

SINESTESIE ONLINE

SUPPLEMENTO DELLA RIVISTA «SINESTESIE»

ISSN 2280-6849

a. XI, n. 37, 2022

RUBRICA «RIFRAZIONI»

Pirandello and Multilingualism: Paolo Magelli directs 'The Mountain Giants'

ZAFIRIS NIKITAS

ABSTRACT

L'articolo esamina lo spettacolo I giganti della montagna di Luigi Pirandello, diretto nel 2018 dal regista italiano Paolo Magelli. La produzione implementa il multilinguismo per esplorare la dialettica dell'inclusione e dell'esclusione nell'Europa contemporanea. Allo stesso tempo, illumina la qualità eterna della drammaturgia di Pirandello che rispetta senza tempo, a capite ad calcem, le emergenti tensioni socioculturali dell'Europa attraverso rinnovate interpretazioni di messa in scena. Il progetto specifico, che ha avuto luogo presso il Teatro Nazionale di Croazia, è stato realizzato con la collaborazione di cinque teatri minoritari in Europa, riflettendo un approccio multinazionale. Nell'articolo si indagano gli aspetti culturali, performativi e pedagogici legati alle performance e ai laboratori che si sono svolti nel contesto del progetto. L'accento è posto sulla funzione del multilinguismo come strumento performativo e commento culturale.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Pirandello, Magelli, Multiculturalismo, Identità europea

The article examines the performance of The Mountain Giants by Luigi Pirandello, directed in 2018 by the Italian director Paolo Magelli. The production implements multilingualism in order to explore the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Europe. At the same time, it illuminates the everlasting quality of Pirandello's dramatic oeuvre that mirrors timelessly, a capite ad calcem, the emerging sociocultural tensions of Europe through renewed staging interpretations. The specific project, that took place at the Croatian National Theatre, was realized with the collaboration of five minority theatres in Europe, reflecting a multinational approach. In the article we investigate the cultural, performative and pedagogical aspects of the performance and the workshops that took place in the context of the project. The emphasis is given on the function of multilingualism as a performative tool and a cultural comment.

KEYWORDS: Pirandello, Magelli, Multiculturalism, European Identity

AUTORE

Zafiris Nikitas insegna Teatro presso l'Università Aristotele di Salonicco (Grecia). Ha conseguito il Dottorato di ricerca in Studi teatrali (Magna Cum Laude). I suoi interessi di ricerca si focalizzano sul teatro e la cultura italiana, sul teatro delle minoranze e sulle digital humanities. Ha pubblicato articoli in greco e in inglese su riviste internazionali. È membro di un progetto di ricerca sul dramma greco antico ed è stato titolare di borse di ricerca conferite dall'Associazione Ellenica per la Ricerca e l'Innovazione. La sua monografia, Representing the Nation, è in corso di pubblicazione.

zafirisnikitas@yahoo.gr

An Ode to Inclusion

In 2018 the Italian director Paolo Magelli directed *The Mountain Giants* at the Croatian National Theatre Ivan Zajc in Rijeka.¹ Pirandello's unfinished play, an intriguing study on the chimeric myth of art, was transformed into a decisive comment on the dynamics of inclusion in modern Europe. The importance of the performance expands beyond its performative identity and connects with the sociocultural dialectics on European identity in relation to national minorities. At the same time, the approach of Magelli reflects the multiplicity of the meanings emerging from Pirandello's dramatic oeuvre "in vitro", through the director's lens.² In the course of the article, drawing from my experience as a theatre scholar as well as a director, I will analyze the multifaceted performative, pedagogical and cultural dimensions of the selected performance. Magelli, as we will see, delivers more than an ode to inclusion.³ He also answers to the question: How can Pirandello be relevant today (through directing and staging)? The playwright noted in 1926 that relativism is the only true constant of life: «Una realtà non ci fu data e non c'è, dobbiamo farcela noi: non sarà mai una per tutti e per sempre ma di continuo e infinitamente mutabile» ('For reality is not a thing conferred upon us or which exists; it is something that we have to manufacture ourselves, if we will to be; and it will never be one for all, one forever, but continuous and subject to infinite mutations').⁴ Yet Magelli illustrates that Pirandello's relativism is far from a pessimistic surrender: it can be turned into an energetic engagement in the social fluxus. It can explore the "infinite mutations" towards a desired goal.

¹ My warmest thanks to Professor Annamaria Sapienza of the Università degli Studi di Salerno for the thoughtful notes on the article. The article is part of my scientific research on Minority Theatre realized at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

² *The Mountain Giants* have an extensive and interesting performance history, notably the four different performances directed by Giorgio Strehler at the Piccolo Teatro in 1947, at the Schauspielhaus in Düsseldorf in 1958, (again) at the Piccolo Teatro in 1966 (with major critical acclaim) and the Brooklyn Academy of Arts in 1995, see: D. HIRST, *Giorgio Strehler*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 13.

³ For Magelli's work (both in terms of political connotations and performative aesthetics) see for example: M. SORLI, *The Internationalization of Slovenian National Theatre Between 1989 and 1996: The Seven Years of Popular Theatre*, in *Global Changes–Local Stages. How Theatre Functions in Smaller European Countries*, edited by H. van Maanen, A. Kotte and A. Saro, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2009, pp. 438–441.

⁴ L. PIRANDELLO, *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, a cura di G. Mazzacurati, Einaudi, Torino 1994, p. 78; ID., *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*, trans. Samuel Putnam, Howard Fertig, New York 1960, p. 132.

The dramatic narrative and the core themes of *The Mountain Giants* lend themselves to a plethora of (stage and literary) interpretations.⁵ The open-ended nature of the play reinforces the hermeneutic possibilities. Pirandello was describing the plot of the play in interviews in 1928 and 1929 but had not concluded the work at the time of his death in 1936. The third act survives only in the form of a prose summary taken by Stefano Pirandello, the playwright's son. In the play *Ilse*, a Countess and an actress, arrives with her theatrical troupe in "Villa Scalogna", inhabited by Cotrone, a magician, and his companions. *Ilse* and Cotrone disagree on one of the major aspects of art: its connection to the audience. She wants to present a play to the public, yet he chooses the elitist retreat. When he decides to exit the safe space of his surroundings, it turns out that the "giants" (that could range from Fascism to capitalism) are waiting.⁶ The dualities that lock horns are multiple: spirituality and materialism, solipsism and connectivity, creativity and authority, art and power.⁷ Magelli makes sure to choose the elements that reinforce his vision of inclusivity, while also maintaining a series of dialectic ambiguities.

The first major aspect that needs to be addressed relates to the institutional background that led to the performance. The specific project was realized through the collaboration of five European minority theatres.⁸ These are organizations that reinforce the linguistic and cultural presence of national minorities in their country. The institutions that collaborated were the Italian Drama of the Croatian National Theatre, the German Theatre of Timisoara (Romania), the Slovene Permanent Theatre in Trieste (Italy), the National Institution Albanian Theatre (Skopje) and the

⁵ For *The Mountain Giants* see: P. PUPPA, *Fantasma contro giganti. Scena e immaginario in Pirandello*, Patron, Bologna 1978, pp. 7-31; R. ALONGE, *Missiroli: "I giganti della montagna" di Luigi Pirandello*, Multimagini, Torino 1980, pp. 12-47; C. VICENTINI, *Pirandello: il disagio del teatro*, Marsilio, Venice 1993, pp. 112-148. For the wider context of Pirandello's work (such as *Six Authors in Search of an Author*) also see the more recent bibliography: F. TAVIANI, *La minaccia di una fama divaricata*, in L. PIRANDELLO, *Saggi e interventi*, Meridiani Mondadori, Milano 2006, pp. xiii-cii; F. TAVIANI, *Pirandello prima e dopo "Sei personaggi"*, in ID., *Uomini di scena, uomini di libro. La scena sulla coscienza*, Officina, Roma 2010, pp. 72-94; D. TOMASELLO, *I "Sei personaggi" e la prima 'occupazione' del Valle*, in ID., *La drammaturgia italiana contemporanea. Da Pirandello al futuro*, Carocci, Roma 2015, pp. 15-34.

⁶ For the diverse interpretations see: M.A. FRESE WITT, *Pirandellian Fascism, Metatragedy and Myth*, in ID., *The Search for Aesthetic Fascism in Italy and France*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 2001, p. 127; J. MAZZARO, *Pirandello's "I Giganti della Montagna" and the Myth of Art*, in «Essays in Literature», 22, 1995, p. 227.

⁷ For the tensions rising in Pirandello's work see also: Z. NIKITAS, *Metatheatre and Identity: An Examination of Luigi Pirandello's Plays*, in «Journal of Art and Humanities», Vol. 11, No. 2, 2022, pp. 9-23.

⁸ For Minority Theatre see my recent research: Z. NIKITAS, *Refugee Narratives: "Case Farmakonisi or The Justice of the Water"*, in «Critical Stages», 14, 2016: [Refugee Narratives: Case Farmakonisi or The Justice of the Water – Critical Stages/Scènes critiques \(critical-stages.org\)](https://critical-stages.org) [accessed 1.6.2022]; ID., *Aegean Monologues: Teenage Refugees in Greece as Playwrights*, in «Culture and Research» (under publication).

Hungarian Theatre Kostolanyi Dezso (Serbia). More than just a multinational initiative, the specific collaboration underlines in an institutional level the need for diversity and inclusion in the context of the European identity. In addition, this multilingual project was a central part of the “(Re)discovering Europe” program of the European Union’s “Creative Europe” initiative. The premiere of the production took place at the beginning of 2018 at the Croatian city of Rijeka, a city that was named the European Capital of Culture for 2020 and marked the perspective of this seminal sociocultural event as a space of dialogue on Europe’s nations. The two-language banner hanging over the entrance of the Croatian National Theatre in Italian and Croatian (“I giganti della montagna/Gorski Divovi”) stressed the production’s approach (see pic. 1).

Magelli clarified from the beginning the outlook that permeates his staging of *The Mountain Giants*. His approach was characterized by a dual interpretation, underlining both the possibilities of connection (through language) and the dominance of oppression (through politics). In this way, Pirandello’s play becomes a way to reflect the tensions of inclusion and exclusion within the European identity. The “giants”, in Magelli’s view, are the majorities that diminish minorities into outcasts and disrupt the osmosis of democratic coexistence. The answer to such an overbearing danger (that looms like the rise of Fascism in Pirandello’s days) can only be the unifying implementation of multilingual and multinational diversity. As the director noted, his aim was to showcase that «language is not a barrier but freedom».⁹ He added that minorities in Europe are «a reality that is unprotected» while the majority becomes less tolerant.¹⁰ The economic reality in Europe in relation to culture is one more aspect reflected by the director who noted that the financial giants of today decrease the funding of culture. According to Magelli, the dystopian diminishing of art as a social mechanism (one of Pirandello’s themes in *The Mountain Giants*) is still relevant today in the poetics of European identity.

Multilingualism and Performativity

The multilingualism of the performance is its major choice in order to elevate the message of inclusion. The production is performed in Italian, German, Slovene, Albanian and Hungarian with subtitles in Croatian and Italian. The performative result is a multifaceted soundscape of voices bearing the cultural connotations of five

⁹ [No Author], “*Mountain Giants*”. *When Language is not a Barrier but Freedom*, in <https://hmk-zajc.hr/en/mountain-giants-when-language-is-not-a-barrier-but-freedom/> [accessed 1.6.2022].

¹⁰ IBID.

different Balkan and European countries. In this was Pirandello's play (already diverse in its meanings) is enriched and reframed with the staging choices. Now the audience does not see only Countess Ilse and magician Cotrone sharing different opinions on the cultural potency of theatre but performers that are already sharing a common ground of multilingual diversity. Magelli makes clear that the key for European inclusiveness (and, in extension, theatre and art) is the acceptance of different roots, not its silencing. Modern Europeans, much like the members of Ilse's travelling troupe and Cotrone's companions, are faced with the challenge of reinforcing the dialectics of their uniqueness and belonging. The director is no stranger in the strive for connection between sides that may seem opposing. In 2007, more than ten years before *The Mountain Giants*, he realized a production in Belgrade that brought together Croatian and Serbian actors in a collaborative project for the first time after fifteen years. Back then the newspaper «Jutarnji list» commented that Magelli connects «both banks of the Drina», underlining metaphorically the cultural bridging of a national gap.¹¹ In *The Mountain Giants*, the director goes even further, linking the voices of minority theatres that extend from the Balkans to Italy and from there to Germany, all in a Croatian stage.

Theatre scholars have underlined the multilayered performative and cultural function of theatrical multilingualism. Marvin Carlson has noted the tension between the real and the convention: «A character speaking an alien language is a particularly clear example of this ongoing struggle in theatre between verisimilitude, the actual or apparent utilization of the real, and artistic convention, which adjusts and qualifies reality in the interests of consensual strategies of reception».¹² In Pirandello's play (and Magelli's performance) this interplay of the real and the conventional, the theatrical and the metatheatrical, the actual and the invented, is more than fitting. *The Mountain Giants*, as a result, are illuminated even more clearly (as a Pirandellian text) through multilingualism. Christopher Balme has noted that the use of multilingualism is often a comment on colonialism. The «theatrical syncretism» created by the use of this performative tool is a «conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of the colonial or post-colonial experience».¹³ In the case of Magelli, of course, it is the European identity (and the complex poetics of belonging) that come under investigation, not the detachment of

¹¹ D. KUNA, B. KUNA, *Naming Strategies and Neighboring Nations in the Croatian Media*, in *Contesting Europe's Eastern Rim: Cultural Identities in Public Discourse*, edited by L. Saric, A. Musolff, S. Manz and I. Hudabiunigg, Multilingual Matters, Bristol-Buffalo-Toronto 2010, p. 83.

¹² M. CARLSON, *Speaking in Tongues: Languages at Play in Theatre*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2009, p. 13.

¹³ C. BALME, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, p. 2.

decolonization. The European identity, as a common cultural and institutional entity, incorporates tensions, ruptures and discontinuities, not only an overbearing sense of shared citizenship. The specific production brings on the surface the (often) compromised state of linguistic and national minorities through the power-play of majorities. After the tension of the debt crisis in Europe in 2009-10, the migrant crisis of 2015 and the waves of the possible Grexit and the (then imminent) Brexit, Magelli echoes a pressing background of questionmarks related to the unified socioeconomic identity of Europe in the 21st century.

The multinational collaborators of the specific project is another essential element. The construction of the interpretive prism of the performance was realized with the input of the dramatist Zeljka Udovicic Plestina while the setting (also crucial as we will see) was constructed by Aleksandra Ana Bukovic and Lorenzo Banci. The lighting was prepared by Dalibor Fugosic and the costumes by Manuela Paladin Sabanovic. The performers taking part in the production, coming from the five minority theatres, reinforced the cultural and national diversity. And they brought the sound of their language on stage, not acting foreign but being native. Pirandello's words were echoed in five different languages underlining the universal quality of his work. For example, Valentina Banci was Ilse, Mauro Maliverno was Cotrone, Aniko Kiss was Diamante, Duccio Doccia was Nobleman Zeqiri, Doroteja Nadrah was La Sgricia and Boris Kučov was the Dwarf. The polyglot symphony orchestrated on stage by the director links the aural embodiment of identity (through the language of the performer) with his country of origin. In this way the spectator "hears" diversity as an added layer to Pirandello's dialectics.

The directing choices of Magelli's production reflect the theoretical perspective of his approach.¹⁴ The minimalistic setting, in subdued colours, is juxtaposed with the colourful (yet low-key) costumes of the performers. A green and a white dress for the women, a beige and brown costume for the men create figures that are out of time (between Pirandello's Interwar period and contemporary Europe). The choice of timelessness connects the performance with the past and the future without being overly literal (in terms of its message for the European identity of today). Ilse wears a light colored dress while Cotrone dark clothes, underlining their difference. The stage is covered with sawdust and a scenographic element, a dark springboard, dominates the centre of the stage. Muted and enigmatic, this element insinuates the balance between the power of the gravity and the ability to overcome it, using only the body (and the mind). In a play that incorporates dream-like elements, with dolls coming into life, the limit between the real and the unreal, the possible

¹⁴ For recent tendencies related to the staging of Pirandello's work see, for example: A. SAPIENZA, *Smascherare il dramma: la regia di Carlo Cecchi dei "Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore"*, in «Sinestesia», XXIII, 2022, pp. 225-235.

and the impossible, is overridden by ambiguity. The lighting also reinforces the dream quality. Not only the reality of European identity but also the dream of European identity is explored through Magelli's directorial endeavor. One of most decisive moments is the end of the performance, when Ilse dies and so dies (symbolically) the future of European culture. Her beige dress is smeared with scarlet colours (see pic. 2). Yet this end, in this complex play (and well-orchestrated performance), is more like a threatening nightmare and less a decisive (and didactic) reality. Magelli incorporates the Pirandellian ambivalence to showcase what may happen. Change, from this perspective, is still possible.

Towards a Pirandellian Pedagogy

The pedagogical parameter of the project under examination is also an important one.¹⁵ A series of seminal workshops were realized in the context of the initiative, during the month of the premiere. The first workshop was held by Magelli and it was titled "Actor in theatre dell'Arte".¹⁶ The workshop focused on the historical and philosophical context of *The Mountain Giants* in order to illuminate its diverse background and, more than that, explore its contemporary interpretation. The workshop hosted students of the acting department as well as the other departments of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. At the same time, it reinforced the multilingual aspect of the project as it also hosted students from other participating cities from Italy to Romania (namely Trieste, Skopje, Subotica and Timisoara). As a result, the performative multilingualism on the stage was linked with the educational multilingualism off the stage. Ilse makes sure to underline in *The Mountain Giants* that she is an actress more than a Countess, and the acting workshop of Magelli illuminated acting as a common ground of young evolving European citizens (beyond national identity and economic class). The second work-

¹⁵ For the rising of pedagogical paradigms in the context of National Theatres in the Balkans (e.g. in Greece) see my article: Z. NIKITAS, *The Young People's Stage of the National Theatre of Greece: Cultural and Pedagogical Paradigms*, in «Critical Stages», 22, 2020: [Critical Stages/Scènes critiques - The IATC journal/Revue de l'AICT - December/Décembre 2020: Issue No 22-The Young People's Stage of the National Theatre of Greece: Cultural Politics and Pedagogical Paradigms \(critical-stages.org\)](https://criticalstages.org/) [accessed 1.6.2022].

¹⁶ The use of Commedia dell'Arte techniques by European directors as a tool for the actor's training and the performance itself has an extended background from Vsevolod Meyerhold to Jacques Copeau and from there to Giorgio Strehler. I address the subject in my upcoming monograph *From Stanislavsky to Grotowski: Theatre Directors in Europe*. For an overview on the subject see: *Commedia dell'Arte in Context*, edited by C. Balme, P. Vescovo and D. Vianello, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018.

shop was implemented by an educator, not an artist. It was held by Lade Cale Feldman, Professor at the Department for Comparative Literature of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. The title of the workshop was “Who was the first Countess Ilse or Pirandello and the actress” and focused on Pirandello’s relationship with actress Marta Abba. Abba’s cold reception of the first reading of the play, when Pirandello presented it to her, is one of the possible reasons that may have stalled the completion of the play.¹⁷ The workshop, as a result, illuminates the autobiographical elements that inform the creative life of the playwright. A last initiative was a lecture by Morana Cale, Professor of Italian literature at the Department of Italian of the Faculty of Social Sciences in Zagreb, entitled “Theatre and New Media”, that expanded on Pirandello’s work through the lens of new media.

On an ending note, it is important to reflect on the universalism of the ingenious Italian playwright that is Luigi Pirandello. Magelli’s production and the sociocultural dialogue of the minority theatres reveal the everlasting ability of the Pirandellian oeuvre which can become a mirror of different historical eras and pose pressing questions rather than deliver comforting answers. *The Mountain Giants* incorporate, as a play, the dichotomies that can bring society into a halt but can also energize the initiation of difficult yet purposeful change. Magelli’s approach chose a dominant performative element, the aural diversity of multilingualism, in order to underline the ability to communicate beyond the chasms of differences. Pirandello was interested in the “naked masks” of humanity.¹⁸ He reflected on the idea that social, personal and artistic masks dominate human interactions. Theatre was a paradise of metatheatrical fluidity. Magelli was interested in reframing Pirandello’s play in the context of contemporary European citizenship. He made sure to pinpoint the masks that prevent inclusion.

¹⁷ For Pirandello’s letter exchange related to *The Mountain Giants* in the spring of 1929 see: C. KLETTKE, *Le case di Pirandello a Berlino e una poesia sul Landwehrkanal*, in *La Germania di Pirandello tra sogno e realtà. Atti del Convegno internazionale per il 150° anniversario della nascita di Luigi Pirandello (Berlino/Potsdam, 26-27 ottobre 2017)*, edited by C. Klettke, Frank & Timme, Berlin 2019, pp. 33-34.

¹⁸ L. PIRANDELLO, *Maschere nude*, Fratelli Treves, Milan 1918.

PHOTO APPENDIX



Picture 1: The two-language banner of the performance at the National Theatre of Croatia (Photo: National Theatre of Croatia)



Picture 2: Ilse (actress Valentina Banci), in the middle, at the end of the performance (Photo: National Theatre of Croatia)



Picture 3: The director Paolo Magelli (Photo: National Theatre of Croatia)