those descending for the first time in *The Divine Comedy* like myself.

There was a conspicuous allusion to Greta Thunberg versus the end of *The Purgatorio*, upon arriving at the *Paradiso terrestre*. And then there was Joseph Beuys. Is it pure coincidence that at the time I am writing this text, the author of the famous quote "Every human being is an artist" is being celebrated in a big way in german-speaking countries

(on May 12 he would have been 100 years old)? Above all, The Purgatory of the Teatro delle Albe is a recurring metaphor of school.

Ora sei a buon punto.

Sei il bimbo che balbetta

il primo giorno di scuola

seduto al suo banco.

Ora salirai il monte

imparerai la lingua nuova

il nuovo alfabeto.

Sei pronto?

With this wording Ermanna invited us, spectators/participants, to become schoolchildren, in order to build a new world together. For me, the choir of "worms and butterflies" was the most powerful scene: seated in school benches, people of all ages and races declaimed, shouted or whispered the verses of Dante and other poets in various languages. A profound proof of Dante's humanism was unfolding before our eyes! And, once more, an evidence that aesthetics can be political. "Not every political statement that I share is aesthetically sound but nearly every theatrical utterance that makes an aesthetical impact on me carries a powerful political charge", said theatre critic Marina Davydova in her opening discourse of the Russian Case 2021. I can't but agree with her.

Yet, the spirit of the Divine Comedy is universal, it isn't confined only to Ravenna or Italy. It goes even beyond European borders. What better proof of this than Marco's art film *The Sky over Kibera*? The acclaimed theatermaker proves to be a flawless filmmaker. 150 masterly guided protagonists "bring to life" The Divine Comedy in the immense slum of Nairobi, Kibera. Nothing is left to chance: the choice of the three teenagers acting as Dante, Virgil and Beatrice, the enthusiastic children forming the chorus reciting, singing and dancing and of course, the wording. Having had the privilege of preparing the German subtitles of the movie, I took the occasion for a profound examination of Marco's text. He succeeds in reinventing Dante's masterpiece this time in English and Swahili.

But let's turn back to Ravenna and The Purgatory. I would say that initially huge iron staircases caught my attention in the garden shared by the Musical Institute Verdi, the Garibaldi retirement home and the Rasi Theatre. The choir of women who died a violent death wailed, later on the chorus of wrathfuls roared on them.

Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello,

*nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta,
non donna di province, ma bordello!*
(*Purgatorio*, canto VI, vv. 76-78)

shouted the latter and reminded me of the way Marco took up Dante's invective against "servile Italy" in *fedeli d'Amore* by applying it to the present. This is the longest of the seven panels of the polyptych interposed by Marco between The Inferno and The Purgatory as another homage to Dante Alighieri. Light and sound installation combined with large video projections formed an astounding experience. I don't remember having felt anytime the urge of holding my breath so often as I did while listening to Ermanna's voice and Simone Marzocchi's trumpet, or rather to the silence between their appearances during the panels of *fedeli d'Amore*.

But how do Marco and Ermanna accomplish this invisible liaison that manifests itself in the form of mysterious Love, capable of moving each one of us? I can count myself as one of the lucky ones that had the opportunity to follow them to Timișoara in 2019. They were working there with a couple of youngsters, preparing their *Paradiso* as well as The Divine Comedy trilogy for Timișoara European Capital of Culture 2021. It was a sublime experience to see them walking through the city in Western Romania searching for adequate settings for The Inferno as well as for climbing the mountain of The Purgatory and finally for the unfolding of The Paradiso. It was in Timișoara that the Romanian Revolution started in December 1989. It soon spread throughout the country. Having a keen eye on good locations, Ermanna kept looking at the local Orthodox Cathedral as a possible venue. But each country has its own habits. While strolling on the pedestrian alley connecting the Opera with the Orthodox Cathedral, we learned of the terrible episode of December 17, 1989 in which the gates of the Cathedral were closed to everybody. The army fired on those protesting for freedom who then fell dead on the steps of the church. Fortunately this remained a single episode: three days later from the balcony of the Opera, Timișoara was declared the first Romanian city freed of communism.

Apart from searching for possible venues, Ermanna conducted daily laboratories with future Romanian guides. As part of the original "non-school" educational program of the Teatro delle Albe, one day the young participants were asked to suggest Romanian poems to be used in the shows. These were read aloud, translated and information about the authors was provided. The topic was corruption. I was surprised by the various verses the youngsters chose. However, I felt that nothing matched yet the conversion of a specific illegal behaviour like fraud or profiteering in a poetic way. How is this achieved?

Well, we all know that in the meantime the pandemic has made a mess of all (cultural) plans. But I think that I have the answer to the question above. So I am looking forward to experience this last piece of the puzzle: The Paradiso conceived by Ermanna and Marco together with the citizens responding to their new *chiamata pubblica*. Hopefully we will be allowed to touch and embrace each other again soon. Because Ermanna and Marco's creations based on Dante's masterpiece cannot be envisioned otherwise.