

BOOK REVIEW

Nuovo scenario italiano: Stranieri e italiani nel teatro contemporaneo, by Maria Cristina Mauceri and Marta Niccolai, Rome, Edizioni Ensemble, 2015, 260pp., €15 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-6881-123-5

In 1861, Italy became a nation, uniting different languages and cultural traditions, interweaving them in the Risorgimento to become one imagined community. The centralisation of Italian identity, through government, print media and television, homogenised and unified diverse cultures so that for many decades it was possible to have a clear repertoire of images and sounds (however stereotypical) of the many varieties of being Italian. Such images fed on and into local and national realities. But those images were only one side of the story and privileged certain histories and languages over others, ignoring, for example, the experiences of those who were subjected to Italy's cultural and imperial influences in East Africa. As Italy transitioned from being a poor country of emigrants to find itself a wealthy and desirable destination of immigrants, this repertoire of images became even less reflective of the peninsula's lived realities.

Over the past few decades, more complex images of what it means to be Italian have emerged via the cultural production of migrants, and of Italians in collaboration with them. Such images are the subject of this book, which is based on extensive research undertaken on recent collaborations between migrants and native Italians in Italian theatre.

In the early 1990s, migrants began to enter the Italian imaginary as protagonists of novels and short stories and African migrant authors began to write books in Italian. It is seldom acknowledged that, prior to the publication of such literary works, the first collaborations between migrants and Italians took place on stage (p. 11). From 1988, inter-ethnic theatrical productions placed migrant figures and migrant actors together. Theatre companies such as Il Teatro delle Albe (Sunrise Theatre) and Mascherenere (Black Masks), for example, sought to work with migrants for cultural and artistic reasons, putting on stage cultural forces that were revitalising Italy (p. 12). The authors contrast the ongoing collaborative nature of such theatrical productions with the temporary, short-lived literary enterprises of this era, which tended to be circumscribed by the commercial interests of large publishing houses capitalising on a growing public interest in immigration.

Few studies exist on migrants in contemporary Italian theatre, in part due to the relative inaccessibility of theatrical productions when compared with the circulation of books or films on the subject. *Nuovo scenario italiano: stranieri e italiani nel teatro contemporaneo* deftly fills this lacuna and establishes an unprecedented archive of contemporary theatrical production that involves migrants on the Italian stage, surveying over 50 works produced in Italian for Italian audiences during the period of 1988–2010. The book is organised around the concept of creole-transcultural theatre which draws on Édouard Glissant's poetics of creolisation and Armando Gnisci's European transculturation, to refer to the possibility of encounter between cultures and to denote collaboration between Italian playwrights and migrant actors (p. 9).

The book is divided into three chapters titled 'Creole theatre', 'The foreigner in dramas and comedies by Italian directors', and 'Narrative theatre'. Mauceri and Niccolai attend in particular to the powerful ways in which humour can enable us to deal with serious issues and break down

cultural barriers, altering audience perceptions of what it means to be a migrant in Italy today. The first chapter, for example, focuses on the works of the Ravenna-based company, Teatro delle albe (the book is dedicated to the memory of one of its late collaborators, Mandiaye N'Diaye). The chapter analyses a number of their plays, in particular *Le disavventure di un Arlecchino nero contemporaneo: I 22 infortuni di Mor Arlecchino*, which places contemporary migrants within the Italian Commedia dell'arte tradition.

A women's theatre collective, AlmaTeatro (Soul Theatre) is also taken into account in this section. AlmaTeatro emerged in 1993 from the Turin-based Alma Mater inter-cultural association which worked with native Italian and migrant women in order to promote dialogue between the different cultures and languages present in Italy. The Italian directors of this collective, Gabriella Bordin and Rosanna Rabezzana, viewed their being together in the wake of emigration as a way to mend torn cultural networks, while remaining conscious that identities are like maps, continually being 'redesigned by encounters with others' (p. 108).

Most of AlmaTeatro's theatrical productions have their origins in autobiographical accounts of the women participants: the body of the actor and the body of the specific woman storyteller thus overlap, at least culturally. Key concerns of their plays include globalisation, Italian internal migration in the 1960s, and contemporary migration. Mauceri and Niccolai analyse three recent works: *Chador e altri foulards*, *Chi è l'ultima* and *Storie sommerse* which all respond to the social preoccupations of the women involved. *Chador e altri foulards* (*The chador and other scarves*), for example, tackles issues surrounding the veiling of women from the perspective of the women themselves, offering insights that are rarely heard in mainstream media or in public discourse. The play's cast is made up of two native Italian women and one Somali woman. The women say the word 'veil' in a variety of languages in order to highlight the different cultural adaptations of the veil. The play concludes by reminding its audience that veiling may be a choice or it may be imposed on women: in the latter case, it becomes a shroud marking 'the social death' of a woman (p. 111).

Women's bodies are also the subject of *Chi è l'ultima* (*Who is the last one?*), set in the waiting room of a medical clinic, again with a cast of three women of different cultural provenances: Italy, Nigeria and Somalia. The women discuss the ways in which they are subjected to societal beauty norms and how they have internalised such norms (the Somali woman, for example, remembers wanting to be infibulated as a child in order to fit in) (p. 112). This play ends with elderly women's 'voices from yesterday', encouraging the benefits of infibulation, that are heard in contrast to women's voices of today in which women discourage the practice. The 'last woman' to undergo such societal pressures to modify herself, however, is yet to appear.

Mauceri and Niccolai address 'the problem of the so-called second generations' in the first section of the book through the work of directors who collaborated with Rom migrants. The intention of the director Daniele Lamuraglia, of *Cristo Gitano* (*Gypsy Christ*), for example, was to 'give voice and bring to light realities that tend to be obscured and have no alternative spaces in which to represent themselves' (p. 80). Yet in spite of such cultural production, the political reality of *jus sanguinis* continues to enforce the perception of migrants as second-class citizens.

Mauceri and Niccolai's book documents the rich and growing emergence of the presence of migrants within Italian theatre. This is a vital project in an era in which humans have never been more mobile and, paradoxically, bordered. The most innovative works surveyed, according to the authors, are those collaborations between theatre companies directed by Italians with migrant collaborators. Most of the directors in these instances interrogated their own cultural assumptions by spending time immersed in the cultures of the migrants with whom they collaborated (p. 213).

By placing migrants at the centre of their plays, such directors sought to invert the colonising gaze and instead adopt one that would decolonise audience sensibilities. There is no doubt that such works are precious intercultural instruments. Yet none, as Mauceri and Niccolai admit in their conclusion, feature migrant characters who have fully integrated into Italian society (p. 215). Migrants thus remain ‘foreigners’ in Italian eyes. In this sense, the book raises questions for further investigation.

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