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“Well-Staged Syllables”:
From Classical to Early Modern English Metres
in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

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Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

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SILVIA SILVESTRI*

“But he loves me... to death”. An Interview with Director Tonio De Nitto and Translator-Adaptor Francesco Niccolini about their Staging of *La Bisbetica Domata* (*The Taming of the Shrew*) for Factory Compagnia Transadriatica

Abstract

The author interviews director Tonio De Nitto and translator-adaptor Francesco Niccolini about their staging of *La Bisbetica Domata* – an Italian adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* produced by Factory Compagnia Transadriatica in 2015 and performed in numerous national and international venues ever since. Tapping into Factory’s deep-rooted attachment to their Apulian residency and De Nitto’s longstanding fascination with Shakespearean drama, the interview delves into the semiotics and semantics of the adaptation, discussing the challenges and the interpretative stances arising from Niccolini’s translation in rhyming couplets and De Nitto’s ‘Burtonian’ staging, marked by thought-provoking casting choices, dismal soundtracks, and meaning-laden scenic, light, and costume designs.

KEYWORDS: *The Taming of the Shrew*; Shakespeare; Tonio De Nitto; Francesco Niccolini; performance

1. Staging the Taming: Factory’s Unsettling Take on *The Taming of the Shrew*

Bringing *The Taming of the Shrew* on contemporary stages is no task for the faint-hearted. Whereas past generations of spectators seemingly rolled in laughter at the regimentation of the unruly, foul-mouthed Katherina, cheering Petruchio on in his forceful shrew-taming, modern audiences find it increasingly hard to stomach (let alone enjoy) the knockabout spectacle of a man beating, starving, and brainwashing his wife into submission. Nothing can make such actions look “other than disgusting and unmanly”, wrote George Bernard Shaw as early as 1888 (16), and, 130 years later, Alexander Thom can still not refrain from pointing out that this play has “exhausted [his] usual reserve of critical charity” (2019, 1): its contents are beyond redemption, no matter the lens you read them through.

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Of course, as Ann Thompson has lucidly observed, responses to a play like *The Shrew* “are bound to be affected by the status of women in society at any given time and by the way that status is perceived by both men and women” (2017, 24) – a culturally and historically inflected factor that accounts for the comedy’s shifting reception. From a performative viewpoint, however, it is clear that *The Shrew* continues to appeal to theatre-makers and goes precisely because of its ambiguities, its capacity to poke the soft underbelly of our societies and stir up age-old controversies regarding gender inequality, uneven power dynamics, physical and psychological abuse. One can try to hide such weighty issues under the pretence of farse, treating the play as nothing but good-fun material. One can foreground them by turning Kate into a tragic heroine, or even incorporate them in a strange narrative of toxic, mutual attraction between two kindred spirits. Yet, whatever angle they decide to take, today’s directors are put in a tight interpretative spot when dealing with *The Shrew* – a predicament they face (or try to elude) in contrasting, ever more creative ways.

As for Tonio De Nitto, he decided to address the comedy’s ‘monstrosity’ head-on, playing up Petruchio’s brutality without condoning its supposed benefits or minimizing its effects on Kate. Translated into Italian by dramatist-adaptor Francesco Niccolini, produced by Factory Compagnia Transadriatica, and performed in numerous national and international venues from 2015 onwards, his *Bisbetica domata* offers an unsettling take on Shakespeare’s ‘battle of the sexes’, working with its discomfiting yet at times irresistibly comic texture to make it resonate with contemporary Italian audiences.

The key to Factory’s interpretation of the play is provided, as has frequently been the case in *The Shrew*’s stage history, by their reworking of the Folio Induction. Their *Bisbetica* opens with a dreamlike sequence that, despite fulfilling the same framing function originally assigned to the Sly episode, retains little to nothing of Shakespeare’s prologue. Here, the drunkard and Lord Simon’s entourage are replaced by Katherina herself, who stiffly walks to centre stage to the eerie notes of a carillon, dressed in a bulky wedding gown. The scenery is kept in the dark, but, as soon as she starts looking around with bewildered eyes, the windows of the stylized buildings surrounding her light up, revealing various sinister figures who stare at her. Katherina turns around, feeling their eyes on her back, but she sees nothing: the onlookers have swiftly ducked down, the backdrop has fallen back into darkness.

Such an ominous prelude sets the tone for the rest of the performance, immersing the audience in a nightmarish atmosphere that frames Kate as a stubborn, naïve young woman doomed to succumb to the scrutiny of her community. After trying to rebel against her father and the patriarchal values he stands for, in Act 3 she reluctantly agrees to marry Petruchio, hoping that this change in status will take the pressure of her neighbours’ intrusiveness off of her shoulders. She soon realizes, however, that her husband is but another oppressor, ready to do anything to curb her wilfulness and bring her into submission.

De Nitto handles this 'awakening of conscience' with remarkable directorial skill, dazing his audience with a whirlwind of slapstick sketches only to nudge them into utter shock. The heartily laughs that accompany the play's inception, rich in double entendre and comic stage business, gradually turn to nervous chuckles during the tense wedding scene, ultimately fading into silence as Acts 4 and 5 unfold. Textually, this emotional downward spiral is aided by Niccolini's bold adaptive choices: most of Shakespeare's dialogues are recast in rhyming couplets in his translation, so as to match the *opera buffa* atmosphere that permeates the first part of the performance; then, at the peak of Petruchio's crude shrew-taming, this somewhat light-hearted articulation gives way to a stinging prose style, much more suited to describe the tamer's abuses. The expressive and performative transition thus structured marks a turning point in Factory's *Bisbetica*, compromising any potential for a reconciliatory ending: by the time Petruchio summons Katherina back on stage in 5.2, prompting her infamous last speech, it is impossible to feel anything but horror and sympathy for the shattered, brutalized woman who returns our gaze. She has nothing of the peppy, insolent girl who took the stage by storm at the outset of the play – the maverick who fought back against her father's misogynistic codes and had a laugh at the expenses of her coy sister and noisy community. Her final monologue cannot be intended as tongue-in-cheek under De Nitto's direction: her quivering voice and swollen face make it clear that Petruchio has beaten all impudence out of her.

In what follows, we will plunge deeper into this abyss of violence with the help of De Nitto and Niccolini themselves, so as to shed light on the interpretative and performative cruxes of their adaptation of *The Shrew*.

By way of introduction, it should be noted that neither of our interlocutors is new to Shakespearean reworkings. Tonio De Nitto – actor, director, and co-founder of Factory Transadriatica – started his career at Cantieri Teatrali Koreja, participating, among other things, in their staging of *Molto rumore per nulla* (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 1995-2002). Later on, he was assistant director for Arturo Cirillo's *Otello* (*Othello*, 2008) and director of *Sogno di una notte di mezza estate* (*A Midsummer's Night Dream*, 2011) and *Romeo e Giulietta* (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2012) for Factory's ensemble. More recently, he has worked on *Cenerentola* (*Cinderella*, 2012), *Diario di un brutto anatroccolo* (2016), Molière's *Misanthropo* (*Le Misanthrope*, 2018), *Mattia e il nonno* (2019), which earned him the prestigious 'Eolo' award (2020), *Peter Pan* (2020) and *Hubu Re* (2021). Francesco Niccolini authored a number of original plays and adaptations, including Shakespeare's *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet*. Over the last few years, he has formed fruitful creative partnerships with actors, companies, and directors such as Tonio De Nitto, Marco Paolini (*Vajont*, *Parlamento Chimico*, *Itis Galileo*, *Il calzolaio di Ulisse*), Luigi D'Elia (*Moby Dick*, *Zanna Bianca*, *La Grande Foresta*), Alessio Boni (*I Duellanti*, *Don Chisciotte*). He is also the author of widely appreciated graphic novels, illustrated books for children, and novels, including

Il Lupo e la Farfalla (Mondadori 2019) and *Manù e Michè* (Mondadori 2021). From 2007 onwards, he has collaborated with Italian and Swiss radio and television networks as author and screenwriter. His protean artistic commitment earned him several prestigious dramaturgical and literary recognitions, among which we can cite the Eolo Award (2009, 2013, 2018, 2019), the Laura Orvieto Award (2019), and the Enriquez Award (2020, 2021).

2. Interview

SS: Tonio, I would like to open our conversation with a few remarks on Factory Transadriatica, the company you contributed to founding in 2009. Factory has carved its place in the Italian artistic scene as a hotbed of new talents and ideas, involved in the production of original and adapted plays, the organization of national and international festivals, and the development of young theatre audiences. How did your company come to light? What role do your Apulian residency and roots play in such a successful creative enterprise?

TDN: Factory was born out of a desire to bring together the expertise, aspirations, and dreams of a group of friends and artists who decided to think out of the box and take a chance on themselves, rebelling against the pressures and toxicities that encumber larger theatrical systems. The company is actually a small miracle made possible by a European programme, one of those seemingly dead-end projects that bear no lasting effect on the parties involved. Well, Factory Transadriatica takes its very name from a 2009 Interreg Cooperation Programme – a project that resulted in the staging of an Italo-Balkan adaptation of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Ever since our inception, we set ourselves the goal of contributing to the development of the Apulian theatrical scene, establishing our artistic residency in Novoli (Lecce), organising social theatre workshops, educational events for schools, and launching two festivals of distinctive international scope: *Kids*, thought out for the younger generation, and *I teatri della cupa*, dedicated to contemporary productions. On performative and productive grounds, our deep attachment to our roots is also testified by *Trip* – a theatrical journey among Apulian traditions, history, and tastes that has been met with enthusiastic audience response.

SS: Factory's artistic commitment is evidently wide-ranging and, production-wise, it appears to be driven by a keen interest in Shakespearean drama. Your theatrical poetics, Tonio, seems indeed particularly permeated with Shakespearean influences, which inform many of your directorial works. What lies behind such an enduring and fruitful fascination with the Bard?

TDN: I have always loved Shakespeare. Perhaps, this passion was unintentionally

passed on to me by my mother, who was an English teacher, or maybe I owe it to Shakespeare's unparalleled ability to tackle universal issues and flesh out colourful, tormented characters that offer a compendium of human nature. Having a background in classical studies, with a dissertation on the contemporary adaptations of Aristophanes, it was merely natural for me to turn to Shakespeare – a playwright who looked up to his predecessors in a moment when the theatre still maintained the civic role it had fulfilled in the *polis*. I must also admit that, as a young director, I felt more at ease directing large ensembles of actors rather than one-man shows – a challenge I inevitably had to overcome later on in my career. Maybe, the sense of comfort I experience when working on Shakespeare comes from the opportunity to lay hands on perpetually meaningful materials, on powerful words that are still capable of giving shape to our thoughts, fears, and views of the world. There are many other Shakespearean plays I would like to stage in the future, but I am sure I will be drawn back to them in due time, when the only way to express my feelings will be through their words.

SS: *La Bisbetica domata* is Factory's third Shakespearean adaptation, preceded by *Sogno di una notte di mezza estate* (*A Midsummer's Night Dream*, 2009) and *Romeo e Giulietta* (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2012). It is also the second play you stage with the help of Francesco Niccolini – playwright, novelist, screenwriter, stage adaptor. Thanking Francesco for joining us in this conversation, I would like to ask you both what drew you to *The Taming of the Shrew* – no doubt one of Shakespeare's most ambivalent and controversial comedies.

FN: *The Shrew* is the second Shakespearean script I adapted for Tonio: I did not work on *Il Sogno* [*A Midsummer's Night Dream*], the first one he directed for Factory. With other companies, I went through *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard III*, and *Hamlet*. It was Tonio who drew me to *The Shrew*. At first, I was actually a little perplexed by his choice, but my interest in the play sparked when I realized I would have to rewrite the 'original' script to give meaning and purpose to our adaptation. Tonio agreed to take such a risk: now we can say it was worth it.

TDN: I must say that I have always been attracted to this non-comedy. In due course, I found out that this fascination of mine had been shared by more deserving thinkers, and I started brooding over the underlying bitterness of this play, fantasising about the possibility of re-reading its ending by completely overturning its mood. With a work like *The Shrew*, Shakespeare tapped into the condition of Elizabethan women, who were celebrated in his immortal works of art while actually remaining excluded from public life – with the exception of the Royal household, of course. It was Katherina's last speech that spurred my interest in the play: how could the straightforward, unruly Katherina end up uttering such things? Were we to believe that her rebellion had been nothing but a joke played on us, a clever ruse to suggest that nothing would ever change? To come to grips with the issue, we had to start by asking ourselves what it means

to ‘tame’ a woman today. Needless to say, the mere mentioning of such an idea makes our skin crawl. We worked on that feeling, trying to incorporate it into our script without tearing its original texture apart. We foregrounded some of the play’s hidden conflicts and enhanced the black humour of its characters – a community that wants to get rid of the pain in the neck that is Katherina and even of a father who markets his daughters’ bodies in a way that, with some degree of approximation, mirrors the commodification of today’s child brides.

SS: As you were suggesting, this performative refocalization was enabled by a careful reworking of the ‘original’ script, which is presented to Factory’s audiences in an Italian translation. Putting aside the *vexata quaestio* of Shakespeare’s authoriality and originality – a longstanding scholarly problem that goes far beyond the scope of our conversation – we can borrow Rex Gibson’s words to remark that the linguistic and cultural reallocation of Shakespeare’s plays entails “a provisionality and incompleteness that anticipates and requires imaginative, dramatic enactment for completion. A script declares that it is to be played with, explored, actively and imaginatively brought to life by acting out” (2016, 8), the scholar observes, outlining a multifaceted appropriative task that appears even more daunting when related to the renown of Shakespeare’s canon. In your case, not only was *The Shrew* translated from page to stage, but it was also rendered into Italian – not an anodyne operation at that, given the Paduan setting of the action – and performed before twenty-first-century audiences of all ages. Retracing his own steps in such a minefield, Leon Rubin has acknowledged that “acting and directing Shakespeare in translation bring many challenges that need different approaches to working in English”, since “a translation largely dictates much about the production which will emerge from it, and character, style, and setting will be greatly impacted by the choices a translator has made” (2021, 96). How did you approach this challenging task, Francesco? Were you influenced by other stage or page adaptations of *The Shrew*?

FN: When I write, translate, and rewrite, I do not want to dwell too much on what has come before. I prefer jumping in at the deep end, focusing on today’s audience, my own idea of theatricality, and the experiences I share with Tonio, which inspire me tremendously. Two determinations pivoted my approach to *The Shrew*: the decision to rewrite the script in rhyming couplets and the idea of metaphorically striking a violent blow against Katherina – something I strongly argued for and that Tonio luckily agreed to. Sixteenth-century spectators probably laughed at the stubborn, insurgent daughter who, despite being on the verge of spinsterhood, refuses to get married. Most importantly, they laughed at how she is ultimately beaten into submission by her husband. Today, no one would find anything to laugh about that. To bring this unsettling feeling to the fore, we tried to exacerbate the contrast between the slapstick tones of our opening acts and the violence that permeates the last ones: in our adaptation,

the entire village turns their back on Katherina, shutting their eyes and ears to the brutalities she has to endure. At the end of the play, it is impossible to laugh: the blow you get in the stomach knocks you out.

SS: Indeed. Following on from what you just said, I would like to further discuss the style of your adaptation, namely your choice to recast the majority of Shakespeare's dialogues in rhyming couplets. What prompted you to opt for such a unique transposition? What challenges did it pose in textual and performative terms?

FN: I often say to myself that if my source is in verses, my work has to be in verses as well. The same happened with *Romeo e Giulietta*. My idea of a rhyming script, however, has nothing to do with singsong rhymes or with the risk – a terrible one for actors – of getting carried away by the couplets' redundant rhythm and end up acting in an old-fashioned way. I believe that rhymes, when skilfully handled, can turn into an extraordinary expressive *medium* for comedy, capable of bringing out the theatricality of the spoken word. The friendship I share with the actors who brought my words to life – Angela De Gaetano [Katherina], Ippolito Chiarello [Petruccio], Fabio Tinella [Lucentio], Dario Cadei [Baptista] – gave me a great head start. I tailored my lines to their personalities.

SS: As is known, *The Shrew's* nebulous gender politics has been instrumental in securing the play's undying performative appeal. Contemporary directors seem indeed to relish in experimenting with the relational and power dynamics imbricated with the play, negotiating and questioning their implications through ever more creative performative *escamotages*. I'm thinking, for instance, of the gender-swapped *Shrew* directed by Justin Audibert for the Royal Shakespeare Company (2018), which subverts traditional power hierarchies by flipping the characters' gender and putting women in charge; or, to stay within the bounds of Italian theatre, of the all-male performance recently brushed up by Andrea Chiodi for LAC and Teatro Carcano Milano (2017). As for your adaptation, Tonio, I was particularly impressed by the decision to cast an actor – the talented Antonio Guadalupi – in Bianca's role.

TDN: The idea of having Bianca played by an actor *en travesti* stemmed from the necessity to underline the sidereal distance that separates Katherina from the rest of her community. Our Bianca embodies the stereotypical, misogynistic assumption of what a young woman is like – a vain, flirtatious girl whose only goal is to seduce and being seduced. As a result, she does not come across as a well-rounded character but rather as an avatar, a distorted projection of what certain types of men want to see in women. By playing up such characteristics, I managed to stress the difference between her attitude and Katherina's unbending nature, calling attention to the hypocrisy and duplicity of the village that surrounds her. History tells us that the Elizabethan stage was no place for

women, but I knew I could never do without a proper shrew – a proud yet fragile woman who is slowly annihilated by her partner, as unfortunately still happens to thousands of women who flee the oppression of their family only to fall into the hands of a new tormenter.

SS: It seems to me that the relentless annihilation you have just mentioned starts at the very outset of the play, with the dimming of the lights. In fact, on the curtain rise, we see a woman – who we will later find out to be Katherina – walking towards the stalls in a puffy wedding gown, as stiff as a puppet, while the theatre is slowly filled with a melody that seems to come from a carillon. Then, the windows of your modular, richly decorated scenery light up, and various characters start peeking out of them with a grin on their face, staring at Katherina's back. I do not think it far-fetched to assume that this is your reinterpretation of the Sly frame – one of the most problematic segments of the play, as it was left unfinished in the *First Folio* edition of 1623. In view of its incompleteness, past and present productions of *The Shrew* have alternatively omitted the drunkard's episode altogether or have forcefully wrapped it up with the help of *The Taming of a Shrew* – anonymous Quarto of uncertain philological descent. What was the source of inspiration for your reworking of this performative crux?

TDN: My obsession with carillons surely played a huge part in the definition of this framing narrative – it is this same fascination that led me to open *Sogno di una notte di mezza estate* with an up-tempo theatrical mechanism designed to carry the audience into the play's Athenian setting. Generally speaking, I like to take some of my characters' peculiarities to the extremes, baring their essence with the help of my actors and then infusing it in their very movements. Even the smallest of gestures, at times obsessively repeated, can foreshadow what we are about to see on stage, bespeaking the innermost obsessions that define our characters and the world they inhabit. The repetition, acceleration, and slackening of movements allow to influence the audience's perception of the play, making them look at it through the same lens that I, as director, am using to re-read it. Of the original Sly frame, I actually take nothing but its dreamlike dimension, using it as a kind of refrain – a *déjà-vu* that rushes back into the audience's minds when Katherina, dressed in that same wedding gown, is left to wait at the altar while the whole village stares at her, judging her every move.

SS: An interesting interpretative stance for sure, that, to a certain extent, follows Sears Jayne's suggestion to stage *The Shrew* as “a dream play in which the whole of the inner play is Sly's dream” (1966, 56) – a variation meant to solve the thorny ‘Sly problem’ and provide an interpretative key for the whole action, especially for what concerns the main plot. With regards to the subplot, instead, Act 3.1 appears to be crucial in developing Bianca's storyline, since it is along

its lines that Shakespeare reveals the coquetry and duplicity of the younger Minola. In the English play, Bianca and Lucentio's courtship is enabled by a questionable translation of Ovid's *Heroides*, whose verses are remoulded into cheeky declarations of love and lust. In your adaptation, Francesco, the same literary mediation is offered by Leopardi's *Infinito*.

FN: When I work on a foreign play-text, I try not to translate word by word. I would rather engage with the audience's shared knowledge and experiences, making use of elements they are familiar with. My work aims at bridging communicative gaps, not enlarging them. In this particular case, I thought that *L'Infinito* could also fulfil a distinctive comic function: using a very well-known nineteenth-century Italian poem in a world-famous sixteenth-century English comedy... it was a bit like creating a hall of mirrors, making past and present, Italy and England, poetry and drama collide on stage.

SS: A risk that paid off, I would say: everyone in the stalls laughed out loud at Lucentio's saucy recitation of the poem. On a completely different note, let us focus now on a sore point with Shakespeare's contemporary spectators: the brutal shrew-taming that dominates Act 4. I think it interesting to point out that your adaptation omits the multitude of servants who materially carry out Petruchio's tortures, reimagining the sequence as a crude confrontation between the tamer and his shrewish wife alone. From a stylistic perspective, this is the only moment when rhyming couplets give way to a modern, sharp, at times even vulgar prose style – a change in tone that underlines the turning point leading up to the plot's crisis. On performative grounds, the same purpose seems to be served by the modular scenery, which is temporarily moved to the side of the stage to neutralize the scene of action, and a well-thought-out play of light that keeps Petruchio and Kate in shade, as if they were shadow puppets cast onto a blank wall illuminated with cool nocturnal colours. The action thus structured comes across as a sort of diegetic *a parte* – a cathartic intermission that capitalizes upon verbal and non-verbal signs to engage the audience on a deep emotional level. Would it be right to suggest that these are the moments that define the interpretative horizon of your *Bisbetica*?

FN: Yes, absolutely. Petruchio's cruelty, the indifference of the surrounding community, Katherina's crippling, consuming loneliness are a bit of a stretch from a philological point of view. Yet, I firmly believe that, as far as stage adaptations are concerned, being faithful to one's sources does not mean sticking to their exact wording, but rather opening them up to new interpretations, making them relevant for today's spectators. Enhancing the violence of Petruchio and Katherina's clash was crucial to this purpose.

TDN: Yes. Positing that Katherina's last speech was something other than an elaborate ruse, I had to turn Act 4 into an actual descent to hell, so as to pave

the way towards the play's bitter ending. After reading and testing Francesco's first draft with the actors, I asked him to rewrite this sequence, eliminating all supporting characters to increase the tension between our two protagonists. So, Grumio and the other servants drop out of the scene, giving their lines to Petruchio and putting him in charge of the bullying. Context-wise, we give our audience nothing but two dark silhouettes to look at, thus drawing attention to the tense words that are being spoken on stage. That is why I needed Petruchio and Katherina to engage in a raw, stinging verbal confrontation, *à la Pinter*¹ – a violent exchange meant to match the brutality these characters' fight. I was fully satisfied with Francesco's second draft, and I made our theatrical apparatuses comply with its dark tones. In response to this stark dramatic transition, our spectators usually fall silent, sometimes they even chuckle hysterically, plunging with Petruchio and Katherina into an abyss of violence and terror.

SS: In the light of their evident semantic thickness, it would be interesting to examine in greater detail the stage apparatuses you just referred to, namely Davide Arsenio's stunning light designs and the painstakingly decorated modular scenery built by Roberta Dori Puddu and Luigi Conte. As Roland Barthes eloquently put it, any theatrical representation is characterized by "a real informational polyphony" (1964, 262) triggered by what Keir Elam defined as "transcodification": on stage "a given bit of semantic information can be translated from one system to another or supplied simultaneously by different kinds of signal" (1980, 52) distributed on linguistic, kinesic, proxemic, scenic levels, thereby spreading semantic content across different, cooperating communicative systems. It follows that lights and scenery play a crucial role in outlining a play's fictional space, contributing to singling out diegetic turning points and guiding audience decoding. Tonio, could you walk us through the preparatory work underlying your staging of *The Shrew*? What function did light and scenic effects fulfil within the semantic and semiotic framework of your adaptation?

TDN: As is well-known, theatrical communication relies on the interplay between verbal, non-verbal, and para-verbal codes, which contribute, each in their own way, to the production of meaning on stage. We wanted to fully exploit this synergy in our staging of *The Shrew*, and we found a seminal source of inspiration in Tim Burton's aesthetics. I envisioned our *Bisbetica* as a dark Burtonian comedy, with Katherina leading as a sort of Corpse Bride – bruised, shattered, with broken bones and soul. In compliance with this almost cinematic atmosphere, our setting represents Padua as a cartoon-like village, made of stylized movable buildings gathered around Baptista's house and peopled

¹ On Harold Pinter's distinctive use of vulgarisms, see for instance Fletcher 1993 and Yerebakan 2014.

by silhouettes that constantly peep through their windows and doors, in a whirlwind of restless motions and rotations. Such a dynamic setup obviously impinged on the choice of our actors' physicality, and it has also encouraged them to caricature their body motions while darting across the stage, moving and rotating props to reveal what is hidden behind their shiny façades. With a few other *escamotages* – the use of white gloves to neutralize the actors' function and turn them into stagehands, the spotlighting of one particular house to make it stand out – we managed to carve different spaces and situations out of our scene of action, using scenic and kinesic conventions to accompany the plot's rapid unravelling. Roberta Dori Puddu brought my gothic fantasies to life, embellishing our scenic elements with layers of painting and meticulous chisel work to imitate the decorative style of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Venetian villas.

SS: Speaking of the potential for garments to change an actor's role on stage, it comes naturally to think of two additional, highly semanticized theatrical systems: make-up and costumes, here designed by Lapi Lou. In this regard, I was particularly struck by Katherina's last make-up and Petruccio's tamer attire, completed with a riding crop that he slaps into the palm of his hand while speaking of and with Kate – a gesture that can be traced back to John Philip Kemble's interpretation of the male lead.

TDN: Lapi Lou's costumes – sewn with obsessive attention to detail – have a comics-like design that merges the aesthetics of Signor Bonaventura, the protagonist of *Il Corriere dei piccoli*, with gothic, Burtonian influences. As a result of this stylization, Petruccio is presented as a proper beast-tamer, dressed in a purple tailcoat paired with a top hat, a riding crop, and a full beard almost entirely drawn on his face. As for Katherina, in our last scene she hobbles back on stage with bruises on her face, battered, her lips so swollen and sore that she can barely speak. Her appearance surely marks one of the most shocking moments of our performance: the sight of her disturbing countenance silences the stalls, virtually punching the audience in the stomach. Sometimes, it even urges them to voice their indignation.

SS: A truly unnerving spectacle, indeed. After Kate's last speech, the taut silence that fills the theatre is broken only by a dismal acoustic adaptation of *Però mi vuole bene* ("But he loves me", 1964) – a popular motif of the Italian *Quartetto Cetra* revisited by Paolo Coletta to mark the stages of Petruccio's gruesome shrew-taming.

TDN: Exactly. That song is the linchpin of our soundtrack, which consists mostly of alterations and variations of its main theme. As Act 4 progresses, the scenery is rearranged to the tune of *Però mi vuole bene*, softly hummed by the actors-stagehands in a way that makes it almost unrecognizable. Then, throughout Act

5, the same melody is played by carillons to mark the pivotal moments of our *dénouement*. Paolo Coletta is an extraordinarily sensitive musician, and, having been an actor himself, he has a perfect understanding of how the theatre works. That “love-to-death” refrain sung by *Quartetto Cetra* effortlessly – and, perhaps, cynically – encapsulates the message of our *Bisbetica*, suggesting once more that there is no love in what (or who) kills you.

Translated by the author

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