Innovation and Tradition: Kantor, Grotowski, and the Sicilian School in the Theatre of Emma Dante

THESIS

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Francesca Spedalieri

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Master’s Examination Committee:

Lesley Ferris, Advisor

Nena Couch
Abstract

Sicilian theatre actress, director, and playwright Emma Dante is one of the most intriguing figures of the contemporary Italian theatre scene. This thesis will explore how the theatre of Emma Dante finds its roots in both the European avant-garde of the late twentieth century and in the theatrical tradition of the Sicilian School. I will use Dante’s first trilogy, *La trilogia della famiglia siciliana*, as a case study, paying particular attention to the last work of the trilogy, *Vita mia*. Throughout the thesis, I will take a historiographical approach to research, using a variety of primary and secondary sources, including personal interviews and DVD recordings of performances of Dante’s company: Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale.

The introduction to the thesis will provide a short biography of the Sicilian director, a brief overview of her theatrical works, and a detailed description of *La trilogia della famiglia siciliana*.

The first chapter will specifically look at the connections between the theatre of research pursued by Emma Dante, Tadeusz Kantor, and Jerzy Grotowski. Exploring differences and similarities among the theatrical practices of those three directors, the chapter will address questions related to theatre of research, total theatre, theatre laboratories, and actor training, ultimately connecting Dante’s work with the European avant-garde of the late twentieth century.
The second chapter will frame Dante’s work in the context of the Sicilian Theatrical School, paying particular attention to the works of Verga and Pirandello. By rapidly exploring the socio-economic repercussions of historical events connected to the *Questione Meridionale* and the *Questione della Lingua* on the Sicilian people and, consequently on Sicilian artists, the chapter will present thematic threads connecting the works of Dante with those of the theatre of the Sicilian School.

I will conclude that, with her exciting theatre of research, Emma Dante is able to balance a drive for innovation inspired by the European avant-garde for the past four decades while continuing to honor the tradition of the Sicilian theatrical school to which she belongs.
Dedication

To my famiglia.
Acknowledgments

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Emma Dante, who has been and will continue to be an inspiration for my own theatrical career.
Vita

2004.............................................I.B. Diploma and I.B. Extra Diploma in
  Further Mathematics, United World College
  of the Atlantic, Wales

2008.............................................B.A. Theatre, University of Florida

2011 to present ..................................Graduate Teaching Associate, Department
  of Theatre, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Theatre
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii  

Dedication ............................................................................................................................ iv  

Acknowledgments ................................................................................................................ v  

Vita ........................................................................................................................................ vi  

Fields of Study ....................................................................................................................... vi  

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. vii  

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 1: European Influences: Kantor and Grotowski .................................................. 26  

Chapter 2: Influences from the Sicilian Theatrical Tradition ........................................... 61  

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 91  

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 96
Introduction

I do not claim that everything we do is entirely new. We are bound, consciously or unconsciously, to be influenced by the traditions, science and art, even by the superstitions and presentiments peculiar to the civilization which has molded us, just as we breathe the air of the particular continent that has given us life. All this influences our undertaking, though sometimes we may deny it.

(Jerzy Grotowski. Towards a Poor Theatre, 24)

Over the past three decades, the Italian peninsula has been underrepresented in the global theatrical scene. If we were to set aside the historical influences of Commedia dell’Arte and Italian Futurism, as well as the works of Nobel Laureates Luigi Pirandello and Dario Fo, the only widely recognized, contemporary Italian contribution to the international theatrical community would appear to come from the theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio (based in Cesena, founded in 1981 by Chiara Guidi, Romeo and Claudia Castellucci). Due primarily to the lack of governmental financial support, this theatrical absenteeism from the international scene soon resulted in a disappointingly low number of English translations of Italian performance text and critical literature on performers, their theatrical productions, and the theories behind those productions. The absence of English translations makes it particularly difficult for a body of English language
criticism of the contemporary Italian stage to evolve, limiting the presence of the rich and socially active Italian theatrical community in the international critical dialogue. When in 2009 the Italian government cut all funds to the Ente Teatrale Italiano or E.T.I. (Italian Theater Association), the slow, steady regress in the artistic vitality of the country reached a climax. With the dismantling of the E.T.I., Italian theatrical practitioners witnessed the disappearance of the last stronghold defending and showcasing the theatrical significance of the *Bel Paese*\(^1\) on a national and international scale. Often penniless and unable to present their work to audiences abroad, contemporary Italian theatre companies and artists have continued to flourish, some of them achieving fame that transcend the Italian national borders. Mostly based in the central and northern part of Italy, those artists create new works that can be loosely categorized as belonging to two umbrella theatrical trends: *Teatro di Narrazione* (Theatre of Narration) and *Teatro Totale* (Total Theatre). While *Teatro di Narrazione* can be defined as theatre that relies on the tradition of *cantastorie* (popular storytellers) and on the power of the word to bring to the audience socially and politically charged solo performances – as in the case of Dario Fo (b.1926), Marco Paolini (b.1956) and Ascanio Celestini (b.1972) – finding a cohesive definition for *Teatro Totale* is a much more challenging task.

Re-elaborating the idea of *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) presented by Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and the Theater of Cruelty of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), Alfio Petrini (b. 1950) provides in his *Manifesto del Teatro Totale* a definition of total theatre that seems to perfectly encompass the theatrical trend of Italian *Teatro Totale*.

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\(^1\) Meaning ‘The Beautiful Country,’ phrase with which Italy is often identified.
Italian actor, director, theatre critic, and academic, Petrini has founded and directed the Centro Nazionale di Drammaturgia Teatro Totale based in Rome since the early 1990s. This center for theatrical research and avant-garde is dedicated to promoting the development of works of total theatre. In 2007, Petrini published *Teatro Totale, una Proposta, una Pratica*, which is the first Italian book solely on the subject of total theatre. In his writings, Petrini envisions total theatre as a complex performance art that uses the whole spectrum of theatrical communication, not only words, weaving together live performance and visual art. Proposing a theater “that goes beyond the classic representation of identity” (Petrini, “Manifesto della Nuova Drammaturgia” n.p.), Petrini’s total theatre treats language as one possible pathway to reach or leave behind emotions, aspiring to bring spectators to unexpected theatrical encounters. A director who truly creates works of *Teatro Totale* should take into consideration everything that could be used to communicate – including the body of the actors, costumes, properties, scenery, light, sound, and new technologies – but should only use those elements based on the necessity of their presence and not their mere availability. In particular, in a performance of total theater the usefulness of technological devices on stage is subordinated to their ability to enhance the communication between the stage and the audience. Similarly, the use of actor techniques primarily focused on character psychology, or “psycho-techniques” as Petrini labels them (“Sul Teatro Totale” n.p.), has to be subordinate to the actors themselves in their subjectivity and humanity, since it is only then that the “total act” of an actor’s body, voice, and mind can “include both the material and the immaterial side of a human being […] revealing the precious load of individuality actors
bring with them” (Petrini, “Sul Teatro Totale” n.p.) that is fundamental for the creation of
total theater. Large Italian companies such as Societas Raffaello Sanzio, MOTUS (based
in Rimini, founded in 1991 by Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Francesconi Nicolò),
Teatrino Clandestino (based in Bologna, founded in 1989 by Pietro Babina and Fiorenza
Menni), Fanny & Alexander (based in Ravenna, founded in 1992 by Luigi de Angelis and
Chiara Lagani), Teatro Valdoca (based in Cesena, founded 1983 by Cesare Ronconi and
Mariangela Gualtieri) and Compagnia Pippo Delbono (based in Modena, founded in 1987
by Pippo Delbono\(^2\)) are living examples of Petrini’s definition of total theatre. Focusing
on the totality of the theatrical act, the works of those companies organically involve the
senses and the body, technology and words.

Among the Italian companies that Petrini considers examples of Teatro Totale, we
find Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale directed by Emma Dante. A Sicilian theatre
company based in Palermo, Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale, is one of the few
contemporary professional theatrical ensembles in Italy today to be directed solely by a
woman and to claim to pursue theatrical research. It is also one the few companies from
southern Italy to have achieved national and international praise in a time when the
southern region of the peninsula seems to be theatrically dormant. Using the “conceptual,
imaginative, and aching theater” of Societas Raffaello Sanzio with its striking images,
and the “direct, immediate and simple method of communication that is based on the
word and on narration” (Porcheddu 49) exemplified in the works of Celestini, the work of
Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale can be considered as a perfect example of Petrini’s

\(^2\) Pippo Delbono started his career as an actor and a dancer. In 1987 he met Pina Bausch and was invited
by her to take part in one of her Tanztheater works.
This thesis will analyze Dante’s work as a model of Teatro Totale product of both European innovation and Sicilian tradition.

After providing a brief biography of Emma Dante and an outline of her works in the introduction, I will provide an overview of European theatrical practitioners who directly influenced the works of Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale. In the first chapter of the thesis, I will focus on framing Dante’s work in the context of the European model of theatre as research. For the scope of this thesis, I will limit my analysis to comparing the theatre of Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990) and Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), and, by proxy, the theatre of Artaud, with that of Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale, since both Kantor and Grotowski were acknowledged directly by Dante as inspirational in the creation of her theatre of research.

The second chapter will delineate the connections between Emma Dante’s theatre and the Sicilian theatrical tradition. It will present her works as derived from those of the Sicilian theatrical canon, thematically overlapping the high-brow theatre of Verga and Pirandello with the contemporary, low-brow theatre of Salvo Licata, Franco Scaldati, and Davide Enia. Throughout the thesis, I will use Emma Dante’s first trilogy or the La trilogia della famiglia siciliana (The Trilogy of the Sicilian Family), concentrating on the performance and textual analysis of the last play of the trilogy, Vita mia (Life of Mine) (2004), as a case study. Ultimately, the thesis will present Dante’s Grotowskian Poor Theatre – technology-less and heavily imagistic – as a contemporary exciting presence on Italian stages. Further, it will try to illustrate her theatre as one that integrates the European idea of ‘theatre as research’ with the traditional themes and concerns expressed
by Sicilian theatre, eventually presenting a thrilling example of Southern Italian total theatre worthy of international consideration.

Surveying the existing literature on Emma Dante, I found no published material in English and very little material written in Italian. None of these publications directly addresses the subject matters of this thesis. Currently, there are only two critical books on Dante’s theatre: Anna Barsotti’s *La lingua teatrale di Emma Dante: mPalermu, Carnezzeria, Vita mia* (*The Theatrical Language of Emma Dante: mPalermu, Carnezzeria, Vita mia*) (2009) and Linda Dalisi’s *Messa in scena della mafia. Cani di bancata: il metodo maieutico di Emma Dante* (*The Mise-en-scène of the Mafia. Cliff Dogs: Emma Dante’s maieutic method*) (2009). Barsotti’s book provides insights on some of the traditional Sicilian themes present in Emma Dante’s work and explains how Dante’s alternate use of the Italian language and the Sicilian language – in the dialect of Palermo – create a new theatrical language intrinsic to her performance texts. Dalisi’s book is a fascinating study on the development of the play *Cani di Bancata* (*Cliff Dogs*) (2005). Although not analyzed in this thesis, *Cani di Bancata* is considered to be directly related to Dante’s first trilogy, dealing with the Sicilian mafia as an extended family. In *Messa in scena della mafia*, Dalisi undertakes a scene by scene journey through the play, presenting snippets of interviews with Dante, movement diagrams, drawings, production pictures and paragraphs of critical analysis to clarify the performance text or the final *mise-en-scène*. This book provided fascinating insights in Dante’s production process for *Cani di Bancata* which were useful in understanding her overall artistic process. In addition to reading published and unpublished performance texts staged by Compagnia
Sud Costa Occidentale – including Dante’s first and second trilogy – I based my research on theatrical reviews and published and unpublished interviews with Dante and some of her collaborators. Among those, the interviews collected by Andrea Porcheddu in *Palermo Dentro: Il Teatro di Emma Dante* (*Palermo Inside: Emma Dante’s Theatre*) (2006), by Luisa Cavaliere in *Anticorpi: Dialoghi Con Emma Dante E Rossella Postorino* (*Antibodies: Dialogues with Emma Dante and Rossella Pastorino*) (2010), and by Delia Centonze in *Emma Dante: Il Lusso della Memoria* (*Conversazioni su T. Kantor*) (*Emma Dante: The Luxury of Memory* (*Conversations on T. Kantor*)) (2006) have been invaluable to understand her theatrical method and the origins of her theatre. While Centonze’s interview specifically focuses on the link between Dante’s work and Kantor’s theatre and is used in Centonze’s unpublished undergraduate honors thesis *Sul Teatro di Emma Dante: La Suggestione di Tadeusz Kantor* (*On the Theatre of Emma Dante: The Suggestion of Tadeusz Kantor*) (2006), Porcheddu’s and Cavaliere’s interviews have a larger scope. The first concentrates on delineating a biographical portrait without deeply exploring the European or Sicilian connection of Dante’s work; the second attends, among other topics, to the significance of Dante’s work in the sociological context of southern Italian women as literary authors.

This thesis follows a historiographical approach, primarily concentrating on how Dante’s theatrical training and her upbringing in Palermo have influenced her productions since “[a]ll artistic works, no matter how innovative they may be, exist in relation to an artistic heritage of conventions and models” (Postlewait 14). Thus, this

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thesis looks at the relations between Dante’s performances, the societal context in which they manifested themselves, and their reception by the audience. In the introduction to this thesis, I have consulted Joseph Farrell and Paolo Puppa’s *A History of the Italian Theater* (2006) in order to rapidly sketch the contemporary Italian theatrical scene and to understand where the work of Emma Dante fits in such artistic landscape. Most importantly, I have used the findings which emerged from the personal interviews I conducted with Italian theatre historians and practitioners, such as Raffaele Furno, Alfio Petrini, and Anna Sica, during my research trip to central and southern Italy, which took place in the summer of 2010 and was supported by The Ohio State University Department of Theatre, the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, and the William Case Kramer Fellowship.

Raffaele Furno received his Ph.D. at Northwestern University in Performance Studies and is currently a professor at the Center for Italian Studies of Arcadia University in Rome as well as the co-founder and artistic director of the Compagnia Teatrale Imprevisti & Probabilità (based in Formia, near Latina, founded in 1998). In addition to explaining the economic difficulties that the Italian theater world is enduring, Furno provided me with an extensive and insightful list of contemporary theater practitioners and projects of national and international interest which gave me a strong research departure point. While Alfio Petrini helped me better understand his definition of *Teatro Totale* and painstakingly illustrated which contemporary theatre companies are practicing total theatre according to his definition, Anna Sica’s contribution to my research was much more focused on Sicilian theatre. Currently a research professor of theater at the
University of Palermo, Anna Sica earned her Ph.D. in Theatre in the early 1990s from the Universitá La Sapienza based in Rome. Sica’s interview specifically helped me trace the theatrical genealogy of Emma Dante’s work as part of the Sicilian tradition which is of fundamental importance to the analysis in the second chapter of my thesis.

In collecting historical information regarding the Sicilian theatrical tradition and the works of Kantor and Grotowski, I used traditional methods of research verging on the analysis of secondary and primary sources such as critical texts and theatrical scripts as well as refer to the interviews collected during the course of my trip to Italy. In analyzing Dante’s works, I investigated her theoretical ideas on theatre as they transpire through Dante’s interviews and critical writings on Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale’s website, while attempting to draw a connection between them, contemporary Italian society and their reception by the Italian contemporary audience. I also used performance texts that have been either published or graciously given me by Emma Dante whom I have met in Palermo in the summer of 2010. Further, I utilized my observations of her work after attending two rehearsals of *Il Castello della Zisa*, which Dante was preparing for its debut on mainland Italy. Finally, I used the video material of some of Dante’s works kindly provided by Fanny Bouquerel and by videographer Clarissa Cappellani, who has been working with Dante since the establishment of Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale and whom I met at Dante’s rehearsals. Out of this video material, I paid particular attention to the performance of *Vita mia* filmed in Villa Medici (Rome) in 2004 which is going to be used as a case study throughout the thesis.
With the exception of few articles in French and Spanish, the majority of the published and unpublished material about Emma Dante used in this thesis was written in Italian or Sicilian language. All the relevant quotes taken from either Italian, French or Spanish texts have been translated by myself, unless otherwise noted.

**Emma Dante: Biography and Theatrical Works**

Emma Dante was born in Palermo, capital of the Sicilian island, in 1967. At the age of six, Dante’s family moved to Catania where she would spend her childhood. Returning to Palermo during her high school years, Dante felt a fascination for theatre since her teenage years. She initially attended Teatès, a Palermo-based theatre school run by the Italian playwright, director, and theatre theorist Michele Perriera (1937-2010). In 1986, at the age of nineteen, Dante left Sicily for the first time to audition at the Accademia Nazionale di Arte Drammatica ‘Silvio D’Amico’ (the ‘Silvio D’Amico’ National Academy of Dramatic Arts) in Rome to study acting. At the Accademia, she trained with nationally respected artists such as Lorenzo Salveti (b. 1949), Andrea Camilleri (b.1926), and Roberto Guicciardini (b.1933). After graduating from the Academy in 1990, Dante began to work professionally as an actress for theater, cinema

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4 Currently the director of the Accademia Nazionale di Arte Drammatica ‘Silvio D’Amico.’ Salveti teaches acting and has been a professional director for many years.
5 Camilleri is a screenwriter and novelist. He occasionally teaches at the Accademia ‘Silvio D’Amico.’ Camilleri wrote the introduction to Emma Dante’s first trilogy.
6 Guicciardini is a theatre director. He was one of the founders of the company Gruppo della Rocca, the first Italian theatrical co-op founded in 1970 in San Gimignano (and later moved to Turin) by a group of actors, directors, designers, and organizers. Guicciardini has also worked as a television director and held the artistic director position at the Teatro Biondo Stabile in Palermo from 1992 to 1998.
and television, performing side by side iconic Italian actors such as Vittorio Gassman
(1922-2000) and Marcello Mastroianni (1924-1996).

In 1995, Emma Dante briefly returned to Sicily after the death of her brother,
renouncing her partnership in the then Turin-based theatrical company Gruppo della
Rocca, which she had held since 1993. After going back to Rome, Dante spent the next
four years working as an actress in minor roles while continuing to refine her acting skills
by taking experimental theatre workshops with figures such as the director Cesare
Ronconi (b. 1951).7

A time filled with personal and family-related hardships and culminating in 1999
with the death of her mother, the years from 1995 to 1999 were the darkest in Dante’s
career and contributed to pushing the Sicilian director to question her career choice to
become an actress. She rememnes:

When I returned [to Palermo] […] – to assist my dying mother – I felt that the
whole path I had followed was a failure […]. I came back to Palermo with a sense
of failure: because I was 32 years old and, at that age, I was nothing […]. That
was the worse time of my life: I had lost my brother, my mother was dying, I was
unemployed, I had left my house in Rome, I had nothing left […]. (Emma Dante,
“La Strada” 47)

It is during that same year that Dante decided to abandon her acting career and theatre,
but only few months after her decision, she was asked by a family friend to organize an

7 Together with playwright Mariangela Gualtieri, in 1983 Ronconi founded the Teatro Valdoca in Cesena.
Primarily based on physical theatre and poetry, the works of Teatro Valdoca have received European
acclaim since its establishment. He has studied with both Kantor and Grotowski as well as collaborated
with Bread and Puppet Theatre.
experimental theatre workshop for a cultural center in Palermo. This experience revived a passion for theatre arts and, soon after, she established her own theater company in Palermo, Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale, together with actors Manuela Lo Sicco, Sabino Civilleri, and Italia Carroccio. Currently, the company is formed by its original members as well as actors Carmine Maringola, Onofrio Zummo, Claudia Benassi, Valentina Chiribella, Daniela Gusmano, and Lisa Pugliese. The work of Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale is not subsidized by the Italian government, leaving the company to survive using the money earned by selling the shows it produces. As Dante writes on her well maintained personal website⁸, which also doubles as the company’s website, finding a place to house the activities of the Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale was an arduous task. In fact, although the Sicilian director began to receive national critical acclaim in 2003, there was a strong opposition to her artistic views in her own city of Palermo that continued for many years to follow. She states that:

After years of forced idleness due to a widespread indifference and ignorance among cultural authorities and the local theatres, in April of 2008, the company and myself, with our own resources, have planted out roots in Palermo in a basement in Polito Street, behind the old cultural center of La Zisa. Our home is called La Vicaria and it was an old shoe factory. (Emma Dante: Sito Ufficiale, “S.C.O”)

Finally able to have a permanent space for her theatre work, Dante began to use La Vicaria as multipurpose space for theatrical and cultural experimentation. She writes:

⁸ http://www.emmadante.it/
Beside studying theatre through a permanent laboratory, important debates, reviews, performances, encounters and events have taken place at La Vicaria that have freed that place from the official insignia of high culture theatre. It is not by chance that those who take part in those activities are mostly common citizens (and, therefore a ‘real public’) instead of people who belong to the theatre world. 

(Emma Dante: Sito Ufficiale, “S.C.O”)

Foregoing the canonic ‘high culture theatre’ for an experimental theatre that speaks to the people of Palermo, devising new works, and acting as the literary and directorial heart of her company, Emma Dante has managed to slowly stir up the Italian theatrical scene. Her subversive and novel approach to theater has made her company known across the Italian peninsula as well as throughout continental Europe, granting Dante the possibility of performing her works in France, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and, in 2009, at the International Festival of Buenos Aires. Also in 2009, Dante made her debut on the stage of the La Scala Theater in Milan where she directed a provocative and controversial Carmen which inaugurated the 2009-2010 La Scala opera season.

Receiving national and international accolades, Dante’s work as a playwright, dramaturge and director has been widely acclaimed by critics and audiences alike. Among the most prestigious recognitions Dante received, are two Premio Ubu (Ubu Awards) for Best Italian New Work, in 2003 and 2004, which were awarded to her plays

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9 Emma Dante also wrote a novel, Via Castellana Bandiera, that was published in 2008 and translated into German by Christiane von Bechtolsheim in 2010, as well as an illustrated children’s book called La favola del pesce cambiato (2007), with illustrations by Gianluigi Toccafondo.

10 The Premio Ubu (Ubu Awards) was established in 1979 by the theatre critic Franco Quadi and it is considered the highest Italian theatre award. The name of the award derives from Alfred Jarry’s play Ubu roi (1896).
mPalermu (Inside Palermo) (2001) and Carneizzeria (The Butchery) (2002), the Gassman Award for directorial excellence in 2004, the Donnadiscena 2005 Award which she received as best Italian female director, and the 2009 Giuseppe Sinopoli Award for Culture. Today, in addition to directing all the performances of Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale and writing many of the performance texts for her company, Emma Dante also occasionally teaches directing at the Accademia Nazionale di Arte Drammatica ‘Silvio D’Amico’ as a guest artist. These high artistic acknowledgments have consecrated Dante’s theater as one of the most vital and provocative on the contemporary Italian stage. With a theater of aesthetically beautiful imagery hiding an under-armor of substantial social content, supported with bold choices in acting and staging, Emma Dante has carved a niche for her artistic talent in the contemporary Italian performance arts scene.

Looking at the performance pieces Dante developed with her company, we can trace an evolutionary arc which began with early experimental works such as Il Sortilegio (The Spell) (1999) and La Favola di Farrusca e Cherastani (The Fairytale of Farrusca and Cherastani) (2001), which were staged with highly theatrical make-up and costumes, and still infused with the aesthetic sensibility of Ronconi’s Teatro Valdoca. Dante rose to a more mature artistic level in 2001 when she first staged mPalermu and, since then, she

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11 In presenting the award to Emma Dante, the 2009 Giuseppe Sinopoli Award for Culture Committee stated: “Among the most significant figures of one of the most exciting novelties of the Italian theatre, that is the rank of those who we might define as directors-authors, Emma Dante does not belong to the group of those who look at the literature that has preceded them, but, because she is connected to her own memory, her cultural roots, she develops the themes of her theatre in a way that is incredibly personal with power of expression and some sort of visionary aggression that is never exonerating, but that shows, in its different outcomes, the mark of an urgent necessity.” (qtd in “A Emma Dante il Premio Sinopoli.” Live Sicilia Quotidiano Online. September 29, 2010. Web.)
has developed a very specific personal aesthetic. Among her later works we find Dante’s first trilogy, centered around the Sicilian family and containing *mPalermu, Carneizzeria* and *Vita mia; La scimia (The Monkey)* (2004); *Mishelle di Sant’Oliva (Mishelle from Sant’ Oliva)* (2005); *Cani di Bancata, Il Festino (The Party)* (2007); *Le Pulle (The Whores)* (2008); *Anastasia, Genoveffa, e Cenerentola (Anastasia, Genoveffa, and Cinderella)* (2010); and Dante’s 2010 second trilogy, *La trilogia degli occhiali (The Trilogy of the Glasses)* which includes *Acquasanta (Holywater)*, *Il castello della Zisa (The Castle of La Zisa)*, and *Ballarini (Dancers)*. Differently from the rest of Dante’s works, which are original devised pieces written by Dante herself, *La scimia* is an adaptation made by Elena Stancanelli of Tommaso Landolfi’s 1946 novel *Le Due Zitelle (The Two Spinsters)*. Occasionally regarded as autobiographical works, the plays of Emma Dante only reference her life slightly. Mainly, her performances are fruit of the imaginative mind of the Sicilian director who extrapolated the essence of her experience as a child growing up in a Sicilian middle class family in the 1970s and 1980s, her life on the Italian mainland, and the clash of those experiences with the reality faced after her return to the island following the death of her brother and mother. The deaths in her family, although devastating, are only a small part of what ultimately influenced her writing. In this respect, Dante affirms:

My family is no different from others. Clearly it is not the family I talk about in my works, also because mine is a bourgeois family: in my house there’s never been misery or stories of incest nor violence. There has been grave mourning, but my theatre is not autobiographical. (Dante, “La Strada” 31)
Dante’s relationship with her family has played an important role in her life as a woman and as an artist. She believes that, being the first point of social contact, family is fundamental to the formation of one’s identity and one’s relationship with the world (Dante, “La Strada” 30). It is not surprising that her first widely acclaimed work, *La trilogia della famiglia siciliana* (The Trilogy of the Sicilian Family) verges on this inescapable social institution.

**The Trilogy of the Sicilian Family**

Emma Dante’s first trilogy is a conglomerate of stylized reflections on the Sicilian family and Sicilian society. Each 45 minutes to one hour in length, the three plays constitute a series of theatrical studies on Sicily and Palermo that explore interconnected social issues and look at the decay of Sicilian society as the metaphorical death of the island. Published in 2007, *La trilogia della famiglia siciliana* is a journey through mutilated families, deprived of parental figures. Particularly, the families of *mPalermu* and *Carnezzeria* lack both a father and a mother, while in *Vita mia* there is only a maternal figure. The trilogy undertakes a journey that is also accompanied by death and its symbolism. While present in all three works, in *mPalermu* death is just hinted at when, in the last scene of the play, the audience assists at the quick an unexpected death of Nonna Citta, the matriarch of the family. In contrast from the first work of the trilogy, in *Carnezzeria* death is present on stage throughout the performance as a storm ready to begin, and it marks every move made by the four siblings, following closely the young

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12 This issue will continue to be explored in a larger, more societal sense in *Cani di Bancata*, where Dante tackles the mafia and its organization.
sister, Nina. In the last work of the trilogy, *Vita mia*, death constitutes the painful underscore to the entire performance, permeating the whole performing space and becoming embodied in Chicco, the youngest son.

The first play of the trilogy, *mPalermo* (Inside Palermo), is centered on the immobility and silence in the city of Palermo, and consequently, in the whole of Sicily. It focuses on a small social nucleus, that of the five members of the parentless Carollo family, and follows their attempts to fulfill an apparently simple task that proves impossible for them: leaving the house for their ritual Sunday stroll. The play captures a Sunday in the life of the five members Carollo family: Rosalia (the sister), Zia Lucia (the aunt), Giammarco (Rosalia’s brother in law), Nonna Citta (the grandmother), and Mimmo (the brother and the most authoritative). The play begins with the whole family lined up at the line demarcating the end of the stage and the beginning of the house, facing the audience. Each of the actors holds a little packet containing a single patisserie item. As the play progresses, we assist to aggressive verbal exchanges between the male characters and towards the female characters as the characters talk about their clothes, the differences between Sicily and everything that is not Sicily, and soccer. After playing a short and chaotic game of soccer and having restored the little dessert packets to their rightful owners, the family stares at Giammarco who binges on everyone’s dessert and, eventually, regurgitates them on stage. Disappointed by the waist of their treats, the characters waste also the limited water supply present on stage in the form of a full plastic jug. They take their garments off and in their underwear dance in the water which is falls on them like rain. Eventually emptying the jug, the characters put their clothes
back on and attempt once again to leave the house. All characters assume the same position they held at the beginning of the play except for the eldest one, Nonna Citta, the grandmother, who stays behind the others and dies unexpectedly. At the end of the play, the characters line up once again facing the audience, closing the day in the same way it had begun.

*mPalermu* speaks of a division between the inside and the outside a demarcation line that is uncrossable. Entrapped between the well known confines of their home, the immobilized family becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of instituting change on the island, to go beyond well known confines, to begin a journey. As the other plays of the trilogy, *mPalermu* does not have a traditional plot, but as Andrea Camilleri says in the preface to the trilogy, it is a situation that could be considered as a “starting point” (11). It presents a family lined up at the threshold, impregnated with gestures that cannot be transferred from the character’s minds into their flesh and blood. The family is connected through an umbilical cord to their home and their city. This is a city that encourages waste and the superfluous as we can see in the scenes of the devouring and regurgitating of the pastries, as well as in the wasting of water in a land where water is historically one of the most precious goods. The play presents a land where no concrete actions are taken, but there is a continuous staging of ceremonies, of rhetorical gestures that are not concrete but hint and wink at the possibility of real action. The audience observes a family that has one task only: to act, to cross the threshold of the house, and, consequently, to finally be able to stop fabricating lies to justify its immobility. For the whole duration of the performance the audience witnesses a series of aborted attempts at
freedom and is eventually left with a family that is constantly ready to leave the house and yet frozen in a permanent act of going, echoing Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*.

In *Carnezzeria (The Butchery)*, the second play of *La trilogia della famiglia siciliana*, Dante puts on stage a family composed of three brothers, Paride, Toruccio, and Ignazio, and one sister, Nina. The play begins in a festive climate. The stage is adorned for a wedding, resembling the decoration of a traditional religious festival that take place in a small town, but there is an air of imminent danger that cannot be hidden by all the festive lights on stage. At the beginning of the play, the three brothers carry their pregnant sister on stage. Nina is wearing a white wedding gown with a black sash wrapped around her belly and getting ready for the wedding that her brothers have arranged for her. She waits from someone from the main land, from the region of Calabria, who is going to be her groom. It soon becomes clear that the wedding is a farce and that there is no groom. The real objective of the brothers is to get rid of their mentally ill sister, abandoning her in a foreign land, away from home. In fact, *Carnezzeria* is an unholy ceremony to absolve Nina and her brothers of the sin of an illegitimate pregnancy.

As the play progresses, Nina takes out from her black sash old family pictures that bring out to dirty family secrets. Growing up, the bothers were sexually abused by their father and how their suppressed rage and resentment turned against Nina. When, with a violent beating of the girl and an orgiastic scene, the many years of sexual abuse of the mentally ill sister are revealed, it is easy to understand that Nina’s belly is swollen with the bastard son of incest. As the brothers continue to attempt to abandon their sister and quarrel with each other, the baby in Nina’s belly seems to become more and more animated.
Controlling Nina’s body, her pregnant belly makes her dance about like a demonic possession. Nina goes into contractions many times, but her brothers force her to wait, to keep the baby unborn. At the end of the play, the brothers succeed in abandoning Nina who, inadvertently, hangs herself upside-down with her nuptial veil.

In describing Carnezzeria, Dante writes in the introduction to the published text:

I have seen eyes of lizards in people’s faces, semi-hidden by eyelids; eyes of horse, red with blood; and eyes of cows, shining and wet, veiled with a heartbreaking sweetness. Those were men ripped from themselves; slaughtered by a meaningless life. Those animals are scared and dangerous, participating in longstanding suffering and have lost, with time, every human connection.

Carnezzeria is the story of one of those families of slaughterhouse meat, with its morbid connections, with its hysterical and paralyzing escapes […]. (75)

Dante puts on stage exactly one of those “families of slaughterhouse meat,” each of its members parading something bestial in their eyes, their bodies, and their voices. In this play, the existence of the three brothers revolves around appearance: their sin, the sin of their family, cannot be made public. The horror of the family’s life has to be kept a secret to obey the sacred law of respect so that the three males could preserve their dignity and continue to be looked at with respect, without having to cast their eyes down in shame.

The brothers are beasts who claw, fight, and bite to hide their responsibilities, who do not hesitate to sacrifice the weak after having used them for their amusement. Carnezzeria becomes a way for Dante to examine this metaphorical world of beasts that is Palermo, to get inside their heads, to manage to “see things between the mud the same way a pig sees
them” (Dante, Carnezzeria 76), and, eventually, to understand the absurdity of the codes of honor present in Palermo.

The last piece of the trilogy, *Vita mia*, is possibly the text that is most autobiographical in the whole trilogy. It is contaminated by Dante’s own losses: the death of her brother and her mother. The play is a funerary vigil as seen from the prospective of a desperate mother who has witnessed the death of her youngest son. Entering the room when the performance is going to take place, the audience is faced with an empty stage and a bed in the middle of it. The audience is invited to take a sort of space-time journey since the room where the spectators congregate, for what will be revealed as a vigil, is a hole into nothing: “it is the place where the soul is suspended into the air for a moment before being ripped apart from the body” (Dante, Carnezzeria 137). The performance begins with the mother looking lovingly at her three sons, Gaspare (the eldest), Uccio (the middle child), and Chicco (the youngest). Gaspare and Uccio stand around the bed while Chicco makes big circles with his bicycle around the bed and then his family members. He continues to spin around the bed until he stops and joins the others around the bed. The mother beings to talk to the audience, sharing her life and the difficulties her family had to endure. She talks about her three sons, who are her whole life, explaining that Gaspare is unemployed because of his unwillingness to work and not because, as he says, there’s no work. She then introduces Uccio, who is not very bright, and Chicco, who prefers to play soccer instead of studying and having a better future. As the play continues, we assist to a strange game during which the three brothers take turns in jumping on the bed, which ends with Chicco going back to ride on his bicycle followed
by his brothers, while the mother prepares the bed for the death vigil. After the catafalque is ready, the mother dresses Chicco in a white funerary suit and makes him lie down on the bed where he stops moving. Few instants later, instigated by his mother, the body of the dead Chicco begins to convulse and contract, managing to temporarily inject life into himself and to escape death. Chicco runs around the room until, full with life, he re-enact the instant of his death (when the handles of his beloved bike stabbed his chest) leaving him lifeless on the floor. After changing into an elegant red evening gown, the mother puts Chicco’s lifeless body back on the bed. The mother joins her son in bed and asks her other two sons to cover them with a funerary veil. The bicycle is put at the feet of the bed. At the end, the other two brothers disappear under the catafalque, while the mother spins with her foot the wheel of the murderous bike. The play ends as the sound of the spinning wheel and the bicycle dynamo fades away.

In *Vita mia*, the mother attempts to teach her sons that life is the most precious gift, something to be preserved since it flies by. Life, for the mother as for Dante, is a race around a central catafalque, symbolized by the bed at the center of the room. In order to preserve life, the mother holds her three sons within the confines of what she considers safe: her house. She keeps them away from the outside world, worrying about what could happen to the point that she does not allow for anything to happen. Thus, life becomes something that must be talked about, guarded, planned, but never actually lived. As we see in the play, the final result of these actions is an announced tragedy. If life cannot be lived, then it is inevitably taken away from you. Chicco is the one brother who is not yet ready to disappear into oblivion, who still has impulses of life, ideas, projects, a
willingness to break free from an incomprehensible life of limitations and repetitions. It is the vitality of Chicco’s soul, his desire to change, his active pursuit of his bicycle laps around the bed of death that, faced with his family’s desires for immobility and with their empty words, is abruptly brought to an end. Vita mia then conveys the absurd attempt of a mother responsible for the death of her son, to replay his last lap around that bed, to retard death by grasping on to the same life she denied him. The play then overgrows the bounds of autobiography, becoming another critical glimpse to Sicily and the inability of its inhabitants to break free from an absurd cycle of life and death.

La trilogia della famiglia siciliana is an example of Dante’s ‘mature’ theatrical aesthetic and has won many Italian theatrical awards as well as international acclaim, becoming the most acknowledged of Dante’s works among the writings of Italian scholars. This, together with the critical writings published on the trilogy and the video documentation available for all three plays make Dante’s La trilogia della famiglia siciliana the perfect starting point to explore the recurrent ideas present in Emma Dante’s productions. It also makes it ideal to analyze the influence that the European avant-garde of the late twentieth century and the Sicilian tradition had on Dante’s works. Particularly, being able to see the trilogy in video format has allowed me to analyze the plays using their written texts as well through these recordings of the live performances.

It is also important to point out that, although Emma Dante’s plays are published and available to other theatre companies, when it comes to staging them outside Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale, artists are faced with the same dilemma that arises when staging theatre works specific to a company or author and deeply rooted in
physicality. Differently from Beckett’s plays,\textsuperscript{13} which started as written texts and spell out every movement of the actors on stage providing a much more comprehensive performance text to use, Dante’s published texts are the result of a long devising process and give only necessary stage directions, not outlining every movement of every actor. Those stage directions are only a small part of what is presented in the performances, which are always carefully developed works of ‘total theatre’ to which gestures, props, and costumes are integral, as we will see in the first chapter.

We can think of the plays of Complicite (founded in 1983 by Simon McBurney, Annabel Arden, and Marcello Magni) as a similar example. Although Complicite publishes their plays and rehearsal notes, which are available to be purchased and performed by interested parties, the successful performance of these works hinge on the completion, on the part of the performers, of a precise and rigid physical and psychological actor training. Further, it depends on the ability of the production and performance team to create an ensemble that would not only understand the written language of the plays, but also the difficult nuances originally intended for the devised piece of theatre by the playwright and the director who have created their own very specific performance language.

If Dante’s plays were performed by a theatre company that had not followed a physical training regime similar to the one required of the actors of Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale, such a company would present a very different theatrical production than the one originally intended by Dante that could possibly lack its original potency. In

\textsuperscript{13} Such as \textit{Act Without Words I} (1956), \textit{Krapp’s Last Tape} (1958), \textit{Act Without Words II} (1959), and \textit{Quad} (1981).
addition, anyone who would restage one of Dante’s devised works would have to not only understand the performance they are putting on stage, with its language and its metaphors pertinent to Sicily and being Sicilian, but it must intimately know them in order to give justice to the cultural heritage and the themes present in the plays. Although the concerns raised should be seriously weighted if a theatre company were to consider mounting a production of Dante’s works, ultimately it is my personal belief that, although extremely arduous, such an endeavor could be successfully completed. By combining extremely detailed dramaturgical work with a directorial approach aimed at creating works of Teatro Totale, and, possibly, with carefully crafted English translations of Emma Dante’s texts, those plays could become accessible to the international community not only as subjects of critical studies, but also as performances to be staged: a live, malleable example of exciting and pulsating contemporary Italian theatre.
Chapter 1: European Influences: Kantor and Grotowski

Whatever is reality today,

whatever you touch and believe in and seems real to you today,

is going to be - like the reality of yesterday – an illusion tomorrow.

(Luigi Pirandello. *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 130)

The theatre of Emma Dante has grown in the context of strong European artistic influences, germinating on a soil enriched by waves of continuous avant-garde movements. Although it is particularly difficult to construct a lineage of western European theatrical avant-gardes due to the many cross-overs and contaminations, a clear connection can be established between the Theatre of Cruelty of Antonin Artaud and the avant-gardist theatre of the second half of the twentieth century. Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski in particular took extreme care in pinpointing the nature of the relation between their theatre and that of Artaud. Elaborating on the seeds of ideas that were already present in Artaud’s writings, they both began to regard theatre as a process of research and devising; a unified whole or ‘total art.’ For them theatre became the keeper of memories and a bridge for dialogue between life and death. Emma Dante embraces and re-elaborates those views on theatre shared by both Kantor and Grotowski that
reaches back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the extent of the influence that the western European tradition has on Dante’s work might be shortchanged by narrowly focusing only on Grotowski and Kantor, this chapter will explore how those widely acknowledged giants of the avant-garde of the twentieth century have been instrumental to Dante’s establishment of her own theatrical practice.

**Theatre as Research Instead of Theatre as Entertainment**

Breaking away from the preconception of theatrical experimentation as limited to integrating technological innovations with current stage practices (Grotowski, *Towards* 15), Emma Dante separates her devised theatre from that of other contemporary Italian theatre companies, such as Societas Raffaello Sanzio and MOTUS. By refusing to value a directorial theatre or the theatrical canon above theatrical research, Dante locates her work in a more Grotowskian and Kantorian optic. It is not by chance that what ultimately propelled Dante towards regarding theatre as a legitimate institution for research was participating as an audience member in Kantor's 1987 production *The Machine of Love and Death*¹⁴ and the 1990 production of *Memory* by the Odin Teatret.¹⁵ *Memory* brought to Rome Grotowski’s legacy. In fact, Eugenio Barba, the founder and director of the Odin Teatret, spent three years in Poland (1961-1963) working with Grotowski at his Teatr Laboratorium where he cultivated a personal friendship as well as a deep professional relationship with the Polish director which lasted until Grotowski’s death.

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¹⁴ Staged at the Teatro Biondo in Palermo.
¹⁵ Dante saw the performance at the National Academy of Arts Silvio D’Amico in Rome, where she was studying as an actress.
Speaking of Kantor’s *The Machine of Love and Death*, Dante remembers:

“[…] him, Kantor, giving his back to the audience […]. He was always giving his back: he gave me his back. This fact made me uneasy and I always remember it because, for me, Kantor’s shoulders are the theatre. Him, who gave his back to the audience while directing and who saw that what he had in front of him, theatre, was the most important thing. The blatant disrespect he showed me seemed of such strength and power… So it was then, in that occasion, maybe, that there was a little shift that helped me to understand that I was not interested in making a certain kind of theatre, to follow tradition, but to give my back to the audience and do research.” (Dante *La Strada* 33)

A staple of Kantor’s theatre, the act of giving his back to the audience can be regarded as one of the strongest artistic statements of the Polish director. He believed that in order for his work to be alive, it had to be kept in a state of constant rehearsal and incompleteness. In each of his productions, Kantor played the part of an orchestra conductor, directing the action on stage during every performance, never allowing his works to become a finished product. By not turning his back on his art, continuously directing its elements with devotion, Kantor inevitably gave his back to the audience, electing the liveliness of his experimental art above his audience. The Polish director’s behavior transformed Dante’s view of the possibilities of theatre. Kantor’s figure on stage “controlling all the action without a word,” his presence/absence on stage, his “standing back, lost in

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17 Miklaszewski quotes from the French newspaper *Le Monde.*
thought…only occasionally joining in the action, to beat time under the nose of the actor,”¹⁸ and his living “so deep within his dream that he is constantly coming back to himself, a bit surprised by the course events have taken” (Miklaszewski 54) inspired the Sicilian director to pursue theatrical research in hope of following in Kantor’s footsteps in reestablishing “the essential meaning of the relationship: viewer and actor” (Kantor, “Theatre of Death” 114).¹⁹ Both Kantor and Grotowski sought a way to recuperate the primordial force that accompanied the first time an actor/audience dynamic was created, when a human being (the viewer) opposite another human being (the actor), who, although similar to them, is both completely foreign and behind the impenetrable barrier of the stage (Kantor, “Theatre of Death” 114). Grotowski in particular refers to his work as detailed investigations of the dynamic between actors and the audience, considering “the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art” (Grotowski, Towards 16). For Dante the ultimate goal of theatrical research is this “return to humanity” (Dante, “Il lusso” VIII), and not to do research for the sake of doing research, becoming a self-serving and self-gratifying art. She believes that contemporary Italian theatre, with its emphasis on the classics, realism, and experimentation for the sake of technology, has strayed too far away from humanity. She affirms:

I do a theatre of research because I want to find a way to speak with human beings. It is not as easy as looking someone in the eyes and telling them the truth: my truth! Which is not his! Because, if there were a universal truth, we would not

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¹⁸ Miklaszewski quotes from the French newspaper L’Humanité.
¹⁹ Kantor’s essay “The Theatre of Death” (1975) appears in the book Essays and Manifestos. A Journey Through Other Spaces. This anthology contains Kantor’s essays and manifestos and was translated and edited by Michal Kobialka. It also contains a critical essay on Kantor’s theatre written by Kobialka.
be telling each other; what need would there be to speak to each other and confront each other on the hypothesis of truth? This is the objective of a theatre of research – to arrive to free communication – even confrontational communication – with human beings. After that, there are 300,000 ways of telling a story, my story is a story that has to simply put in contact with humans. (Dante, “Il lusto” VIII)

Advocating for a theatre that can tell her truth and create a point of contact with humanity, Dante moves away from representation and realism: she calls for a theatre that must be openly fake to be capable of sketching what reality is. Similar to Kantor, Dante believes that the illusion or fiction present in drama and acting are not in a dichotomy with the reality of our world. In Kantor’s words:

REALITY ‘IS.’ It is IN LIFE, IN THE REALITY OF OUR LIVES. […]

FICTION has not come in contact with REALITY; it has found its extension in REALITY. There was no REALNESS. There was only a place, THEATER, which, like a sanctuary, was separated from life and was dedicated to aesthetic experiences. Therefore, the spectator still found himself in the space that was reserved for theatre, in the institution whose job was to smuggle in and manipulate with fiction. The spectator was coaxed into believing that he was experiencing fiction as if he were experiencing ‘reality of life.’ (Kantor, “New Theatrical” 141)

By finding the extension of fiction in reality and openly acknowledging the illusion presented on stage, both Dante and Kantor, as well as Grotowski, want to present the viewer with something that cannot be considered reality, but something that is
contaminated and impure. The live reality on stage can then be considered as a reality of a lower rank, very different from the mausoleums dedicated to the dead characters from a drama.

As Kantor and Grotowski before her, Dante attempts to eliminate the illusion of realism and well disguised stage tricks from her theatre or, at least, she undertakes a conscious process of eradicating illusion throughout each of her performances. The most evident attempt to destroy the illusion of the stage is to eliminate the division between the stage, the auditorium, and backstage – which Kantor considers as “the last barricade behind which illusion could hide” (Kantor, “The Milano Lessons 6” 226). This idea of breaking down all partitions of the theatrical space is readily seen in *Vita mia*, the last play of Dante’s first trilogy. During the performance, there is no division between backstage, stage, and auditorium. The actors and the audience are always conscious of each other’s presence. There is no attempt to create a separate reality or to hide anything from the spectators. There is no semblance of illusion when the audience witnesses the on-stage assembling and disassembling of the bed that functions as the only scenic element of the play. For Emma Dante, attempting to create illusions (pursuing fiction as a way to experience the reality of life) becomes the sterilization of the power of theatre to whisper to, and also to scream at, the audience. She is not interested in maintaining scenic and performance realism: she wants to present her truth void of those 19th century tropes in the hope that such communication with the audience would shake their reality. To make possible the theatrical research that Dante aspires to and to activate a non-
representational system of communication with the audience, it is imperative to start by considering the actors.

**Dante’s Theatrical Laboratory**

Despite considering Kantor as the spiritual master of theatrical research, Dante elects a modus-operandi that is more similar to that of Grotowski. As Grotowski had done before her, the Sicilian director regards her center of research as a laboratory in which theatre experiments are conducted. As Peter Brook points out in his preface to *Towards a Poor Theatre*, “[i]n Grotowski’s theatre as in all true laboratories the experiments are scientifically valid because the essential conditions are observed. In his theatre, there is absolute concentration by a small group and unlimited time” (11).

Extended workshops or theatrical laboratories thus become the most appropriate venue to pursue theatre as research. Dante aligns herself with that European tradition of theatrical laboratories that finds its roots even before the beginning of the twentieth century in the practice of Konstantin Stanislavsky, and subsequently in the work carried on in the early twentieth century by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jacques Copeau, and Etienne Decroux. Although the practices of many of those artists do not fit exactly the canonical elements of a theatrical laboratory, which are usually identified with Grotowski’s practice, we can

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20 “According to me, he [Kantor] is the spiritual master of all those who came after him and undertook theatre as research, because he has plowed the way for all of us, not only for me. He has revolutionized the way of doing theatre in the 1900s, he has destabilized theatre, he has created and important break […] I do not believe him to be only my spiritual master, I believe him to be the spiritual master of all those who, to do serious research, look at theatre as a point of departure and not of arrival, to open up as many questions as possible without ever finding an answer” (Dante, “Il lusso” I).
still recognize in them the first signs of the modern theatrical laboratorial practices (Centonze 10).

The theatrical research systems of many theatre practitioners such as Grotowski, Peter Brook, Caryl Churchill, Arianne Mnouchkine, and even Emma Dante are connected to these proto-laboratories of the first half of the century through reflections and elaborations on what constitutes theatre and the ideas behind it, and through the seriousness and commitment of everyone involved in the laboratory which creates a sense of continuity and collectivity in the work. Emma Dante’s laboratories address those same issues of the nature of theatre and theatrical research. They provide her with the space and the time to attend to the process of research and to work with her actors as an ensemble, making them undergo an intense training program which is instrumental for the success of such experimental process. It is precisely this process that allows Dante to slightly displace the definition of a theatre director in her laboratories, twisting it towards assuming more the significance of a theatrical trainer and explore than a traditional director.

For Dante, time seems to be the most appealing part of a laboratory. Usually the traditional slot of time allotted for professional companies to rehearse and mount a performance is not enough in the context of a theatre of research and devising. Coupled

21 Brook, Churchill, and Mnouchkine have often constructed their works through a series of workshops or longer laboratories. This allows for physical and textual experimentation with the material at the heart of their research topic that will be eventually transformed into a performance by either a single playwright, as in the case of Churchill or by the collective creation of a more devised piece as it is often the case with Mnouchkine and Brook. Mnouchkine in particular is a strong supporter of collective creation. Churchill’s Cloud Nine provides an example of such process of theatrical research in a workshop or laboratory setting. In fact, the play was the result of a series of workshops based on the general concept of “sexual politics” with actors of the Joint Stock Theatre Company in 1978. Other examples are Brook’s The Conference of the Birds, a performance created after Brook and his company spent an extended period of time in the African continent investigating the meaning of theatre and theatricality.
with an almost perpetual lack of funds faced daily by Italian artists, the lack of time becomes the most serious obstacle halting the development of experimental theatre and research. When the gestation time for a new work is shortchanged during rehearsals, theatrical laboratories provide an opportunity to reach the heart of the play and to make it live. Similar to Grotowski, Dante believes that, in theatrical research, “time is quality” (Dante, “Il lusso” IV). It is the necessary ingredient to undertake a theatre of research.

Time, in the context of theatrical research, then becomes “the only possible way to reach this utopia” (Dante, “Il lusso” IV), to re-edify the communication between the humans on stage and the ones in the audience. Separating the goal of a laboratory from that of a traditional production, we are faced with a theatrical experiment aiming to “find the chord at the essence of humanity and to learn how to make it vibrate” (Dante, “Il lusso” IV) and not to create a magnificent spectacle, nor to package a perfectly finished product ready to be mass-produced. For Kantor, as for Grotowski, the performance has to take shape during the course of a preparatory inquisitive process that allows actors to experiment with their actions, bodies, and feelings. The performers then learn how not to rely on a constructed or composed reality entrusted upon them by the director or superficially collaged together in the course of a short rehearsal process. They acquire the skills necessary to access over and over again the reality which they have slowly and carefully revealed, returning with each performance to the “characters and objects which have been ‘found’” in such reality during that preparatory stage of exploration (Kantor, “Let” 114).
It is important to point out that Dante, similar to Kantor and Grotowski, attaches a deep meaning to the word ‘found.’ She does not simply imply the outcome of a search or a discovery, but the establishment of an almost mystical connection with an anterior world that transcends the senses (Kantor, “Let” 117). Materializing this connection and learning to re-establish it when on stage allows the actors to transfer echoes of the findings of the laboratory into the performance. In order to maximize her actors’ transfer rate, Emma Dante structures her theatrical laboratories so to create an environment where the training of actors would be continuous, even daily. Such disciplined environment, without any time restraints, is aimed at creating a cohesive and prepared group by providing actors with the necessary physical and mental acting exercises able to create that deep and delicate connection between body and mind that is necessary on stage. Before addressing the mise-en-scène of a performance or the details of a play, the laboratory molds the ensemble.

**Actor Training**

Dante believes that forming a good ensemble is a necessary condition for the devising of a performance. Therefore, for the Sicilian director, the theatrical laboratory “is everything” (Dante, “Il lusso” IV) thus becoming the only acceptable way to pursue her theatre practice. With the aim of setting aside notions of good and bad, right and wrong, and concentrating instead of the physical and mental skills needed in her company ensemble, Dante asks her actors during her laboratories to explore unknown routes. She pushes them to cross the boundaries of the familiar and known in ways that, although
conventional in the method of theatrical practitioners such as Kantor and Grotowski, were initially not well received in Palermo due to their originality. In a long interview with Andrea Porcheddu, published in the book *Palermo Dentro: Il Teatro di Emma Dante* (*Palermo Inside: Emma Dante’s Theatre*), Dante recalls that when she began her work with Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale, many of the Sicilian artists she had invited to take part in her experimental theater company had left in a haste when she asked them to take off their shoes and explore the space barefoot (Dante, “La strada” 48). Today, actors come from all over Italy to work with Emma Dante. Although well know in the Italian theatre circles as an extremely harsh – almost abrasive – and exigent director, Dante manages to inspire and deeply change the actors who work with her. For many of them, despite having to endure harsh words, Dante’s sporadic temper tantrums, and an extremely trying physical training, Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale becomes a loved and very functional artistic family.

Dante generally begins her actors’ training process by realizing the individual needs of her actors in order to establish an individualized actor-director dynamic that allows the ensemble to produce the best results possible. As in the case of Kantor’s and Grotowski’s ensembles, the success produced by such a process depends on the willingness of actors to follow the director’s lead and not on how ‘good’ those actors are. In fact, Dante makes a sharp distinction between good actors and trained actors. For her, good actors often exhibit an ostentatious and pretentious awareness of their own artistic talent that hinders their exploration of what exists beyond talent itself and how such talent can be refined. By working with actors who are trained but do not yet know how to bend
their training to the service of their craft, there seems to be a richer pay-off to Dante’s training methods, since such actors are more open to experimentation and can be pushed to explore unexpected possibilities. For Dante, as for Grotowski, no acting technique can be considered sacred. What they regard as sacred or holy is the process of becoming a trained actor. The two directors consider actors’ training as a road that needs to be traveled with devotion and humility, aimed at presenting actors with a series of shocks. Those jarring experiences push actors to confront themselves in the face of challenges, forcing them to discard acting tricks and clichés. This compels them to sense the vast and untapped resources residing in themselves, obliges them to realize that acting is a total art of dedication, and pushes them to the point of questioning why they are actors. As Peter Brook points out, such an approach to actor training also brings actors closer to understanding Artaud’s notion of being “cruel to the self” as a complete way of life (Brook 11).

In training her actors, Dante follows the example set by both Kantor and Grotowski, focusing on a highly demanding physical regime adapted from the ones used by Italian directors Cesare Ronconi and Gabriele Vacis (b.1955). The physical training regime developed by Dante allows her actors to strengthen two indispensable acting skills: listening and observing. Patrizia Bologna affirms that many of the notoriously strenuous exercises that Dante uses are aimed at developing these two skills between the members of the ensemble and at developing the confidence and openness needed by the

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22 Gabriele Vacis is an Italian playwright and director. Emma Dante worked with him in Turin in 1995, acting in Canto per Torino, a theatre project directed by Vacis. At that time Dante was an actress in the theatre company Gruppo della Rocca and it was during the rehearsals of Canto per Torino that Dante learned Vacis’s actor training technique La schiera.
actors to know that during the process of creation on stage they are not alone but they are a cohesive creative unit devising as a whole (146). In the development of such ensemble, understanding how to use rhythm and speed is fundamental since both play a central role in Dante’s performances. Working with music, specific bodily and vocal exercises, and the innate rhythm of the Italian language and the Sicilian dialect, Dante’s actors learn to manipulate the rhythms of movement and speech through repetition and variations in speed. By incorporating repetition and speed in her theatrical laboratories and in rehearsals, Dante believes that actors can develop an instinctual, primordial, almost animalistic acting frame based on in-the-moment reactions. This point of entrance into theatre is very similar to the one adopted by Grotowski and later used in what we can regard today as the physical theatre tradition. By accessing characters and acting through the body with the help of rhythm and speed means to access acting from an opposite point of entrance with respect to the tradition of psychological or realistic acting; it means to begin a journey of theatrical research by searching for a heightened rhythm and tempo that inevitably has to bring the actors to reach almost comical heights before it can be ready to be transformed into tragedy (Dante, “La strada” 51). After having become comfortable with the body, as well as rhythmic and speed variations, there is a moment in Dante’s theatrical laboratories in which the actors’ physical training begins to attend to psychological characterization in addition to developing physicality. This commences a phase of the laboratory that is constituted by theatrical exercises specifically aimed at acting development, which are divided among strictly-disciplined practice exercises and
improvisational exercises. Among the practice exercise, the most famous one used by Dante is *la schiera or the rank.*

*La schiera* is a highly physical exercise inspired by a combination of training routines used by Stanislavsky and Grotowski. Dante adapted and modified this exercise from a much simpler version used since 1985 by Gabriele Vacis that made him famous across the Italian peninsula. The original exercise of *la schiera* consists in a line of actors which subsequently moves forward and backward by performing twelve steps that follow an established rhythm—often accompanied by music. The actor’s job is to avoid getting out of sync with the pre-imposed rhythm and with the rest of the ensemble. By repeating this particular training sequence for prolonged periods of time, actors are encouraged to create a neutral voice and body, stripping off acting habits and eliminating each actor’s rigidity that inhibits movement and speech. By doing so, Dante, like Grotowski, aims to tear down the culturally conditioned wall put up by such habits that cripples actors in not seeing a world of unexplored theatrical possibilities. Once this neutral voice and body is reached, actors are free to begin exploring their character’s voice and physicality while performing *la schiera.* Dante elaborated Vacis’s original exercise, disassembling the limitations and rigidity of the straight line used by Vacis, and creating a series of interlacing grids and crosses which opened up the possibility of more complicated interactions, sudden encounters and realizations that might have not been possible if the exercise were to be performed in a straight line. Manuela Lo Sicco, one of the members of Dante’s Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale affirms that starting from a constant and apparently monotonous and lifeless rhythm, actors are eventually able to insert life in
their characters (Lo Sicco 174). Taking twelve steps in unison over a precise spatial design and following the same rhythm as an ensemble, without conscious leaders or followers, allows characters to organically emerge on stage, through the actors’ bodies which undergo a process of gradual metamorphoses. Such transformation is triggered by the introduction of character specific parts of their costumes that Dante throws, one by one, to the actors while they are immersed in *la schiera*. The actors are then faced with the gradual discovery of different pieces of costume. Over time, the actors explore how wearing a specific piece of costume changes a specific part of their body. While doing this exploration, the actors have to continue to be part of *la schiera* and continue to walk in unison while keeping their whole body neutral except for the body part covered by the costume since this body part had literally put on a character. The visible transformation in the bodies of the actors during this exercise is incredibly powerful and is more and more fascinating to watch as the specificity of body isolation and character choices increase over time. *La schiera* then becomes a basic tool to be used during the devising of a new work to explore character development.

For Dante, specificity of gestures and commitment to actions are two fundamental ingredients in character development. Gestures weigh as much as monologues for the Sicilian director, therefore it is necessary for the actor to declare them to make sure that the audience would notice them. In this respect, Dante embraces Grotowski’s idea of a single gesture as a series of micro-pantomimes that illuminate the character. Those gestures are often elaborated according to an actor’s hermeneutical experience and, as gestures in real life, they are processed to be made subjective in their specificity while
remaining widely understood in their meaning within the constraints of a specific cultural frame of reference. During this process, the actor must avoid complexity for complexity’s sake, abiding to the same principles of specificity and clarity that govern communication in everyday life. Although Dante inherently regards theatrical gestures as false gestures and not copies of real life actions, she is also convinced that it is necessary to search for their truth, or, more specifically, what necessity is behind every character’s gesture. This *gesto necessario* (necessary gesture), as Dante calls it, is entirely generated by the actor without any directorial impositions and is able to directly speak to the audience.

Necessary gestures become the only possible and organic thing that an actor could do in that situation, playing that specific character. For Dante, the difference between such organic creation and directorial theatre is clearly visible on stage. Gestures that the actor does not know or has not found have no value on stage and hinder communication with the audience.

Pursuing a deep connection with the audience through actions, both Grotowski and Dante are interested in the association of intonation and gestures with a specific image. In 1961, Grotowski explained what he meant by this association while talking of his work *The Ancestors*. He gave an example of an actor who “stops in the middle of a race and takes the stance of a cavalry soldier charging, as in the old popular drawings” (Grotowski qtd in Barba 75). For him, the picture created by this kind of acting conjured by association images that are deeply rooted in the collective imagination. Emma Dante creates similar associations in her works. In *Vita mia*, this is manifest in the ceremony of the dressing of the dead or the mourning of the dead in front of a crucifix, all easily
recognizable ritualistic moments engrained in southern Italian culture which, presented through the specificity of gestures of the actors, are suspended in time and captured in an easily identifiable cultural portrait.

It is specificity that allows the bodily work and that of the mind to connect. Dante believes that it is only through training, openness, and specificity that life is born on stage. In a similar way, Grotowski believed that:

an actor reaches the essence of his vocation whenever he commits an act of sincerity, when he unveils himself, opens and gives himself in an extreme, solemn gesture, and does not hold back before any obstacle set by custom and behaviour. And further, when this act of extreme sincerity is modeled in a living organism, in impulses, a way of breathing, a rhythm of thought and the circulation of blood, when it is ordered and brought to consciousness, not dissolving into chaos and formal anarchy – in a word, when this act accomplished through the theatre is total, then even if it doesn’t protect us from the dark powers, at least it enables us to respond totally, that is, begin to exist. (Grotowski, *Towards* 124-25)

The totality of the act of theatre as articulated by Grotowski echoes Artaud’s illustration of the “language of the stage” presented in the first manifesto of the Theatre of Cruelty (Artaud 94-95). Further, it expresses what Dante adopted as a fundamental part of her actors’ training: to reach a state in which the actor is able to respond totally. For Grotowski as for Dante, this meant to acquire the skills of magicians in shifting “the audience’s attention from the visual to the auditory, from the auditory to the visual, from one part of the body to the other, etc” (Grotowski qtd in Barba 78). Ultimately,
coordination, variation, improvisation, observational skills, mimicry, adaptation, unification, synchronism, concentration, reflexes, vocal training, rhythmic perception, repetition, and awareness of the acting body, are all necessary abilities that Dante’s actors must acquire to develop what the Sicilian director refers to as the *technique of life*.

**The Technique of Life and the *fantasmino***

Bringing the *technique of life* into actors’ training incorporates specific patterns of habits that influence both their actions and their words into the painstaking process of conjuring a character. Accessing the necessary gestures they have discovered during Dante’s theatrical laboratories, actors use specificity to color their ‘found’ actions with life, without allowing them to become sterile. By guiding them down the road to introspection and awareness, Dante asks her performers to reach a deep level of concentration that allows them to come in contact with that place she calls *altrove* (elsewhere). Dante’s *altrove* is Kantor’s “UR-MATTER:” a “mystical or utopian idea” that is independent of the artist, “that shapes itself, and that grounds all possible, infinite variants of life” (Kantor, “The Milano Lessons 3” 217). The *altrove* can be considered as the universe of the stage, a non-material place that the actors need to tap into to acquire a state of heightened consciousness. By doing so, actors become immersed in what they are doing and, at the same time, they stay aware of themselves and their surroundings. This balance conjures what Dante calls the *fantasmino* (little ghost) (Dante, “La strada” 53). This ghostly entity encloses the character’s life and emerges from within the actors themselves – not from their minds or souls, but from the chosen bodily habits which their
body has put on during their character exploration. Allowing an almost mystical life force to infuse their performances, the actors organically transform themselves into the characters they are embodying. As Porcheddu points out, this process is not too different from the process of giving life to a character that many other European theater practitioners have attempted to explain. In fact, Dante’s *fantasmini* recall the heightened state of consciousness of the actor advocated by both Artaud and Kantor (Dante, “La strada” 60) and Peter Brook’s view of the actor as a medium who must capture waves of theatrical life that he must then manifest on stage. The *fantasmini* also evoke the concept of a character as the “imitation of another by the self” (Meldolesi qtd Dante, “La strada” 60)\(^{23}\) that we also find in Kantor’s writings which verges on the idea of the actor or the self being an imitator for another different then the self but who resides within the self.

The idea of “imitation of another by the self” can also be extended and analyzed from the prospective of an actor-audience relationship, creating a very interesting triangle. In this respect Michal Kobialka’s use of optics and mirrors in the analysis of Kantor’s theatre can be used to clarify the ideas of the Polish director on the relationship between actors and audience. Kobialka affirms that:

> Mirrors reflect us and allow us to see that we have an outside (the body) that separates us from other realities and that we exist in “real” space. At the same time, a process of transference takes place in which the image existing within the mirror’s surface is the “ghost” or ourselves living in an imaginary space. We are not, paradoxically, where our eyes are but over there, on the other side. We

\(^{23}\) As expressed by Italian theatre historian and theorist Claudio Meldolesi (1942-2009).
become aware of the Other whose existence is legitimized by the existence of the Self. (Kobialka, “The Quest” 312-13)

Present in many of Kantor’s works, including The Dead Class (1975), this metaphor of the mirror can transcend the simple audience-actor relationship and be applied to the actor-character relationship. Such extrapolation helps to elucidate Dante’s ideas of the actor as the bearer of a fantasmino (little ghost). By providing the Other (the fantasmino), a place from which it could speak (the stage) and by regarding the Other (the fantasmino) as a twin born beside the Self (the actor), this complex allegory creates a reality in which the actor “must give himself and not play for himself or for the spectator. His search must be directed from within himself to the outside, but not for the outside” (Grotowski, “Interview” 38). Grotowski refers to this process as the technique of the “trance” or a way to stripping down actors of their defenses to reach their most intimate layers and thus begin a process of physical and psychic integration (Grotowski, Towards 16). Such a path towards character formation is incredibly important for Dante in the context of her belief in the construction of characters through stripping actors of their habits – an accumulation of knowledge about the self and one’s body – and the subsequent layering of the character’s habits on the actor, which is reached via personal and ensemble research in laboratories and rehearsals (Dante, “La strada” 60).

Similar to her theatrical exercises, improvisations allow Dante to prepare her actors for the process of devising and theatrical research. More than creating a character or persona, Dante’s improvisations are a way to explore the human connections between the characters on stage as well as the audience. If her theatrical exercises function as a
way to build a character, then her improvisations are a way for that character to interact with other characters and the audience. Dante then uses both exercises and improvisations as a way to study anthropologically the world in which those characters live and interact, as well as the sociological interactions of these characters with our world. Improvisations are aimed at freeing from superimposed structures the world in which the actors’ characters live, as well as liberating the actors of pre-conceived notions of what a character would or would not do. In addition to requiring her actors to continuously re-establish the connection with their Other (the fantasmino), the Sicilian director uses improvisation as a tool to keep a show as a work in progress. Embracing the role pioneered by Kantor as an ever-present figure, able to alter the course of the performance at will, Dante follows her company at every performance and makes a conscious effort to keep her works in rehearsal mode in order to maintain the liveliness of the performance, often changing parts of the script, blocking, or props used between shows.

It is safe to affirm that in Dante’s theatre, character analysis strays from its traditional meaning of text dissection and character study, becoming that process through which actors, on their feet in the rehearsal room, allow themselves to be surprised by and receptive to what may happen once actors and the characters are left free to explore that theatrical altrove. This kind of exploration is what Dante calls “the act of freeing the idiot” (Dante, “La strada” 59). For Dante, an actor has three developmental stages. The first one is the stage of the beast, which signifies a pure and violent instinct. The second stage is the stage of the baby, which is the stage of ingenuity. The third one is a stage
that, depending on what evolutionary path actors take after the stage of the baby, can
either be called the stage of the idiot or the stage of the buffoon (Dante, “La strada” 59).
According to Dante, the idiot represents sanctity and it encompasses the purity and the
openness that are present in actors who reach the most mature stage of their artistic
development. Such purity allows actors to break free from any pre-imposed, inhibitory
performance scaffoldings and, ultimately, become the character. Counterpoint to the idiot
is the buffoon (Dante, “La strada” 59), who acts on the impulse of being accepted and
included and, thus, the impulse of pretending, not being truthful. While the idiot is free
from such impulses, the buffoon is governed by them. According to Dante this creates a
dichotomy which asserts that the idiot is while the buffoon does, which underlines the
difference between an actor who does a movement or a part, and an actor who is a gesture
or a character.

“Freeing the idiot” though improvisations helps to progressively build stage
entities that interact with the world which they inhabit (the theatrical altrove) and with
our world. The three stages of actor development presented by Emma Dante are
ultimately similar to the three rebirths of the actor advocated by Grotowski. In particular,
the stage of the idiot corresponds to the Grotowskian third rebirth of the actor. As stated
in his interview with Richard Schechner and Theodore Hoffman, Grotowski believed
that:

It is during this third rebirth that the actor finds solutions to the most difficult
problems: how to create while one is controlled by others, how to create without
the security of creation, how to find security which is inevitable if we want to
express ourselves despite the fact that theatre is a collective creation […].

(Grotowski, “Interview” 39)

Reaching the stage of the idiot, and therefore Grotowski’s third rebirth of the actor, allows theatrical laboratories to be at their most productive since delineated psychology is discarded and the instincts of the actors and their bodies, not from their feelings, allow them to find the characters. Such process of physical creation, which begins and ends with in the moment physical actions and reactions, generates characters that, as noted by Bologna, do not have a past nor they have a future since the scene in which they are alive takes place in the present (147).

Favoring the essential quality and simplicity of Grotowski’s poor theatre, Dante values an effective and deliberate use of props, scenery, and costumes which, coupled with her strict actor training, produces a carnal theatre, stripped down of the superfluous. Grotowski’s Poor Theatre, as Dante’s theatrical research, “concentrates on human actions only, and the relationship between the actors and the audience” (Grotowski, “I said” 81). It means to give up all unessential externals, keeping only the ones that are essential to the survival of the piece. Dante believes that scenery, lights and all other scenic elements in themselves do not make a difference to the production. They are “empty, deprived of expression, connections, references, characteristics of programmed communication” (Kantor, “Reality” 119-20). In order to mean something, scenic elements, costumes and objects on stage must be the actor’s partners; they must become “artificial extensions of the actor” (Grotowski qts in Barba 75). Costumes then become the skin of the character that cannot be traded with a new skin during dress rehearsals but that has to have been
worn since the first day of laboratory work and that must become one with the character. Both Grotowski and Dante refuse to relegate costumes and objects to stage ornaments, advocating that the only way an actor can give life to objects is to treat them as living things and discover their secret identities.

The digging into the secret identity of an object and its relationship to both the actors and the audience is an idea that Grotowski’s Poor Theatre shares with Kantor’s notion of “poor reality.” For Kantor, objects and the matter from which they are formed are infinitely malleable. After World War II, he realized the need to accept the wrenched reality, separated from everyday reality, in which he lived to incorporate it in his creative process. He needed to substitute “real objects” with “artistic objects.” Similarly to Brecht, Kantor eventually realized that what had the most potential of becoming an “artistic object” could be found among discarded and useless things. The Polish director labeled those items as “poor objects,” or objects belonging to “a reality of the lowest rank,” setting to extract their deeper meanings and putting them on stage (Kantor, “Reality” 119-20).

We can find examples of Grotowski’s poor theatre and Kantor’s reality of the lowest rank in Emma Dante’s Vita mia. There we can see that the few objects and pieces of costumes on stage assume a deep significance that goes beyond their appearance. There is nothing brand new, nothing that has not ‘lived’ on stage since all the costumes and the objects presented have belonged to the actors since the beginning of the rehearsal process. It is then possible for the red dress put on by the mother at the end of the play to both defy and embrace death; for the pajamas worn by her sons to immediately become
symbols of unemployment and apathy, life not lived; for the crucifix brandished by the mother to embrace everything that is ritual and tradition in an upside down journey towards death. A particularly striking example is the bicycle that the youngest son, Chicco, rides. Accompanied by the noise of a dynamo powered by every stroke, the bicycle becomes the life force itself of the family, continuing to be powered through sheer will, physical duress, and impossibilities till the very end of the performance before being finally put to rest.

**Creating Expressions of Total Theatre**

After a long and intense physical and mental training acquired through extended laboratories, Dante’s actors obtain three fundamental skills: the ability of being open to the process of theatrical research and creation, the capability to evoke continuously the fleeting nature of a character with its specificity and liveliness, and, lastly, the means to engage successfully in exploring human interactions on stage and between characters, actors, and audience. Her actors’ training system is also of vital importance in the process of achieving a unity of all elements in the “togetherness of the theatrical machine” (Dante, “Il lusso” I) or, as it is often referred to, in order to create total theatre. This vision of a total theatre – and its consequent research – is a view that Dante shares with both Kantor and Grotowski, while distancing her views from that shared by Richard Wagner, Adolphe Appia, and Gordon Craig – among others – in the early twentieth century. In contrast to theatrical practitioners who believed in total theatre as the result of

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24 Thus, implicitly, with Artaud.
the work of the omniscient guiding hand of the director or the designer, the theatre of Grotowski and that of Kantor do not call for the dominance of one element or person over another, but for a totality of the work of art. For Grotowski as for Dante, the total act of the actor is to “use all of his biological and physical forces towards conjuring up his creative consciousness in order to illuminate his vision” (Grotowski, “I said” 83). A Growtoskian total act of the actor means a “total self-revelation in a moment of extreme honesty” (Grotowski, “I said” 83). It is only after such physical and mental act is carried through that there can be room for the text. Words then are not an appendix or an addition, but become as necessary as gestures. They constitute what Grotowski calls a “supra-language” derived from and built within the body (Grotowski, “I said” 83).

The scholar Denis Bablet explains that, while the majority of the great theorizers of total theatre\textsuperscript{25} of the early twentieth century\textsuperscript{26} recognized – implicitly or explicitly – the necessity of an organizing intelligence to oversee the homogeneity of a work of art, Kantor moved beyond this necessity. Rejecting such suffocation of spontaneity and creativity, he proposed a theatre in which all elements – including the audience – would play an important part in the theatrical performance but without being subject to an external organizing force (Bablet 35). It is precisely Kantor’s total devotion to this “togetherness of the theatrical machine” that fascinates Dante (Dante, “Il lusso” I). For Kantor, all theatrical elements claim a co-existence that would be able to take place only through simultaneity and togetherness since, being completely equivalent, they deliberately lack an organizational entity. Delia Centonze points out that those elements

\textsuperscript{25} Or of a total work of art.

\textsuperscript{26} Including Wagner, Appia, Craig, Artaud, and Meyerhold.
become interdependent through the formation of intricate, heterogeneous, self-preserving, and self-organizing relations which govern Kantor’s system of theatrical unity (Centonze 28). Such unity, or togetherness, needs to produce theatre organically, starting from the actor and the text combined, and expanding with the guidance of a director and the expert contributions of designers. In a performance, all of those elements, being equal, must work together as a harmonious orchestra. It is the existence of what Kantor defines as “UR-MATTER” (Kantor, “The Milano Lessons 3” 217) that makes this self-organizing process possible, without minimizing the position that the artist has in the creative process. Kantor directly asserts that he believes in the “SIMULTANEITY and this EQUALITY of actions – in my individual action and the action of the Primordial Matter. This ‘unité’ will always stay an unfathomable mystery of creation” (Kantor, “The Milano Lessons 3” 217). This self-organizing principle created a dynamic equilibrium on stage. Including rhythm, space, energy, motions and countermotions continuously struggling for balance, the dynamic presence on stage becomes similar to that of a swinging pendulum. The sudden and quick motions generated by the oscillations of the pendulum create tension which is, ultimately, the grid structuring what is presented on stage.

It is by making time to train her actors to be an ensemble through theatrical laboratories and by utilizing an extended period of time devoted to developing a performance integrated in all its elements that allow for Dante’s theatre to become total theatre in both the Grotowskian and Kantorian sense. In such a complex and balanced theatrical ecosystem that comes to flower during the creation of a performance, the role of the director – that was that of a theatrical trainer during the laboratory – becomes that
of a facilitator clearing the floor for this joint creation to occur. In this respect, Dante speaks of Kantor the director as “a cog of the machine, a bolt, not like the motor of it all […]” (Dante, “Il lusso” I). He is the director of a harmonious orchestra of theatrical elements. Similarly to Kantor, Emma Dante is not the only motor propelling her devised theatre; the overbearing intelligence charged with singlehandedly determining the order and the content of the parts in a pre-conceived structure. Dante does not tell her actors what to do. She explains to them what is not working and why it is not working, but she does not give them a solution on how to resolve the issue. She wants her actors to find a solution without any external impositions. This process, although often undoubtedly frustrating, produces organic and communal results. By moving away from the idea of the director/deviser as the sole creator of a synthesis or the undertaker of a critical, single-minded process of assemblage of the text and the other elements of her theatrical performance, Dante regards her role as that of simply bringing an idea to the table, of creating a starting point which is elaborated on through a series of long theatrical laboratories. She affirms:

I, the director, have an idea, I know what the message is, I know what I would like to say but I do not tell them [the actors] – telling them ‘you have to do this now, you have to do that’ – so that they, as authors, can write the piece for me, my story- the one I already have in my head. […] This, in my opinion, is the biggest objective: because in this way the story is not an imposition. You make others participate; you make it live as if it were something public […]. Rehearsing is useful for this: to convince others to write your story. (Dante, “Il lusso” V)
It is this valued co-authorship of all involved in the theatrical process – audience included – that allows for the creation of a performance text. This shared story or text is eventually channeled through the actor and through the public, which automatically become co-authors in the human dialogue established between characters, actors, and audience. Dante’s actors do not merely interpret actions and words that are previously fixed in a dramatic text. They do not represent but create and re-create the performance through laboratories, rehearsal, and performances alike. In this way, Dante’s theatre denies representational realism in that same visceral way that was advocated in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and, subsequently, by Kantor and Grotowski. For Dante, a performance is a process of fracturing reality, not copying it. During this fragmentation, there is a schism that occurs between what is put on stage and what is missing from the stage, as in Genet’s 1958 play *Les Nègres (The Blacks)*. When Dante’s works are on stage, they also convey what is not present on the stage, creating a sort of negative space that speaks as much as the actual performance. A specific example is the conscious choice of not mentioning the word ‘death’ in *Vita mia*. By not speaking this word out loud and, therefore, by excluding it from the performance, the word ‘death’ becomes embodied on stage, obtaining an incredibly powerful presence in its absence (Dante, “La strada” 65). *Vita mia* can be considered as one of Emma Dante’s non-shows, a production expressing the impossibility of actually creating a show. The characters are trapped in their house, without being able to find a life elsewhere, thus expressing the attempt and the inevitable failure to actually complete the performance. In this way, Dante advocates for absence as presence in her theater as Kantor did in his works.
Theatre of Memory and Death

Recalling Kantor’s Theatre of Memory and Grotowski’s “holy” actor\textsuperscript{27} (Grotowski, *Towards* 33-45), Dante’s approach to the creation of a performance becomes a way to unearth memories and rituals. It creates a common bond at the heart of human existence. It plucks that chord that is at the essence of humanity by awakening this bond and strengthening it, presenting humans with the misery that surrounds them and in which they are trapped. Connecting origins and memories, this chord becomes the concretization of a shared human primordial bond. This constant process of physical and mental awakening instigates remembrance as an active reaction to forgetting. The act of remembering actively antagonizes a forgetting that is inevitably connected to time by allowing memory to transcend time and history. As Kantor affirms:

memory, 

Makes use of [film] NEGATIVES 

that are still frozen –

almost like metaphors 

but unlike narratives –

which pulsate, which appear and disappear, 

which appear and disappear again 

until the image fades away, 

until … the tears fill the eyes.

[...] 

\textsuperscript{27} As well as Peter Brook’s Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible or Holy Theatre, as outlined in *The Empty Space*, and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty.
REPETITION,

almost like a prayer,

or like a litany,

is a signal of SHRINKING

TIME. (Kantor, “Memory” 159)

To manipulate time through remembrance creates a theatrical reality where the past coincides with the present through the body of the actors. Becoming custodian of memories via their acquired ability to connect with the altrove, actors allow for this invisible, holy ritual to be made visible and transposed into a theatrical language. The body of the actors can be considered as a vessel of archaic memory filled by fantasmini. Like Kantor’s Other, Dante’s fantasmini are entities that “took the form of memory that folded back on itself and through itself; memory that transformed in space rather than in time” (Kobialka 312-13) and that can be found by accessing the altrove.

Identifying memories – and therefore the fantasmini – as physical presences that adhere to the body and that cannot be physically forgotten, is a concept that is reminiscent of Grotowski (Towards 255-62). Dante embraces this idea, accepting that it is only through the body of the actor that we are fully able to share those physical memories with the audience through a common kinesthetic experience. The theatre then becomes a space where actors and audience can engage in a ritualistic process of revelation and elaboration of shared memory; a temple in which to utter a “secular prayer” (Dante, “La strada” 61).
Grotowski, Kantor and Dante are all attempting to create a modern secular ritual on stage, to erect an “altar of memory” (Kantor, “Memory” 156). They regard theatre as a sacrificial act in which the actors themselves offer their bodies and their blood to the audience in an attempt to redeem them (Centonze 38). By understanding truth as what is not forgotten or what is remembered, only things that we remember acquire the status of truth. The analysis and ritualizing of that act of remembrance provide a particularly fertile ground of comparisons between memory and truth, individual truth and societal truth, as well as between life, death and the human condition. Thus, for Dante, embodying on stage the act of remembering and, therefore, embodying memories, transforms Dante’s plays into artistic pursuits aimed at reaching a primordial, basic, and shared truth. In Vita mia it is the memory of death that makes death true and concrete in the reality in which the characters reside. Death has to be remembered in order to preside and, as Kantor points out, it has to be counterposed against all the deaths which preceded it in order to become a source of true inspiration (Miklaszewski 144-45). This unearthing of memories of and through rituals, allows for theatre to sustain a dialogue between life and death, that same dialogue that Emma Dante presents in her plays and that was advocated for by both Grotowski and Kantor. Overall, the works of the Sicilian director are intended, as Kantor’s The Machine of Love and Death,\(^\text{28}\) to link the past with the present as human beings and as artists, inaugurating a personal confrontation between the individual, humanity, history, memory, and death (Miklaszewski 133).

\(^{28}\) To know more about this show, see the chapter “Exergi Monumentum, or The Machine of Love and Death: Description in dialogue form, July 1987” in the 2002 book by Krzysztof Miklaszewski Encounters with Tadeusz Kantor, pages 132-134.
Analyzing the relation between time, theatre, memory and death, Kantor writes of his play *The Dead Class*:

The CONDITION OF DEATH – of the DEAD – [was] RECREATED IN THE LIVING.
TIME PAST MYSTERIOUSLY SLIPPED INTO TIME PRESENT.

The past exists in memory.
DEAD!
Its inhabitants are
DEAD, too.

They are dead but at the same time alive,
that is, they can move, and they can even talk. These *poor* symptoms of life have, however, no *purpose* or *consequence*. (Kantor, “Memory” 158)

Kantor’s text reflects on his whole artistic output, not solely that of his celebrated *Dead Class*. His words speak of the meshing of past and present, of life and death that continuously happens on stage in the process of recalling memory. Identifying moving
and talking as “poor symptoms of life” as objects of art, Kantor makes them necessary artistic tools in trespassing the demarcation line between what is life and what is death. He goes as far as stating that death can be perceived through the misery of everyday routines the same way that the purity of art beyond drama can be achieved through staging objects belonging to a reality of the lowest rank (Kantor, “The Infamous” 147). Theatre then functions as “a doorway through which the dead enter our lives” (Kantor, “Let” 117). Emma Dante follows Kantor’s ideas in this respect, making death a constant presence in her first trilogy of works and concentrating on what could be regarded as daily family routines. In her theatre works, Dante faces death head-on and, like Kantor before her, she takes delight in taunting it in a desperate attempt to defy it (Miklaszewski 147). In Vita mia, Dante paints the struggle of a mother in accepting the death of her youngest son and therefore, literally keeping him alive through memory. Even though all of the characters in the play are clearly stamped with the mark of death, the play is an act of extreme and hopeless defiance. Inevitably bound to fail, this theatrical gesture portrays an incessant physical struggle between life and death embodied in the physicality of the youngest son who is repeatedly brought back to life by the memories carried by his mother. Vita mia presents death neither as the punch line of the performance nor in a way that violently, dramatically, and spectacularly finalizes art. The Sicilian director, similarly to Kantor, wants death to be the “binding of various manifestations of life, almost constituting the structure of the whole” (Kantor, “Let” 114). Making death integral part of her journey of theatrical research, Dante, like Kantor and Grotowski, experiments to find that transitional state from “the world of ‘beyond’ to the world ‘here,’ from the
condition of being dead into that of being alive” (Kantor, “The Infamous” 145) that would allow her to continue to explore the correspondence of death and life with fiction and reality. It is a way to pursue that return to humanity that propelled Dante towards a theatre of research and to formulate a laboratorial approach to devising. It is a way to continue exploring the human condition with its responsibility and consciousness; of ultimately measuring fate on the scale of death, evoking in the audience a shock that will allow for the re-opening of a lost dialogue between the stage and the auditorium.
Chapter 2: Influences from the Sicilian Theatrical Tradition

We must pay tribute to tradition with actions, not words. We must cultivate the seeds of the past, which may flourish into new values on modern soil… We wish to influence man and the world with our art. We’ve got the courage to fight openly and fervently for the most important issues, because only such issues are worth fighting for.

Qtd Osiński, Grotowski and His Laboratory, 15)

Emma Dante takes particular care in outlining the influence of specific European theatre artists on her theatrical aesthetics and practices. While linking the theory behind her theatre with that of the European avant-gardes of the late twentieth century, Dante does not hesitate to raise a fence between her works and those of past and contemporary Sicilian theatrical auteurs. In an interview with theatrical scholar Celeste Bellofiore, Dante speaks of Franco Scaldati (b. 1943), a well known contemporary Sicilian actor, director, and playwright, by clearly stating that she does not “belong to a tradition that goes back to a theatre such as that of Scaldati” going so far as to exclaim “I have nothing to do with him!” (Dante qtd Barsotti, La Lingua 46). Distancing her work from that of Scaldati and other Sicilian actor-director-playwrights, such as Spiro Scimone (b. 1964) and Davide Enia (b. 1974), Emma Dante attempts to offset her plays from the form and
content of a Sicilian theatrical tradition that she does not feel belongs to her, preferring to frame her work first and foremost in a European context. Dante’s attitude towards identifying her theatrical roots becomes then symptomatic of a larger, more complex issue. Repeatedly emphasizing the link between her artistic practice and those of European authors such as Kantor, Grotowski, and Brook, Dante seems to be legitimizing her work nationally and internationally by identifying with iconic theatre practitioners and innovators. In this desire for of legitimization, she goes out of her way to distance her productions from that of the so called Scuola Siciliana (Sicilian School) or Sicilian theatrical tradition in what may be understood as an attempt to do something new that completely breaks with the Sicilian theatre of tradition. Although there is no doubt that Dante moves away from indigenous Sicilian theatrical forms such as the traditional Opera dei Pupi, it is important to notice that Dante distances herself from a Sicilian tradition principally in terms of form and actor training, and not in the underlining themes of her works.

Such struggle between innovation and tradition has been fought by many Sicilian artists who have preceded Dante or who are her contemporaries, including Giovanni Verga (1840-1922), Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), Pier Maria Rosso di San Secondo (1887-1956), Leonardo Sciascia (1921-1989), Salvo Licata (1937-2000), Scaldati, Scimone, and Enia. From Verga’s Verismo to Rosso di San Secondo’s Futurism, from

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29 L’Opera dei Pupi (Òpra dî Pupi in Sicilian language) it is Sicilian traditional theatre of marionettes. The marionettes themselves are called Pupi, from the latin pupus which mean child. L’Opera belongs to the Sicilian tradition of the cuntastori (cantastorie in Italian) or Sicilian storytellers.
30 The name Verismo, an Italian literary current similar to French naturalism, comes from the Italian vero, meaning "true.” Reaching its maximum popularity between 1875 and the early 1900s, Verismo had Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana as its main exponents and the authors of the manifesto of Verismo.
Pirandello’s metatheatre to Scaldati’s Theatre of Poetry, Scimone’s Beckettian Absurdism, and Enia’s Theatre of Narration, the variety of theatrical forms explored by those Sicilian artists over the span of a century, find their roots in European avant-garde movements as well as in underlying Sicilian themes, which became extraordinarily important after the unification of the Italian Kingdom. Today, the intrinsically Sicilian subjects reflected in the theatre of the island are still at the forefront of the *Questione Meridionale*, a phrase first used in 1873 by the politician Antonio Billia. To this day, to talk about the *Questione Meridionale* means to tackle the political, economical, and social disparity between the *Mezzogiorno* (the southern part of Italy) and the rest of the Italian peninsula that became apparent during the unification of Italy. In 1911, the Italian historian and politician Giustino Fortunato writes:

> It is undeniable that there exists a *Questione Meridionale*, in the economical and political sense of the phrase. Between the north and the south of the [Italian] peninsula there is a big disparity in the field of human activities, in the intensity of collective life, in the size and type of economic production, and, therefore, between the intimate bonds that run between the wellbeing and the heart of a nation; even a deep diversity between the habits, traditions, and their intellectual and moral world. (311-12)

Differently from realism, *Verismo* was an extreme version of objectivity in the arts, aiming to eliminate subjectivity from artistic observations on the world. Unlike French naturalism, which was based on positivistic ideals, Verga and Capuana rejected claims of the social usefulness of their movement; they are pessimists who believe the nothing can be done to change the social status of those classes. Authors who belong to the *Verismo* movement renounce to their intellectuality to take the point of view of the lower class they are analyzing.

Although it is not possible to pinpoint a specific date for such event, the Unification of the Kingdom of Italy was a long process that began after the fall of the Napoleonic Empire with the Congress of Vienna (1815) and was largely completed in 1871 with the absorption of the Papal State and the declaration of Rome as the capital of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy.
As Fortunato points out, the people of southern Italy seem to have a system of habits, traditions, and even morals that are separated from the rest of the nation, allowing for the development of artists and intellectuals whose thoughts are inevitably influenced by the reality in which they live and by their views on such reality. This notion is particularly relevant to Sicilian artists who, geographically severed from the rest of the continent, have developed their school of thought in a more isolated world.

The influences exerted by the Sicilian school on contemporary theatrical practitioners such as Dante are challenging to pinpoint. Possibly the greatest obstacle to such an analysis comes from the amount of historical and sociological exploration necessary in order to understand what powerful forces interacted to create the artistic singularity that is Sicily. Such research is further complicated by the incredible wealth of theatrical practitioners who have flourished in Sicily from late 1800s to present day. For the purpose of this thesis, I will limit my analysis to only a few of those artists – with an emphasis on Verga and Pirandello – in an attempt to place Dante’s theatre, which was previously analyzed in a European context, as part of the Sicilian theatrical tradition.

The Effetto Sicilia

In his analysis of the genealogy of the Sicilian writers of and following the Risorgimento, the scholar Carlo Madrignani highlights the connecting thread tying together the shared experiences and themes portrayed by those authors. The consistency and magnitude of such similarities, led Madrignani to identify this thread as a larger

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32 The Unification of Italy or il Risorgimento (the Resurgence) was the political and social movement that in the 19th century consolidated the many states of the Italian peninsula into the Kingdom of Italy.
phenomenon. Characterizing the effect that the Sicilian Island has on its inhabitants, which is inevitably reflected in Sicilian literature and dramatic arts, Madrignani baptizes this phenomenon as *Effetto Sicilia (The Sicily Effect)*. Similar to the *sicilianismo universale* (universal Sicilian-ness) presented by Beniamino Joppolo (1908-1965), the *Effetto Sicilia* can be understood not as a consciously shared philosophy, but as a way of dealing with the combination of specific, shared historical, sociological, and anthropological traits constituting everyday life in Sicily that ultimately become an integral and common part in the hermeneutical experience of each Sicilian author. The *Effetto Sicilia* then becomes a response to the island’s history and the myths connected to it; a confrontation of the mark impressed on those who live on the island by a common regional mold rooted in the late 1800s; a reaction to the isolation of the Island from the rest of Italy and Europe and an attempt to face *l’altrove* (the elsewhere) that lays beyond the sea. Echoes of this phenomenon reach us, consciously or unconsciously, through the works of contemporary Sicilian authors who continue to portray the uncanny vitality of the island through common threads of images and messages testifying to the gravity of unresolved problems created by the sudden process of modernization that Sicily experienced during the *Risorgimento*. Similarly to Licata, Scaldati, Scimone, and Enia, Emma Dante is undeniably influenced by the *Effetto Sicilia*, which has played an important role in her development as a woman and an artist, ultimately shaping her theatrical works as attempts to restore a dialogue with humanity. Born and raised on the

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33 Barsotti quotes Beniamino Joppolo on page 30 of *La Lingua Teatrale Di Emma Dante: Mpalermu Carnezzeria, Vita Mia*: “The virtue intrinsic to the Sicilian school, consists of this ability to blossom from all types of experiences as irresistible victors, spontaneous and full of unmistakable charm, of a specific character that we can call a ‘sicilianismo universale’ (or universal Sicilian-ness)”

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island, Dante reclaims the whole of Sicily with its roots and its traditions: she uses her plays to communally observe Sicily and the people who inhabit this world, thus, explicitly or implicitly putting *sicilianità* (or sicilian-ness) and the state of being Sicilian at the nucleus of her theatre (Dante, “La Strada” 65).

**The Individual Against Society: a Historical Byproduct**

As both Anna Barsotti and Carlo Madrignani point out, when Sicily, with its tumultuous history of invasions, societal oppression, and lack of economical development, was faced with the prospect of the unification of Italy, the initial positive responses of its inhabitants were soon trampled with a far less glamorous reality. Fomented by the absence of concrete improvements to the conditions of those living on the island, a widespread disappointment contributed to create a climate of conflict between the individual and the world in which they lived, leaving Sicilians to blame society singlehandedly for their individual misfortunes. The scholar Simonetta Salvestroni affirms that such conflict, although reshaped under various disguises over time, represents “the Sicilian answer to the different crisis that invest the whole of Italy” (qtd Barsotti, *La Lingua* 74). Initially used as means to clarify some of the most obscure political and sociological nodes of the Risorgimento, Verga’s *Verismo* – with its impossibility to conciliate the clash between society and the individual – summarizes not only Verga’s views on such conflict, but also conveys that of many other Sicilian authors, including Pirandello and Dante. Roberto Alonge considers the conflict between the isolated man and a hostile reality that we see in Verga’s works, including *Cavalleria*
Rusticana (1884), or in Pirandello’s *dramma borghese* (or bourgeois drama), as a historical byproduct created by a “mold that is so engrained in Sicily that it seems easy to consider it as a natural and existential phenomenon” (30).

**Family, Mafia and Archetypes**

The first battleground of the conflict between individual and society is the institution that is considered the basic societal nucleus: family. Emma Dante’s first trilogy, entitled *Carnezzeria: Trilogia della Famiglia Siciliana* (*The Butchery: The Trilogy of the Sicilian Family*), focuses on what Barsotti defines as “the physiological uneasiness of decapitated family relationships” (*La Lingua* 11). In *Vita mia* those relationships are materialized in the absence of a paternal figure as well as in the death of the youngest son. This mirrors the tendency in Dante’s work to often mutilate the parental nucleus of a family, which in her plays is often missing one or both parents. Dante affirms that “it is as if the performance piece itself lacked a genesis,” (“La Strada” 41) making it almost impossible to track the actual origin of a piece back to a single parental figure – be that a director or a playwright. Similarly to the Baron who juxtaposes the safety and strength of family to the dangers of “the outside” in Verga’s *Dal Tuo Al Mio* (1903), the lonely mother in *Vita mia* lives to protect her three children from the perils of life lurking just beyond her reach. In both plays then, family takes on a significance that justifies challenging and defying death to guarantee the survival of the

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34 Distinguished from his metatheatre, which dealt with the impossibility of representation, Pirandello’s bourgeois drama dealt with the bourgeoisies and sometime the grotesque. This phase of his theatrical career started with *Il piacere dell’onestà* (1917).
family. It is this Sicilian mother – reminiscent of Brecht’s Mother Courage and Eduardo de Filippo’s Filumena Marturano – that revives the archetype of a mythological family intended in the “absolutist terms of a Sicilian frame of mind” (Barsotti, *La Lingua* 19) and turns it upside-down, transforming the traditional, feared patriarchy into a matriarchy. The spectator is then faced with a world in which everything is subverted, and the line between what is pure and what is putrid becomes progressively blurred, creating an ambiguous duality between the sacred and the rotten. An example of this duality becomes the juxtaposition between the actions of the mother and their result: she perpetuates her objective of protecting her three sons from the dangers of the outside world by ultimately denying them life. The sacred institution of the Sicilian family is hence revealed to be a delicate, rotten social universe bound by fear of what is beyond the family nucleus. By dismissing objects that are considered sacred and investing everyday objects – such as a bicycle – with an almost religious significance and thus sanctifying them for their ability to establish a dialogue with the audience, *Vita mia* becomes a demystification of the sacred through the subversion of the institutionalized simulacra of the Sicilian family.

After addressing the social microcosm of family, Dante’s vision of family evolved from that of a matriarchal institution to that of a social and figurative extended family: the Sicilian mafia. Dante regards this phenomenon indigenous to the island Sicily as an experimental ground governed by the same rules of governing the traditional Sicilian family, chief among them it is the blood contract binding both families and the impossibility of breaking such a pact except by death. It is not by chance that after *Vita
mìa, the last representation of microcosm of family and “encompassing abuses, tensions, rules, ceremonies, perversions, and extreme infractions” (Barsotti, La Lingua 38), Dante explored the theme of the Grande Famiglia (the big family), as the mafia is often referred to, in the play Cani di Bancata. In this work, the mafia is literally regarded as a family, headed by a monstrous woman and governed by intimate familial relationship intertwined with a series of extreme moral and intellectual pollutions. By doing so, Dante dismantles the romantic idea of mafia promoted by many American movies and television series such as The Godfather Trilogy and The Sopranos, in an attempt to understand how the social conditions conducive to a mafia environment are prompted, canonized, and, possibly, eradicated.

Honor and Respect

The ideas of honor and respect also permeate all of Dante’s works and are strictly tied with the institution of the traditional Sicilian family. Respect and honor amongst the people of southern Italy are connected to the fundamental human need for decorum, to their ability to look others in the eyes as if there were a direct connection between their existence and their need to be acknowledged by others in that dignified existence. Such a thematic is also reflective of an almost innate necessity of interfering with the life of other human beings: it is a propelling need to intimately connect with others, to constantly cross each other’s path. Dante recognizes this inset necessity for human communication as what propelled her to follow a theatre of research. For her, seeking such dialogues is a way to influence others’ lives, creating a powerful bond that appears
only dissoluble with death. This same bond manifests itself in the tight relationship linking Sicilian artists to their motherland. In their representation of figures and themes, those artists create a common plethora of images deriving from ancient customs.

In her analysis, Barsotti pinpoints some of these archetypal figures common to the Sicilian school initiated with Verga’s work and also present in the Emma Dante’s plays. Among them, we find the figure of the violent, arrogant, and young bully in contrast with that of the thinker, who is consumed by an obsessive yearning for knowledge and self-analysis. We see the carnal lover as an antithesis to the simple-minded and naïve woman who is always seduced and abandoned. We also see the predominance of a chauvinistic view of man-woman relationships augmented by shadowy, terrible brothers and a tyrannical father/godfather as juxtaposed against the mother and the myth itself of maternity (Barsotti, La Lingua 18). It is worth noting that, as Pirandello before her, Dante pays particular attention to the female figures she presents, and in her Trilogy of the Sicilian Family, she explores the balance between male-female relationships and power struggles which derives. The conflict between those opposite archetypal figures described by Barsotti, reflects the conflict between isolated individuals and the social reality to which they belong. Such struggle implies the use of strong violence, which can be both physical and psychological, and which is often responded to with either an equal and opposite reaction, or with a sense of closure and indolence which often overflows into self-marginalization (Barsotti, La Lingua 10).
Violence

Madrignani writes that since the unification of Italy, Sicilian authors have felt compelled to show a reality that is “deformed by a ‘philosophy of violence’ that is so much absorbed into everyday reality that it becomes almost something ‘natural’” (Madrignani 9). In fact, in Verga, Pirandello, Sciascia, Dante and many others, the unconscious always talks with “the strength and the violence of lacerating and obsessive images, desires, and visceral pulses” (Alonge 101) while the conscious mind, understanding the nature of the people living on the island, erratically self-inflicts violent pain and anguish. What derives is an ambivalent portrayal of the island as a land perpetually stuck in the present, where everyday problems are piled on top of ancient ones and never actually solved but left to decay and corrupt reality. Presented in the works of the Sicilian school as well as in Dante’s trilogy, such reality is further complicated by what Madrignani describes as a pessimistic anthropologic and civic view of others (7) which creates a sense of fierce impotence. As in Verga’s Cavalleria Rusticana and Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921), the characters in Vita mia and in the other two plays of Dante’s trilogy are filled with feelings of impotence against life and against death; they are subjugated by the unwritten laws which govern society and human existence and faced with the impossibility to overcome such laws. Recalling literary figures such as Mastro Don Gesualdo, the eponymous landowner in Verga’s 1889 novel Mastro Don Gesualdo, and Mattia Pascal, the protagonist of Pirandello’s 1904 novel The Late Mattia Pascal, Dante’s theatrical figures are outsiders and outcasts who, although impotent, are not resigned but, on the contrary, they conjure
violent indignation and anger with often tragic results. This vision of the world is yet another product of the umbilical cord connecting Sicily with its inhabitants who are nurtured by an indissoluble, almost asphyxiating, attachment to the native land and its founding institutions: family, religion, state, and tradition.

The Sicilian Complex of Superiority

The excessive attachment to the island and its history can be considered a way to compensate for Sicily’s historical complex of inferiority, to which the island has been subjected since the late 1800s, with a Sicilian complex of superiority, first identified and analyzed by Sciascia. Writing about the whole island as a land of exile, Verga, Pirandello, Tomasi di Lampedusa and Sciascia capture in their works this sense of superiority that christens Sicily as a difficult, even damned, place but a place that simultaneously has the ability to shelter its inhabitants from the outside world. In addition to providing its dwellers with a protective cocoon against what lays beyond the sea, Sicily is also able to train those who have understood the unjust laws by which life on the island is governed to withstand every social and moral challenge that faces them. The result of such sheltering and indoctrinating process is the arrogant belief that Sicily has the extraordinary power to elevate the status of those humans dwelling in her bosom to that of demigods. In the novel *Il Gattopardo (The Leopard)* (1958), Tomasi di Lampedusa explains this concept in the words of the Prince of Salina:

[…] Sicilians will never want to become better for the simple reason that they believe to be perfect: their vanity is stronger than their misery; every external
intervention […] unsettles their illusion of having achieved completeness, risking to upset their complacent wait of nothingness; trumped on by different peoples, they believe to have an imperial past that gives them the right to sumptuous funerals. (Tomasi di Lampedusa 183)

This passage describes a characteristic of the Island, namely a widespread attitude of reveling in presumed perfection which presents itself as a “compensatory phenomenon of self-exaltation” (Barsotti, La Lingua 37). Manifestations of this phenomenon as an incessant demand for respect are ingrained in the customs of the region and can be pinpointed in everyday life as well as in the works of all authors of the Sicilian tradition. This strong outlook on safeguarding one’s honor and demanding unconditional respect from others while following a hidden code of social conduct has set off a series of auto-defensive mechanisms in response to the unpleasantness of a landscape that can be considered subhuman (Madrignani 8). This initial gut reaction has become crystallized over time, forcing Sicilians into wearing personal armors inside societal walls that leads to a process of desensitization and alienation from the world around them. In this respect, Pier Maria Rosso di San Secondo writes:

I believe that the nature of the man who lives in the island is in itself essentially tragic, the sanguine burning passions of youth, especially in Sicily, are soon turned […] in a discouraging, silent, bitterness. It suffices to think of the solitude in which it seems that every character in Verga’s works moves around, to understand that it is fatal to every soul of that land such hermetic closure in its disillusionment, after the first enthusiasms of life. (qtd. Barsotti, Pier Maria 40)
Disillusion is the background for a portrait of the island that ultimately appears as the bearer of a gloomy people, always ready to see the blackest part of life, perpetually hoping for something else, something better, and constantly distrusting that such hope will eventually be fulfilled (Vittorini 34). Struggling with the strong temptation to end once and for all their state of sadness and turmoil, Sicilian people are portrayed as incapable of making such a leap. It is either for lack of courage or for their extreme resilience that their lives are so similar to that of the mother in Vita mia, who continues to deny death even in its presence. In a conscious attempt to postpone the end, the mother continues to spin a bicycle wheel with her toes, grasping on to even the last sign of life exemplified in the wheel’s movement and the sound of the rotating circle underneath a funerary shroud.

**Alienation and the Theatrical Space**

Looking at this bipolar syndrome between hope and desperation, we can easily recognize a subversive tension between a desire to be born again in an ideal world where political, social and even artistic institutions can be changed according to one’s wishes and the painful, almost mournful awareness of having given up in the face of a disappointing reality. Torn between an instinct to dissociate oneself from such a reality and the understanding of being predestined to unwillingly become the product of that Sicilian society one does not have the strength to leave, the individual embarks on a search for placebos that, even if briefly, can either construct a pacifying illusion of belonging or bring them blissful peace through alienation (Barsotti, *La Lingua* 35).
Alienation becomes a hypnotic, stupefying eroticism, defined as the “sensual behavior of laziness” (Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo* 109) and able to exorcize the fear of death with a constant state of waiting for nothing while doing nothing. This state of being, reminiscent of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and present in all the works of Verga, Pirandello, Sciascia and Dante, can be exemplified in the words uttered by the Prince of Salina in *The Leopard*:

> All Sicilian manifestations are dream-like manifestations, even the most violent ones. Our sensuality is the desire for oblivion, our shot-gun blasts and knife cuts, the desire for death; our laziness, our salsify and cinnamon sorbets, are a desire for voluptuous immobility: a desire for death. (Tomasi di Lampedusa 178)

A critique of the need to alienate oneself from the surrounding reality and to pacify an apparently innate yearning for death with violence, laziness, and a sexual and gastronomical overindulging of the senses, is often found in the theatre of the Sicilian school. Such a scenario is often accompanied by two distinctive individual reactions: either becoming an island in oneself or running away from the island. While Pirandello touches on this existential alienation of the self in his works – including *The Late Mattia Pascal* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* – he also regards Sicily as a land of transition, a provisional stop in the journey of life which must be left in haste due to the close-mindedness of that “land of sheep” (Pirandello qtd Alonge 6) where people cannot and will not change. Similarly, Sciascia elaborates on these ideas in his plays35 and uses them as a magnifying lens to analyze the Island while highlighting the contrast between

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35 For example, in *L’onorevole, Recitazione della controversia liparitana*, and *I mafiosi*, all published in 1976.
Sicily and *l’altrove* (the elsewhere) that was already present in Verga’s writings. For Sciascia, the historical instability that characterizes Sicily transformed itself in an existential fear that encouraged the Sicilian people’s propensity for isolation, leading them to arrogantly regard their insularity as a privilege (Barsotti, *La Lingua* 34). Dante recalls this behavior in her first trilogy. Already present in the first work of the Trilogy of the Sicilian Family, *mPalermo*, such a tendency to isolation reappears in *Vita mia*, where the house in which the mother and her sons dwell is separated from the rest of the world. Becoming a self-contained universe, Sicily, similarly to the room where the funerary vigil takes place in *Vita mia*, becomes an isolated realm of existence, a trap from which the characters are not able to escape. Emma Dante mirrors this notion of isolation as a trap in her theatrical works, allowing it to influence both the staging and the theme of her productions. To create a setting that would communicate entrapment from a spatial point of view, the Sicilian director expands the stage area to include the actual walls of the theatre, eliminating the backstage. In *Vita mia*, by abolishing the space behind the scenes, Dante eliminates the endless possibilities which such space implies. She cages the imagination of the viewer, creating a claustrophobic environment which offers no escape or alternative reality since the physical space that the actors and the audience cohabit becomes everything that exists. For the Sicilian director, the more the confines of the stage are opened to include what is beyond the stage, the more the stage becomes a closed space encompassing both performers and spectators. Although attributing this quality to different causes, Barsotti points out that all Sicilian authors recognize in their productions

36 For example, Pirandello blames the sea that surrounds Sicily (303), Tomasi di Lampedusa the Sicilian...
regional compatriots and in themselves an instinctive fear of life that generates entrapment in isolation or closure to the rest of the world (Barsotti, *La Lingua* 23).

In his speech celebrating the works of Giovanni Verga given at the Italian Royal Academy on December 3, 1931, Pirandello addressed the ways in which individuals react to this state of isolation. He noted:

> There are those who leave, those who cross -not only materially- the sea, those who braving that instinctive fear, distance themselves (or believe to be distancing themselves) from those [...] depths that make them islands in themselves [...].

(“Discorso” 303)

For Pirandello, to refuse to become an island means to distance oneself from the Sicilian island as a whole and to be able to analyze its complex human ecosystem with an objective eye, thus understanding the influence that the island has in the formation of an individual’s identity. It signifies coming to terms with that traumatic process of contamination from the external world – *l’altrove* – initiated after the unification of Italy and never completely averted through isolation. It is not by chance that many Sicilian artists, including Verga, Pirandello, and Sciascia, flee their island,\(^{37}\) seeking artistic and intellectual comfort in mainland Italy and in other European countries such as Germany and France. Barsotti points out that, although leaving the island acquires an individual significance for each of those authors, the meaning of this action is recurrent (*La Lingua* 23). Giving one’s back to the island becomes a way to react to idleness, to confront

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\(^{37}\) Pirandello, quoted by Alonge in *Luigi Pirandello* on page 4 affirms: “All those Sicilians who wanted to make a living pursuing a career in the arts, Verga, Capuana, myself, De Roberto, and many others – all of us have had to go away from Sicily – to flee!”
themselves and the elsewhere, “to come out from a condition of stasis, to break a self-protective shell, a circle of indolence or anguish, to avoid catching a sickness that, to some, appears endemic to their native land […]” (Barsotti, La Lingua 23) while still holding on to the motifs, colors, and figures learned and observed in Sicily. Emma Dante herself recognizes that it was only after her mother pushed her to leave Sicily and study acting in Rome, that she successfully overcame her own indolence. 

Similarly to many of her predecessors and contemporaries, Dante eventually had to leave Sicily to come to terms with her own identity and to subsequently confront the world with her works in order to test if those products of Sicily had the necessary power to create a human connection with those who did not belong to the island. Talking about presenting the first work of her trilogy, mPalermu, outside of Sicily, Dante explains that she wanted her actors to leave the island where they had been working on the performance for a year. She wanted them to:

run away from Palermo to see what would have happened when her characters, her language, her story would have been seen by others: “the foreigners”. We wanted to […] make the trip and to understand how “the foreigners” would react […]. Yes, well, Italians who, nonetheless, continue to be “foreigners” with respect to Palermo […]. (Dante, “La Strada” 54-55)

The alternative to a constrictive isolation is running away: risking leaving the known territory to explore the world beyond the sea, taking a journey, and opening oneself to a different, mesmerizing reality. Often, the initial journey takes on surrealist tones as Dante

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38 In the interview “La strada scomoda del teatro,” on page 29 Dante affirms that she could have stayed in Palermo all her life since she was not strong enough to take the decision to leave by herself.
herself recalls when speaking of her first journey away from Sicily that brought her to Rome for her audition to enter the Silvio D’Amico National Academy of Dramatic Arts. She says: “I was scared but I was very excited. I remember that I arrived in Rome and it seemed New York to me, with all those lights, all those people. Despite the fear of leaving home, I went [...]” (Dante, “La Strada” 29-30). Although for many Sicilian artists, including Pirandello, running away or embarking in a journey eventually becomes a “permanent state of being” (Providenti 12), for Dante a journey ends always with a return to Sicily.

Returning to the island acquires many different meanings that range from clarifying an artistic point of departure to a physical return after a life abroad. Those returns are sometimes regenerative, other times they are accompanied by a mysterious, almost mythic cloud. Often, they follow traumatic revelations which occurred in the elsewhere, and, quite often, result in the returned artists sinking into complete disillusion and desperation after reinstating themselves in the Sicilian society they had abandoned. Barsotti explains that, similarly to the protagonist in Rosso di San Secondo’s novel *La fuga* (1917), who does not hesitate to leave Sicily and, later come back to the island full of disappointment, Emma Dante returns to Sicily after experiencing desolating failures in northern Italy trying to make a living as an actress in main-stream theatre. She was devastated by the knowledge of having wasted years creating a theatre that did not modify or enhance anybody’s existence, and that, most importantly, did not enrich her existence. In the state of deep uneasiness and failure that hit her upon her return to
Palermo in 1999, after her mother’s death, Dante finds the strength for a theatrical rebirth. She recalls:

I had to transform those troubles into a miracle, that pain had to be a miracle otherwise I would have not survived. [...] I was angry [...]. And so I said [...]：“All right, let’s create a big theatre laboratory.” (Dante, “La Strada” 55)

On the foundation laid by her first laboratory, Dante built her subsequent theatrical experiments culminating in *La trilogia della famiglia siciliana*. Experiencing that sense of failure and managing to rise above it, Dante understood that she wanted to pursue a theatre of research to re-establish human communication and create a theatre that would make a difference in the lives of the audience who witnessed it.

**Palermo and the Sicilian Language**

In order to make a difference in the life of her audience and in her own life, Dante guts and denounces that same society from which she has tried to escape. After years away from the island, Dante explains that she was not sure if the essence of Palermo had survived within her or if she had never actually left the city and its dark corners. She continues:

How can I start over, I thought, without being intimately involved with a place and, at the same time, distancing myself from the nature of such place? For this reason, I decided to stay: to reclaim images that were already present and to later recall them to memory. (Dante, “Appunti” 21)
Similarly to the actor-director-playwrights Salvo Licata, Franco Scaldati, and Davide Enia, Dante began to look at her city, Palermo with its ruins of an opulent past. Acting as a living contradiction, the city relishes in the same grandness of arrogance and degradation that infests the spirit of many of its inhabitants. In Emma Dante’s plays, Palermo is portrayed as a sick city on the verge of a frighteningly fascinating death. It is a deformed collage reassembled through memory. For the Sicilian director, the city of Palermo encompasses and intensifies the same heightened significance and metaphorical value that has invested the whole of Sicily since Verga’s times and that is shared by many other countries in the southern part of Europe (Dante, “Entrevista” 6). Davide Enia goes as far as to affirm that “the conditions of the city of Palermo - a splendid, gangrenous whore - appear to me more and more as the exemplary metaphor for today’s human condition” (Enia n.p.).

Palermo is then considered, by both Enia and Dante, as a reflection of the whole human condition, allowing the works of Dante’s company to have artistic and human significance that transcend folklore and go beyond national borders.

Dante’s representation of Palermo, Sicily, the whole of southern Italy and their complicated reality, inevitably spills into the question of language and dialects which has afflicted Italy since the beginning of the sixteenth century. The phrase ‘Questione della Lingua’ or ‘question of language’ identifies a social and literary controversy which became particularly important during the Italian Renaissance and that today continues to plague Italy. Initially, the Questione was concerned with finding an intellectual language that the people could understand. It wanted to find a middle ground between the unified,

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39 Davide Enia is one of the most important actor-authors of the second-generation of Teatro di Narrazione.
pure Latin used by the Church and academics, and the myriad of everyday languages utilized by the people of the Italian peninsula. Those languages had derived from the many regional and local variations of vulgar Latin, the bastardized version of Latin spoken by the populace, and had slowly begun to be substituted for Latin even in intellectual circles.

The *Questione* was apparently resolved by prominent Renaissance Tuscan academics who decided to synthetically assemble a language – mostly based on the language spoke in Florence – that would be used as the official language of the Italian peninsula. This constructed language, with its agreed upon grammatical and syntactical rules, eventually became what is now known as the Italian language. In reality, the *Questione* was far from being resolved. What the Renaissance intellectuals had done was to substitute the dying Latin language with the artificial Italian language, which, outside of Tuscany, was as incomprehensible to the populace as Latin had been. Italian became an elitist language. It was only after World War II, with the Italian economic revolution and the exponential increase in the retail of television sets, that television programs such as *Non e’ mai troppo tardi* (*It Is Never Too Late*) began to teach adults to read and write. It was at that point, when 50% of the Italian population was still completely illiterate,\(^{40}\) that the Italian language became in practice the official language of the Italian Republic.

In such a complex linguistic climate, the regional languages that had already begun to develop in the Middle Ages eventually consolidated themselves into three large

\(^{40}\) At the time of the unification of the Kingdom of Italy, circa 80% of the Italian population was unable to read and write. The remaining 20% of the population included those who could sign their own name instead of using a cross.
linguistic groups – the northern, the Tuscan, and the middle-southern – all with thousands and thousands of subgroups that change from village to village. Although commonly referred to as dialects, many of those languages, such as Sardinian, Sicilian, and Neapolitan to mention a few, have their own grammatical and syntactical structure independent from that of the Italian language. Those regional languages are related to Italian in the same way Provençal and Catalan are: they all derive from Latin roots mixed with the original language of the indigenous populations living in the area before the Roman conquest and contaminated by centuries of foreign invasions. Further, if regional languages such as Sicilian can be seen as the equivalent of Catalan, then the local variations of such language, such as the ones spoken in Palermo and Catania, can be truly regarded as dialects.

In creating and recounting stories of her land, tales that are painted with stark colors and harsh reality, yet delightfully sublime and moving in their unknown truths, Dante tackles once again the intricate Questione della Lingua that has afflicted the Italy for centuries. In 1935, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian writer, politician, political theorist, linguist, and philosopher wrote that:

Every time the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish a more intimate and secure relationship between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganize the cultural hegemony. (Gramsci 183-4)
It is precisely to simultaneously valorize indigenous tales of the south and reclaim her own linguistic heritage that Emma Dante breaks away from the cultural hegemony of Italian mainstream theatre and Italian language, returning to her native Sicilian language.

By using such language in her works, the Sicilian director is inevitably faced with issues of linguistic communication, which she overcomes by ultimately finding her own method of mixing the dialect specific to Palermo with both the Sicilian language and standard Italian. The result is a malleable, almost elastic language that is open to changes and contaminations. Such enriched language yields highly specialized words and turns of phrases. In this way, the sentences and vocabulary used assume a significance that is not directly translatable into Italian with a one-to-one correspondence. Thus, Dante creates her own theatrical language by mingling meaningful vocabulary and rhythmic variations of Italian and her regional dialect. In the preface to the *Trilogy of the Sicilian Family*, the writer and playwright Andrea Camilleri specifies that Dante uses the Sicilian language and the dialect of Palermo out of a need to communicate precisely and to effectively create words that are not merely signifiers, but that are “things themselves” (Camilleri 10). For Dante, as for many other southern Italian artists, exploring the carnal relationship between the Italian language, their regional language and their particular dialects goes beyond style: it becomes a necessity in the construction of their own theatrical world. An example is found in the title of the second play of her family trilogy, *Carnezzeria*. The word *carnezzeria* is only used in the dialect of the Sicilian language spoken in Palermo and it refers to butchery. Significantly, if Dante had elected to use the Italian word for butchery, *macelleria*, instead of *carnezzeria*, the title would have lost one of the
fundamental themes of the play. Using a word that incorporates *carne* (meat) immediately redirects the imagination of the audience to meat as well as to the body and body instincts and desires, such as violence and sex.\(^{41}\) Although the language spoken in her plays may be considered hard to understand initially for someone who is not familiar with Sicilian dialect, Dante’s ability to tightly intertwine language with the physicality and imagery of her works produces performances of enormous clarity which do not require translations or supertitles when presented in mainland Italy or abroad. Similarly to Scaldati, Dante takes inspiration from the dialect of Palermo, attempting to capture the reality she lives in by creating a bastardized version of the language that is still able to catch the sonority and the essence of her world. She transforms her dialect into something that acquires the importance and complexity of a theatrical language, a multifaceted construct of languages relating the actor to the audience in an act of total communication that could never be achieved only though the Italian language or the Sicilian dialect.

Emma Dante’s theatre punches her audience in the stomach (Barsotti, *La Lingua* 16) and, particularly, it surprises those audiences outside of Sicily who continue to regard the representations of the island made by Sicilian literary and theatrical authors with the same “admiring dismay” and “colonial fascination” they showed in Verga’s time (Madrignani 24). Dante confronts those audiences attracted by the spell of an uncivilized and barbaric Sicily (Madrignani 17) whose experiences are so far removed from those of the people who live in the island. Eradicating from the mind of the spectators that constant stupefied wonder created by their expectation of being faced at any moment

\(^{41}\) In Italian, the word carne also stands for flesh, understood as meat and as the origin of all carnal desires that are intrinsic to humans.
with a “menacing reality, even when […] [performances do] not present episodes of cruelty or illegality” (Madrignani 24), Dante’s plays focus on the uncanny vitality of the island rather than on its ethnic lure. The performances created by Dante ultimately aim to alienate the audience who becomes a witness and, at the same time, an accomplice of the performance (Barsotti, _La Lingua_ 16).

Feeding off the energy of the island, Dante’s work affirms her constant and abiding commitment to the land that inspires her. With all its contradictions and defects, the island becomes the source of Dante’s artistic vision. She affirms that:

The ghosts that we evoke inhabit Ballaró, the Capo, the Cala or Sant’Oliva Square or the Magione…  
It is important, necessary for us to live close to those ghosts, to feel them, observe them… For this reason we [the company and myself] cannot leave. We stay here, inside Palermo, a city that does not want us. (_Emma Dante: Sito Ufficiale_, “S.C.O” n.p.)

This complicated, almost co-dependent relationship with the city of Palermo and the Sicilian region is at the heart of Dante’s work and of the ironic reality that surrounds her. In a city that embraces theatrical innovation and diversity to the point that the University of Palermo instituted a theatrical studio for the School of New Butoh, Emma Dante’s devised works still struggle to be accepted. Possibly, her plays speak an inconvenient truth about the desolating reality of her city that is not well received by the theatrical elite.

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42 Those are some of the oldest and most degraded areas of the city of Palermo.

43 Headed by award winning dancer Sayoko Onishi and legitimized by Yoshito Ohno, son of Butoh master Kazuo Ohno, New Butoh is a branch movement of Butoh which attempts to integrate cultural experiences different from that of the Japanese people into this form of art. It explores how Sicilian influences as well as personal experiences can influence this traditional Japanese dance.
of Palermo. Dante tells the story of Palermo through the eyes of the forgotten. She theatrically shapes the “ugliness” of the city as a whole. Unlike Scaldati, she does confine it to the criminality-ridden neighborhood of the Albergheria, placed at the heart of Palermo, where this ugliness and dirt can be circumscribed and observed under a microscope. Dante takes her unsanitized world and her theatrical dialect outside of Palermo and outside of Sicily, allowing the whole world to see the dirt concealed under the façade of the region and city she loves.

**Political and Social Critique**

The meaning of political theatre has been widely discussed and often used to describe theatre that is socio-political in nature or deals with sociological and political issues. In this respect, the theatre of Emma Dante could be easily labeled political theatre. A product of the politically charged *Questione Meridionale* and, possibly, a reaction to the still current and very political *Questione della Lingua*, the theatre of Emma Dante revolves around cultural and linguistic Sicilian traditions, often staging strong social denunciations. Refuting the label of political as in directly regarding politics, Dante affirms that her theatre is socio-political:

> I do not do political theater because I do not talk about Berlusconi⁴⁴ […] but I have put on some social denunciations. My theater has to do with the incivilities of the world. Hence, maybe, my theater is more sociological then political. Then,

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⁴⁴ Silvio Berlusconi, Italian Prime Minister. He has held this position from 1994 to 1995, from 2001 to 2006 and currently since 2008. He is the second longest-serving Prime Minister since Benito Mussolini and one of the most controversial political figures in Italy.
uncovering every little flaw of the underclass of which I talk about in my works, the spectator can make up his mind about the politics that exists in this country [Italy]. (Dante, “La Strada” 77)

Examples are the alarming rate of unemployment in southern Italy which she denounces in _Vita mia_ and the severe lack of water in Sicily, a politically charged issue still unresolved today that she incorporates in the play _mPalermu_. Regarding this issue, she states:

If you say that in 2006 there are cities in Sicily in which there is lack of water, it is obvious that the responsibility is not of the people leaving in those cities […]. Water does not get there for other reasons, grave and serious reasons. I do not investigate those reasons, but I try to lift a veil. […] Theater deals with lifting the veil that is on top of all things, to uncover them: to lift that veil also means […] to not archive denunciations and to show the dust that covers everything… (Dante, “La Strada” 77)

By declaring her desire to use her theatre for social denunciations, Dante essentially looks back at the tradition of popular jesters or _vastasi_ and their _vastasate_. A _vastasata_ is the name of a _vastaso_’s performance and of the art form that derived from such performances which flourished in Sicily at the end of the XVIII century. The tradition of the _vastaso_ has commonalities with that of the late Commedia dell’Arte and Dario Fo’s _giullare_. In the Sicilian tradition, the _vastaso_ exposes everyday life in farcical tones, it subverts the social order becoming the voice of the populace and scolding the ruling class. The theatre of Emma Dante,
with its socio-political aims, has strong similarities with the Sicilian theatrical tradition of the vastasate and, consequently with the theatre of actor-director-playwright Franco Scaldati which also can be traced to the same tradition that Anna Sica and Goffredo Fofi have delineated respectively in “La drammaturgia degli emarginati nella recente scena siciliana” (2007)\(^{45}\) and in “Emma la vastasa” (2006).\(^{46}\)

In Dante’s work, uncovering sociological problematics and weighting their severity, becomes a weapon against a society that is apt to unjustified waste, as it is exemplified by the unforgivable act of wasting life, as shown in Vita mia. The dense sociological critique present in her scripts and productions contrasts the rise of a T. S. Elliott-like wasteland and the inevitable immobility that such an event would cause in both life and theater. By twisting the idea of consumerism to encompass more mystical values, Dante creates theatrical art rooted in tradition that avoids immobility in order to artistically denounce but also salvage and revalue the Sicilian social wasteland. In this endeavor, Dante calls for a theater of the “uncivilized” and “disinherited” people (Dante, “La Strada” 54), which is far from mainstream Italian theater. At its core, there is Dante’s belief that any piece of theater should be uneasy to watch, in the sense that any performance should take spectators out of their comfort zone. Such theater has a fundamental uneasiness in its themes and its stage representations which do not aim to emote

\(^{45}\) Article printed in the anthology Lingua e lingue nel Teatro Italiano edited by Paolo Puppa, pages 303-30, which illustrates the connection between Scaldati and the tradition of the vastasate.

\(^{46}\) Article printed in Palermo dentro. Il teatro di Emma Dante by Andra Porcheddu, pages 139-141, which only hints at the connection between the theatre of Emma Dante and the tradition of the vastasate.
or to touch the public, but, simply, to satisfy the necessity of theatre of research
able to communicate fundamental human malaise through art.
Conclusion

Whoever has the luck to be born a character can laugh even at death. He cannot die. The man, the writer, the instrument of creation will die, but his creation will never die!

(Luigi Pirandello. *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 10)

Emma Dante’s Compagnia Sud Costa Occidental is an important member of the contemporary Italian theatrical community that has been internationally overlooked for the past three decades. Despite the widespread lack of financial support, Dante has resiliently pursued her passion for a theatre of research that could open a dialogue with humanity. One of the few professional women directors of contemporary Italian theatre to succeed in male-dominated field, Dante has injected new energy, particularly in the neglected theatre of southern Italy and Sicily. Attempting to establish her theatrical practice in a climate of hostility fomented because of her sex, the nature of her works, and the inflammatory, even accusative, tone against Sicily and the city of Palermo often used in her performances, Dante continues to face difficulties and disappointments. In an interview with the writer Luisa Cavaliere, she states:
Palermo is neither happy nor proud of my success […]. In every cinema in the world, even in New York, they have shown the opening of Carmen at La Scala in Milan. They did not do so in Palermo, and it is truly a paradox this ‘forgetfulness.’ I am from Palermo. Shouldn’t it count for something? (Cavaliere 20)

Despite such cold reactions to her work, Dante continues her work with her theater company, Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale. Even when confronted with derision and a grave lack of funds, this strong southern Italian woman never compromises the nature and quality of the work she has created. Dante refuses to subject her practice to the artistic, social, and economic demands of Italian main stream theatre, turning her gaze towards more attractive prospects. Looking at European theatrical innovators such as Kantor and Grotowski for inspiration, she regards theatre as a total act, a ground for research and the joint exploration of body and mind that would be conducive to the creation of devised new works of theatre.

While finding the form of her theatre in Teatro Totale and, in particular, in the works of Kantor and Grotowski, Dante reaches back into her Sicilian theatrical roots to find the content and themes of her works. In the first place, she directly or indirectly represents themes that were common among writers and artists of the island since Verga’s times. As her predecessors, Dante writes about Sicilians, the Sicilian family, and the society of Sicily. She analyses the interactions among Sicilian social institutions, including the mafia, and individuals, framing them as historical byproducts of the Risorgimento. She presents ‘Sicilian-ness’ as a state of being: something ingrained in the
Sicilian people that pushes them toward isolation and outbursts of excessive pride. On stage, her works echo the violence of the Island and the resignation of its inhabitants entrapped in cycles of death and memory, confronting the audience with unspoken, terrible truths.

Overall, Emma Dante’s plays are works invested with social consciousness: antidotes against the state of isolation and idleness in which the Sicilian people and the Sicilian theatre live. Dante’s performances are denunciations against a widespread social malaise. They resurface still unresolved questions regarding the Questione del Mezzogiorno and the Questione della Lingua. They expose everyday injustices, such as unemployment, discrimination, and poverty, exposing the dirt underneath the seemingly perfect socio-economic reality of Sicily and the Italian Mezzogiorno. Thus, Dante’s performances become artistic barricades erected to resist against the prejudice of Sicilians as living historically pre-determined and indolent lives, oozing with neglect and resignation.

Today, even after achieving international acclaim in many European countries and having directed at Teatro La Scala in Milan, one of the most prestigious theatres in the Italian peninsula, Emma Dante and her theatre still encounter much opposition. As I discovered during my visit at La Vicaria in Palermo in the summer of 2010, Dante and her Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale are sometimes denied opportunities to perform in Palermo. More often, in order to perform in continental Italy, they are forced to accept absurd terms imposed by some of the most important Italian theatres. An example I personally witnessed while in Palermo was the imposition from a national theatre to only
present one play at the time in a given city. The official rationale provided by the theatre administrators behind this demand was that by bringing two Dante’s plays at the same time – even if completely different in themes and targeting two completely different audiences (one being for adults, the other for children) – would have resulted in a decreased patron support for the event. Further, Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale has to compromise frequently in terms of compensation and there have been incidents in the history of the company when Dante and her actors, even after signing a contract, have not been fully compensated for their performances. This is particularly trying for their work since the company has no governmental funds to help sustain Dante’s theatrical laboratory.

In spite of the daily difficulties endured by Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale, Emma Dante has made it clear that she will never leave Palermo. Although the prospect of moving to the north of Italy, or even another European country, and not have to worry about how to pay utilities bills for La Vicaria, is incredibly appealing, Dante states that her theatre is inextricably intertwined with her city and Sicily (Cavaliere 14). Abandoning it, it would be to abandon the life source of her theatre. Dante says:

I cannot go away. I stay here, inside Palermo; in this city of bastard sons without a father. I stay barricaded with my gang in our small theatre-jail. Every day we bolt ourselves in because, if the police were to arrive and find the doors open, it would send us all home. It would free us from our bars… (Dante, “Il mio” 44)
This strong willingness to be caged in a city of contradictions, expresses not only a visceral link of codependence between Dante’s art and the streets of Palermo, but Dante’s need to actually make a difference in the artistic and social scene of the native city.

There is still much work to be done in researching Emma Dante’s theatre. The European influences on her work are much more complex than the ones outlined in this thesis. In fact, Dante directly refers to many other European theatre practitioners, aside from Kantor and Grotowski, who influenced the work of the Sicilian director - chief among them is the director Peter Brook. Also, limiting this study to La trilogia della famiglia siciliana, and Vita mia in particular, barely scratches the surface of the mountain of information that an in-depth analysis of all of Dante’s performance texts could yield. Such an analysis could present the academic community with more detailed information not only with respect to Dante’s theatre but also to the evolution of the Sicilian theatrical tradition as a whole. Further, compiling carefully crafted English translations of Dante’s plays would allow her performances to become more accessible worldwide. It would ensure that they not be treated only as subjects of academic study, but as living a breathing performance texts to be staged in order to foster that cultural, sociological, even political ‘dialogue with humanity’ for which Dante had intended them. A bright light in the complex scenario of contemporary Italian theater, the works of the Sicilian director are fascinating examples of a theatre that is able to innovate while respecting tradition. Emma Dante and her Compagnia Sud Costa Occidentale are extremely worthy of international acclaim. My hope is that, although constrained by its scope, this thesis will bring Dante’s productions to the attention of the English-speaking world.
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