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<http://www.skenejournal.it>  
[info@skenejournal.it](mailto:info@skenejournal.it)

MARCO DURANTI\*

## Notes on *Ifigenia, Liberata* at the Piccolo Teatro

Abstract

The *Ifigenia, liberata* (*Iphigenia, Freed*), written by Carmelo Rifici and Angela Dematté and performed at the Piccolo Teatro Strehler in Milan from 27 April to 7 May 2017, is a challenging theatrical experiment on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. This piece illustrates how the conceptual premises of the play are to be found in René Girard's theorization of human violence. In this light, Iphigenia's sacrifice becomes the means to placate the mimetic rivalries among the Greek warriors and eventually pursue the expedition against Troy. But Rifici and Dematté were also inspired by the Italian scholar Giuseppe Fornari, who argues that in *Iphigenia in Aulis* Euripides exposed the cruelty of the sacrifice and its sordid motivations, while being unable to oppose to it a new ethics. These stances intriguingly materialize in the re-working of the Euripidean play through the interaction of words, stage setting, and filmic images.

KEYWORDS: *Iphigenia*, Rifici, Dematté, Euripides, Girard, sacrifice

The *Ifigenia, liberata* (*Iphigenia, Freed*) performed at the Piccolo Teatro Strehler in Milan from 27 April to 7 May 2017 (but first mounted in Lugano from 10 to 11 March, and then on 13-14 July in Spoleto) is a challenging theatrical experiment on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, written by Carmelo Rifici, artistic director of *LuganoInScena* and director of the Luca Ronconi theatrical school at the Piccolo, together with Angela Dematté. The play stages a Dramatist (Mariangela Granelli) and a Director (Tindaro Granata) during rehearsals of the Euripidean tragedy. The stage represents a rehearsal room, enclosed on three sides by wooden walls: on the left, the spectators can see the technical equipment and a library; on the right, two armchairs. A water cooler and a security exit signal complete the picture of a usual performing room. On the background there open three exits; above the central exit there hangs a big screen. Both the Dramatist and the Director address the audience directly, explaining the premises of their work, as well as their dramaturgical choices; moreover, they direct the actors. This has an important bearing on the play. The spectators are not allowed to be fully absorbed in a world of dramatic illusion; on the contrary, they are constantly called back to their present reality, which they are invited to compare to the staged story against the backdrop of the entire cultural history of humanity.

This is indeed a learned play, relying upon a number of quotations from, and allusions to, different, if connected, texts. At the end of it, the screen shows a table, and upon it the scattered covers of the books which have been consulted for this show. Among them, especially relevant for the conceptual framework of the play is a classic from the 1970s, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) by the French scholar René

\* University of Verona – marco.duranti@univr.it

Girard. At the core of Girard's understanding of human violence is the idea that the survival of every human community is endangered by the rivalries between its members. These rivalries are 'mimetic', that is, they result from the desire to achieve the same objectives or goods, which in turn is caused by emulation between the members of the community. Before the resulting hatred turns into an uncontrollable outburst of reciprocal violence, the community needs to find a victim outside – the scapegoat – on whom its members can convey this violence. As Girard writes, "[t]he victim is . . . a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice" (1977: 8; author's emphasis). Once the victim has reconciled the community members through his/her own sacrifice, he/she is usually deified, and this final act covers up the hatred which the same community has felt against the scapegoat.

When seen through the lens of Girard's theory, the sacrifice of Iphigenia becomes the means which allows to placate the tensions in the Greek army and the rivalries between its leaders. As Lorna Shaughnessy explains:

*Iphigenia at Aulis* opens with mimetic rivals vying for possession of Helen: two kingdoms, Greek and Trojan. However, the tensions generated by this external conflict ignite internal divisions within the Greek camp, and in accordance with Girard's theory, mimetic rivalries proliferate. For example, who will control the information in the oracle? Who will maintain control of the restless Greek troops in the absence of wind as they anxiously anticipate departure for war? (2017: 382)

The tensions in the Greek army are amplified by the presence on stage of Odysseus (Igor Horvat), who in the Greek original did not appear. The hero voices the impatience of the Greek warriors, who look forward to conquering Troy, and therefore do not refrain from shedding the blood of an innocent. But Odysseus – and this marks an innovative turn in respect to the original play – also reminds Agamemnon that it is thanks to him that he has become a man by joining the Trojan expedition: if Agamemnon now called it off, he would lose that name. What he implies is that it is precisely the shedding of the human blood of this single victim that allows for the social compactness of the Greeks, at the same time controlling their bestial violence and safeguarding communal peace. More precisely, Odysseus suggests that it is because of the human sacrifice that they can channel their own violence towards a victim, thus checking mutual violence, saving the army, and finally conquering Troy. The sacrifice cancelled, their community would dissolve, and its members would regress to a subhuman condition.

Girard's theory provides the basis for the adjective "freed" in the title. As Rifici explains in the programme (Vasta 2017: 7), the concept of 'liberation' alludes to the revelation of the hypocrisy of Iphigenia's myth: it means to show that the story of her rescue by Artemis and substitution with a doe, before the final sacralization of the victim, conceals the responsibility of the Greek community, who have desired her death. In this respect, Rifici and Granata have taken inspiration from the work of the Italian scholar Giuseppe Fornari, who has recently contested Girard's under-

standing of Greek tragedy. According to Girard, the ancient pagan societies were unable to detect the mechanisms underlying the persecution of the scapegoat: “[p]ersecutors always believe in the excellence of their cause, but in reality *they hate without a cause*” (1986: 103; author’s emphasis). On the contrary, both the Bible – especially in the Psalms – and the Gospels “discredit point by point all the characteristic illusions of mythologies” (ibid.) by presenting the perspective of the victim. Whereas Girard regarded tragic theatre as a way to symbolically represent the mechanism of sacrifice, with no awareness of its profound reasons, Fornari argues that the tragedians, and especially Euripides, revealed the atrocity of the sacrifice and the socio-political dynamics which it hides. In his view, *Iphigenia in Aulis* is the tragedy in which most clearly these implicit premises are exposed: here “the bloody sacrifice of the girl is fully shown alongside the baseness of the reasons behind it, ambition and desire for power”.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the logic of sacrifice is not overcome:

There seems to be here . . . a confused insight into the spiritual opportunities which only Christianity would develop, into the possibilities of expiation of the sacrifice which only Christianity would free by transforming them into redemptive manifestations of love.<sup>2</sup>

Euripides offers no alternative model to that of sacrifice and subsequent sanctification of the victim: after the courageous condemnation of the sacrifice, the play ends canonically with the sanctification of Iphigenia, substituted with a deer and ascending to the gods in heaven (1612). Iphigenia herself is infected with the community’s lust for blood and violence: after trying to convince her father to desist from her own sacrifice, she offers herself for the glory of Greece. The Aristotelian criticism of Iphigenia’s incoherence (*Poet.* 1454a31-3) is here reinterpreted through Fornari’s words: “the character eventually imitates the only model and the only values which are left for the victim, those of her persecutors”.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, Rifici and Dematté try to overcome this impasse in the finale, reflecting on the possibility to find a new, entirely human way for communal life without the salvific intervention of God as testified to by the Gospels.

The reinterpretation of the character of Iphigenia through Girard’s theory allows this play to hint at a possible incestuous relationship between Iphigenia and Agamemnon: incest is one of the moral biases which Girard (drawing for instance on the myth of Oedipus) lists as “characteristic of the way in which frenzied crowds conceive of their victims” (Girard 1986: 26). As Rifici explains (Vasta 2017: 8), this is a conscious manipulation of the Greek text, aimed at highlighting the absurdity of sacrificial rites. And yet, this manipulation is not sufficiently foregrounded on stage, so it can hardly be grasped by the audience, despite the play’s general exhibition of self-reflexivity.

<sup>1</sup> My translation. “. . . il sacrificio cruento della ragazza è mostrato in tutto lo squallore delle sue motivazioni di ambizione e potere” (Fornari 2006: 636).

<sup>2</sup> My translation. “Sembra esserci qui . . . un’intuizione confusa delle possibilità spirituali che solo il cristianesimo avrebbe sviluppato, delle possibilità espiatorie del sacrificio che solo il cristianesimo avrebbe liberato, trasformandole in manifestazioni redentive d’amore” (Fornari 2006: 635-6).

<sup>3</sup> My translation. “[A]lla fine il personaggio imita l’unico modello e gli unici valori che restano alla vittima, quelli dei suoi carnefici” (Fornari 2006: 636).

From what has been said so far, it is clear that, through Girard and Fornari, Rifici and Dematté have transformed and expanded Iphigenia's story to encompass a broader reflection on the same reasons behind human violence, as well as on the fundamentals of human civilization. As Erika Fischer-Lichte reminds us, Girard's theory was elaborated as a response to the socio-political crisis of the 1960s, when "many Western countries faced serious challenges to the political, social and moral order established or re-established after World War II" (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 207). In those years, Western societies were confronted with an outburst of violence, "that was committed through assassinations, in the confrontation of demonstrators and police at riots, protests, marches etc., and even in a kind of civil war" (209). Almost fifty years later, Rifici and Dematté have turned once again to Girard in order to reflect upon the violence of our own times. His theory has enabled them to connect this new violence with man's endless inclination to aggressiveness and to point out that society as a whole is to blame for it: no one can claim to be innocent. In one of the most effective moments of the show, Granelli addresses the audience and asks: "isn't it true that we all want Iphigenia's death?". Our assumed solidarity with the victim is provocatively reversed into our own suggested identification with the persecutors.

All the media available to the director, from videos to books, are exploited in order to enlarge the idea of sacrifice to invest the whole sacrificial history of humanity. The Euripidean text is contaminated with excerpts from Homer, Heraclitus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, the Bible, and Nietzsche. The projected videos are instrumental in multiplying the possible perspectives on the history of civilization, hybridizing the story of *Iphigenia in Aulis* with other stories and kindred motifs. When a film is projected onto the screen, the actors themselves become spectators on stage, thus suggesting that actors and audience alike are part of a collective process of recollection of the human past; the role distinction is far less relevant than their participation in a common experience.

At the beginning of the performance the screen shows a couple of hominids, making the scene deeply reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *a Space Odyssey*. The play clearly means to outline a brief history of the human race, with the objective of understanding what distinguishes man from the other animals. The archetype of human civilization is found in the biblical episode of Cain and Abel, which Rifici and Dematté again read following Girard:

The Bible offers us no background on the two brothers except the bare fact that Cain is a tiller of the soil who gives the fruits of his labor to God, whereas Abel is a shepherd who regularly sacrifices the first-born of his herds. One of the brothers kills the other, and the murderer is the one who does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal. (1977: 4)

The killing of Abel is the result of the fact that Cain has no other way to give vent to his aggressiveness, as he does not make sacrifices. His deed shows how deeply violence is rooted in humankind from its very beginning.

This rootedness of violence in the human race and its persistence across time are expressed through a number of verbal and visual images. The former is conveyed through the recurring phrase "we always get back there, to the bowels", referring to both human and animal bowels, as well to the rites of vaticination which

were carried out on the carcass of the sacrificed animals. This verbal image is connected to the visual one of the labyrinth, which is repeatedly projected onto the central screen. Rifici and Granata again follow Fornari in suggesting that archaic societies regarded the labyrinth as the architectonic transposition of the animal, or human, tangled viscera (Fornari 2006: 202). In addition to the labyrinth, circles symbolize the encirclement of the victim, as in the case of the sand circle surrounding Iphigenia asleep, herself curled up into the circular shape of her foetal position – an image at some point shown for a few minutes on the screen.

As regards the stage setting, scenographer Margherita Palli's intention was to suggest an anonymous and "aseptic" room for the theatrical experiment which was to be carried out; and yet, its reddish wooden walls suggested blood (2017: 15). Thus, through visual and spatial metaphors, the setting represents the double effect which this play is meant to elicit in the audience: on the one hand, an intellectual understanding of violence as a constant feature of human civilization, which is exposed and dissected in front of the audience; on the other, a disquieting feeling of sharing the psychological mechanisms exhibited on stage, arousing our own suspicion of partaking of the characters' own relish for human blood.

For sure, the two Calchidian women who form the chorus (Caterina Carpio and Francesca Porrini) share that relish. They constantly repeat "thinking is harmful. We, women of Calchis, are outspoken" while hula hooping – yet another symbolically circular prop. They speak as the representatives of the crowd, the people who keep to the logic of sacrifice and violence. Their infantile appearance contrasts most strikingly with their lust for war and blood, thus making clear that any individual at any level is intrinsically violent. On the one hand, these women give voice to the most traditional positions, glorifying the Trojan war and the Greek commanders, as the Greek chorus did (e.g. Eur. *IA* 1527-31). On the other hand, they also prove to be contemporary: not only do they state that they know the social networks, but they also voice the current fear of immigrants, thus implicitly suggesting that new forms of violence might ensue. This double face of the chorus members again confirms that the human proclivity towards violence is common to both the ancient and the modern world.

The chorus add yet another symbolic form to the circle mentioned above: the square. The two women play with little cubes showing on their faces the letters of the Greek alphabet. While the square usually suggests architectural order and stability, the women repeatedly destroy and rebuild the constructions they make out of the cubes. Thus, human *logos*, symbolized by the language of the cubes, turns out to be unable to oppose the chaos and unreasonableness of the world in which we live.

The play's finale emphasizes exactly the role of language in fostering our addiction to violence, but also, and conversely, in offering a fundamental instrument to create a new world. Mad violence bursts out when social interaction prevents dialogue; its locus is the crowds, a social dimension which does not allow for mutual understanding. A way out can only be found in the patient dialogue between two interlocutors. It is necessary to get back to an understanding of language in order to rediscover the meaning of words and their social potential: as Granata says, "we would have never feared the other, hated the other, if we had had the courage to

use words well, to take care of them”.<sup>4</sup> The first two words to be re-employed are love and hope. As Rifici writes, “in fact the word *love* is pronounced by the Dramatist; the Director suggests *hope* as nearest to man, more possible”.<sup>5</sup> Both are ‘un-speakable’ words, and yet humanity must tend towards them in order to save itself.

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<sup>4</sup> My translation. “[N]on saremmo mai arrivati alla paura dell’altro, all’odio, se avessimo avuto il coraggio di usare bene le parole, di prendercene cura” (qtd in Rinaldi 2017).

<sup>5</sup> My translation. “[I]n realtà la parola *amore* è pronunciata dalla Drammaturga; il regista suggerisce *speranza* come più vicina all’uomo, più possibile” (Vasta 2017: 10).