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Special Section

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Samuel Beckett on Italian Stages. Intermedial Performances Inspired by his Prose and Poems

Abstract

My essay focuses on the Italian theatre of the twenty-first century, examining how digital technology revitalises Samuel Beckett's non-dramatic work. In particular, I want to explore the collision between live performance and digital devices in the staging of the author's prose and poetry. I will be discussing two case studies: Qual è la parola (2006), and *deForma_09* (2009). The former is directed by Roberto Paci Dalò from the company Giardini Pensili and based on twenty-one of Beckett's poems; the latter is staged under the direction of Michele Sambin from Tam Teatromusica, and it features fragments from the prose fictions *Company* and *Worstward Ho*. Both Paci Dalò and Sambin develop an intermedial type of performance, considering Beckett's words as the core of audio and video processing, which also involves the actors' bodies. In these projects, new technologies affect both the soundscape and the visual sphere, composing in real-time on both layers. Qual è la parola employs sampling techniques and live-produced music to generate a harmonious sound flow, together with Beckett's lyrics. Projections of the performers' figures appear on two gauzes, one positioned on the proscenium area and one on the backdrop. *deForma_09* displays a set of sound contents: electronics, spoken words, and noises originated by the actors' movements on the stage. While four microphones manipulate these elements, Sambin virtually paints on the performers' silhouettes using a graphics tablet.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett; Italian theatre; intermedial performance; digital performance; Giardini Pensili; Tam Teatromusica

Over the years, several theatre practitioners have adapted Samuel Beckett's non-dramatic[1] works for the stage. His prose fiction, in particular, appears to be endowed with remarkable performative qualities that may easily be transformed into theatre. The critical literature on Beckett has occasionally emphasised this aspect, most notably referring to his late writing. Enoch Brater, for instance, in his essay called *The Drama in the Text*, asserts that "Fiction and drama, theatricality and textuality" in the author's narrative "seem to come together" (1994, 12).

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[1] By the phrases "non-dramatic" and "extra-theatrical" I refer to all Beckett's texts other than the stage plays.

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While extremely and notoriously prescriptive for what concerned the staging of his plays by other directors, Beckett did in fact authorize a certain number of adaptations of his prose pieces (Kalb 1989, 117-43). In a letter from 13 January 1965, he wrote to Siobhan O' Casey, who was about to present a theatre version of *From an Abandoned Work* at the University of California at Santa Barbara, suggesting a minimalist set-up, while the actor should be more of a narrative voice than a proper character (Bair 1978, 578-9, 715). During an encounter in Paris, he also offered advice to Open Theater founder, Joseph Chaikin. In 1981 the American actor-director was the protagonist of a solo production (*Text*), staged under the direction of Steven Kent and based on a medley of the thirteen *Texts for Nothing* combined with excerpts from the novel *How It Is*. On the scene of the Public Theater in New York, Chaikin looked, according to Mel Gussow, "something like a clown, a patchwork fool who has wandered from a forest of Arden into a Beckett limbo" (1981). Another novel, *The Lost Ones*, provided the source for an internationally successful experiment that has been considered "a kind of avant-garde legend" ever since (Kalb 1989, 132). I am referring to the dramatization of the piece presented by Mabou Mines at the Theater for The New City (NYC) in 1975, directed by Lee Breuer. The rendering literally visualized the novel storyline: actor David Warrilow used tiny figures and a miniaturized cylinder to illustrate the text, while the public was seated all around the scene. After all, Mabou Mines is one of those groups whose name is largely – though not exclusively – associated with adaptations of Beckett's fiction (between 1975 and 1986 the collective presented, apart from *The Lost Ones*, *Mercier and Camier*, *Company*, *Imagine Dead Imagine*, *Wortsward Ho*).[2] The repertory of Gare St Lazare Players Ireland, a company created by actor Conor Lovett and director Judy Hegarty Lovett, consists, instead, almost entirely of Beckett's prose stagings.[3] They have toured, since 2016, with a cycle of works including *The Beckett Trilogy*, *The End*, *How It Is*, and a peculiar show *Here All Night* featuring original music by Beckett as well as some of his poems, and excerpts from *Watt*, *First Love*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*.

The Italian theatre has not been immune to the charms of Beckett's extra-dramatic word either. If this trend has received only limited scrutiny, it is due to the fact that the author's stage success in Italy is mainly depend-

[2] See Cohn 1999 and Smith Fischer 2007. An examination of Mabou Mines stagings of *The Lost Ones* and *Imagine Dead Imagine* can be found in McMullan 2010, 133-9.

[3] See McMullan 2007.

ent on his work as a playwright.[4] Yet, in 1967, one of the country's leading actors, Vittorio Gassman, converted the novel *The Unnamable* into a monologue, which he directed and performed in a production called *DKBC*, alongside other texts written by Kafka, Dostoevsky and Campton.[5] At Teatro La Cometa in Rome "l'innominabile narratore, solo e quasi immobile, racconta, mentre voci registrate gli rispondono, lo contrastano, gli si sovrappongono e immagini filmate vengono proiettate su pannelli" ("the unnamable narrator, alone and nearly static, speaks while recorded voices reply to him, oppose him, overlay him, and film images are also projected on panels", Cascetta and Peja 2000, 293). In 1987 Beckett's prose made its breakthrough in the framework of the avant-garde Nuovo Teatro with the project *Com'è* (*How It Is*), staged by the company Magazzini under the direction of Federico Tiezzi. In the same year, a repertory theatre, Teatro Stabile del Friuli-Venezia Giulia, presented a musical piece directed by Marco Sciaccaluga (*Beckett Concerto*), where the actor Vittorio Franceschini recited some of Beckett's poems and extracts from *Murphy*, *The Trilogy*, *Watt*, *From an Abandoned Work*, and *First Love*. In 1989 one of Beckett's foremost devotees, Giancarlo Cauteruccio, and his company Krypton proposed at the Teatro di Rifredi in Florence an assemblage of passages by the Irish writer. During the performance, whose title was Forse. Uno studio su Samuel Beckett, three actors mechanically repeated sentences from *How It Is, Sans, Company, All That Falls*, in a stage set up of metal scaffoldings, video monitors, projections, sound recordings and amplification devices. Regarding the contemporary experimental scene, at least two productions are worth mentioning: *A place* [That again], a "video-performance" created by Motus in 2006 as a tribute to *All Strange Away*, and the staging of *Neither*, designed by the video-artistic group Studio Azzurro for the Opernhaus in Stuttgart in 2004.[6]

In my essay, I will be focusing on two Italian projects presented in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which respond to the paradigm of

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[4] Beckett's most frequently performed plays on Italian stages are *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Happy Days*, *Act Without Words I*, and *Act Without Words II*. Among the Italian directors and actors who have distinguished their work on Beckett, we should mention at least Carlo Quartucci, Remondi & Caporossi, Giancarlo Cauteruccio with his company Krypton, Glauco Mauri, Carlo Cecchi, Laura Adani, Adriana Asti, Anna Proclemer. For an overview of Italian productions of Beckett's works, see Cascetta and Peja 2000 and the website https://www.beckettitalianstudies.it/beckett-on-the-italian-stage/.

[5] The production is named after the initial letters of the four writers (Dostoevsky, Kafka, Beckett and Campton).

[6] The staging of the opera, composed by Morton Feldman on a text by Samuel Beckett, is directed by Paolo Rosa. On the production, see Pittaluga 2012 and D'Arienzo 2020.

"postdramatic theatre" (Lehmann 2006): Qual è la parola and deForma_09. The former is conceived by Roberto Paci Dalò from the theatre company Giardini Pensili in 2006 and inspired by twenty-one of Beckett's poems; the latter is staged in 2009 under the direction of Michele Sambin from Tam Teatromusica and features fragments from *Company* and *Worstward Ho*.

By refusing to translate Beckett's extra-theatrical work into a consistent dramaturgical structure, the two productions relinquish "the idea of theatre as a representation of a fictive cosmos" (Lehmann 2006, 30) and elude "the laws of telos and unity" (146). Both *Qual è la parola* and *deForma_09* avoid naturalist representation, linear narrative and mimetic acting, giving prominence to the materiality of the scene, the spatial quality of the stage, and the temporal elements of the performance. Freed from subjection to hierarchies and from the demand for coherency, the textual materials thus become "merely a component with equal rights" within "a gestic, musical, visual, . . . total composition" (46). Whereas Paci Dalò eschews the option of turning *What is the Word* into a staged reading, Sambin has no intention of carving out a monologue from *Company* and *Worstward Ho*, where characters and the literary text are supposed to be dramatized. The two directors, on the contrary, experiment with Beckett's poems and verbal fragments through the employment of digital technology and create a polyphonic texture consisting of different types of sound and musical resources.

My investigation seeks to trace the intermedial dynamics generated by the collision of Beckett's words with live staging and new media. The notion of intermediality in this essay refers to the incorporation of digital devices within the scene ecosystem, a shift that, as noted by Robin Nelson, has "challenged the very conception of theatre" (2010, 13). In fact, "the capacity of digital technologies multi-modally to integrate sound, visuals, words and temporal dynamics (in respect to the ease of digital editing in both real-time and during recording)" has almost radically "extended the multimodality of theatre" (14).

Paci Dalò and Sambin develop an intermedial type of performance, considering Beckett's words as the core of audio and video processing, which also involves the actors' bodies. In these projects, new technologies affect the soundscape and the visual sphere, composing in real-time on the two layers. Qual è la parola employs sampling techniques and live-produced music to generate a harmonious sound flow, together with Beckett's text. Projections of the performers' figures appear on two gauzes, one positioned on the proscenium area and one on the backdrop. deForma_09 displays a set of sound contents: electronics, spoken words, and noises originated by the actors' movements on the stage. While four microphones manipulate these elements, Sambin virtually paints on the performers' silhouettes using a graphics tablet.

1. *Qual è la parola* (2006).[7] Beckett's Lyrics as a Musical Score

Roberto Paci Dalò's work presents as a multi-layered constellation: whereas his background is related to music and the visual arts, he also operates at the intersection of different areas. He applies communication technologies and systems to the artistic sphere, developing projects that span the boundary between art and urban spaces. A theatre director, Paci Dalò has also authored film productions. His foremost research, however, addresses the field of sound design. Sound is understood not only as an acoustic element arranged in musical patterns but also as an array of phenomena:

> La musica, com'è noto, è solo una piccola parte all'interno dell'immenso mondo sonoro. Spesso si tende a confondere le due cose, usando la parola 'musica' come sinonimo del termine 'suono'. Potremmo affermare che il suono contiene in sé, in modo formalizzato, una musica. La musica è allora un momento o una condizione del suono. Parlando del suono ci riferiamo quindi all'intera gamma dell'udibile, ed è necessario, in questo senso, pensare a un processo compositivo che incorpori il rumore e l'intero soundscape. (Paci Dalò, interview with the author 2016)

> [Music, as is well known, is only a tiny part of the immense spectrum of sounds. We often tend to confuse the two concepts, by using the word 'music' as synonymous with the term 'sound'. We should say, instead, that the sound incorporates music, and that music is made up of formalised sounds. In other words, music is a part of or a state of the sound sphere. When we talk about sound, we ought to refer to the whole range of the hearable. It is necessary to imagine a compositional process as something that includes the noise and the entire soundscape.][8]

In addition to writing pieces for ensembles of traditional instruments, Paci Dalò works with electronics, the clarinet and music sampling, composing and reassembling phonic contents in audio-visual installations. In 1985, the artist decided to unite all these interests by founding a performance company named Giardini Pensili. The group aimed at establishing a dialogue between technology and the spoken word, between language and image, between fragments of literature and the phonic dimension in all its variations.

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[7] *Qual è la parola*, a scenic execution by Gabriele Frasca and Roberto Paci Dalò, Teatro Studio, Scandicci, 12 March 2006. Performers: Gabriele Frasca, Caroline Michel, Patrizia Valduga. Direction, space design, visual design, lighting design: Roberto Paci Dalò. Music by Roberto Paci Dalò and Morton Feldman. Live video mixing by Filippo Giunchedi. Production: Giardini Pensili, with the support of Regione Emilia Romagna, Provincia di Rimini, Comune di Rimini.

[8] Translation mine.

Its theatrical projects – based on diverse authors' texts – insert the words within impromptu 'executions', exploiting real-time processing of sound and visual media.

Qual è la parola (the Italian title for Beckett's poem *What Is the Word*) was born from the collaboration between Paci Dalò and one of his most frequent stage partners in Giardini Pensili, Gabriele Frasca. A professor in Comparative Literature at the University of Salerno, a novelist, a poet, and a playwright, Frasca is a specialist in Samuel Beckett's work, which he has partially translated from English and French. In 2006 he asked Paci Dalò to create a theatre piece based on some of the author's texts. In that year, for Beckett's centenary, Frasca had already hosted an academic symposium entitled "Beckett in Italia" ("Beckett in Italy").[9] When he was asked by actor and director Giancarlo Cauteruccio to be involved in the 1906BECKET-TCENTOANNI2006 festival,[10] Frasca reached out to Paci Dalò. The scholar suggested to Paci Dalò that they stage a performance relying not on Beckett's theatre plays, but on his poems, which in 1999 he had translated into a complete Italian edition for the publisher Einaudi. Considering Beckett to be one of his literary influences,[11] Paci Dalò gladly accepted the invitation. The two developed the overall project of *Qual è la parola*, while the musician-artist took care independently of the sound design, lighting design, and video score. Paci Dalò, who considers the figure of the theatre director in the light of a composer, defined the work with the expression "esecuzione scenica" ("scenic execution", *Qual è la parola*, theatre programme 2006), namely, a theatrical staging conceived as a musical score. The term, in fact, is meant to highlight:

> la componente musicale del lavoro, non la presenza della musica in quanto tale. L'elemento musicale, nel mio teatro, è legato ad un'idea di 'composizione in scena'. Una 'esecuzione scenica' è uno spettacolo in cui non ci sono soltanto le voci, le parole che 'dicono' il testo, ma in cui è presente un'idea più articolata di struttura compositiva; una struttura che è musicale dal punto di vista scenico. (Interview with the author 2016)

> [the musical component of the work, not the presence of music as such. The musical element, in my performances, is connected to an idea of 'composi-

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[9] The conference was held in April 2006 at the Università per Stranieri in Siena.

[10] 1906BECKETTCENTOANNI2006 was a festival born with the aim of "offering the new generations an in-depth study of Beckett's works". Conceived by Giancarlo Cauteruccio and produced by the theatre company Krypton, the project was divided into different sections (theatre, visual arts, conferences) over three months and hosted by Teatro Studio in Scandicci.

[11] Paci Dalò has paid tribute to Beckett with a sound and video installation called Beck/ett, presented at the Riccione TTV Festival-Performing Arts on Screen in 2004.

tion on stage'. A 'scenic execution' is a kind of theatrical performance that includes not only words or voices pronouncing the text. It is a performance which depends on a more articulated idea of composition. That is to say, a performance that is a theatrical musical structure.][12]

The show seeks to "fa[r] risuonare i sussurri e gl'inciampi dei versi del grande autore irlandese" ("to echo the whispers and stumbles of the great Irish author's poems", Qual è la parola, theatre programme 2006), drawing attention to the acoustic component of words, enhancing phonemes and their rhythmic arrangement. For Paci Dalò, metrics represents "il vero motore dell'azione drammatica" ("the real engine of dramatic action", 2011, 92), in a vision fully shared by Gabriele Frasca:

> Quando io e Paci Dalò abbiamo cominciato a collaborare nei primi anni '90, abbiamo sempre lavorato io come poeta-performer e lui come musicista-regista. Fin dall'inizio, non abbiamo mai pensato che la parola dovesse essere accompagnata dalla musica. Quello che facciamo, in realtà, è sempre un tentativo di insistere sull'accento metrico . . . Roberto prende l'accento della mia lettura e ne fa un ritmo . . . Già in origine le mie traduzioni beckettiane riservano sorprese nel ritmo. Beckett usa il ritmo, e io penso che sia giusto tradurre le sue opere usando l'Italiano in maniera ritmica. E questo ritmo, volevamo che si sentisse anche nel corso dello performance. [interview with the author 2016]

> [When Paci Dalò and I started collaborating in the early 90s, I would always work as a poet-performer while he was the musician-director. From the beginning, we never thought that the word should be accompanied by music. Actually, what we try to do is to insist on the metric accent. . . Roberto takes the accent of my reading and makes a rhythm out of it . . . Right from the start my translations of Beckett's texts already showed surprises in the rhythm. Beckett uses rhythm, and I think it is right to translate his works rhythmically using the Italian language. And we wanted this rhythm to be heard during the performance as well.][13]

Qual è la parola, intertwines the poems with pre-existing musical compositions, such as instrumental pieces by Morton Feldman[14] and by Paci Dalò himself. These materials, subjected to a sampling process, are then mixed with an electronic sound carpet that the director develops in real-time during the performance. Ideally, Paci Dalò imagines the musical dimension and

[12] Translation mine.

[13] Translation mine.

[14] One of the sampled pieces is *For Samuel Beckett* (1987), a one-hour composition written by Morton Feldman in honour of the Irish author. Feldman scored it for an ensemble consisting of a doubled woodwind quartet, brass septet, string quartet, and a trio of harp, piano, and vibraphone.

the words connected as in a sort of *Sprechgesang* (interview with the author 2016).

For the show, Frasca and Paci Dalò selected twenty-one of Beckett's poems from the Einaudi complete collection. For the Italian edition, Frasca had set out to restore the exact chronological sequence in which the author wrote the texts.[15] The script of *Qual è la parola*, on the contrary, was not animated by any desire for philological systematization, but to provide an overview of Beckett's poetic activity:

> Le liriche beckettiane selezionate comprendevano sia quelle del suo periodo giovanile, più strutturate e canoniche, sia le più strane, come le 'filastroccate'. . . Ma, ovviamente, il pezzo più significativo era What Is the Word, perché è un testo ambiguo, che può essere reso in molti modi diversi: è stato letto, recitato, cantato . . . E noi pensammo appunto all'interazione tra le parole e l'elettronica . . . Era necessario portare pian piano lo spettatore verso l'autore, lasciarlo entrare nell'officina beckettiana. (Frasca, interview with the author 2016)

> [We selected both poems of his youthful years – structured and canonical – and the strangest poems, as the mirlitonnades . . . Of course, the most significant text was What Is the Word, because it is an ambiguous text, which can be rendered in many different ways: it has been read, recited, sung. And we thought about creating an interaction between words and electronics . . . We wanted to lead the public slowly towards the author, to let them enter the Beckettian workshop.][16]

As the script of *Qual è la parola*[17] exhibits, the stage journey through Beckett's poetic world is divided into two Parts. Part I includes five texts, all recited in Italian: Cosa farei mai senza questo mondo senza né volto, senza né domande ("What would I do without this world without a face or questions"),[18] from the "Poems in French" composed in the second part of the 1940s; Cascando, one of his most famous lyrics; Alba and Malacoda from Beckett's first collection of poetry *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935). Then one of the mirlitonnades appears, Notte che tanto fai ("Night, you do

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[15] The complete Italian collection of Beckett's poems is a multilingual edition. Frasca followed both the French and the English complete collections, making several – albeit slight – variations on the chronological order. See Beckett 1992, Beckett 1984 and Frasca 1999, LXI.

[16] Translation mine.

[17] The script is a large format notebook with white sheets kept at the Roberto Paci Dalò Private Archive. The text occupies twenty-two unnumbered pages, on the left column of which the printed texts of the selected lyrics are pasted. The right side of the sheet, instead, presents drawings with scene diagrams and handwritten notes concerning the lighting design, the video score, and the general musical framework.

[18] The original French title is *Que ferais-je sans ce monde sans visage sans questions*.

so much"),[19] closing the first segment of the performance. Part II mostly consists of these short poems written in French in the late 1970s and largely ignored by critics. They are read, together with *Ritorno Ritorno* (the English poem *Roundelay*) both in Italian and in their original language of composition. The performers counterpoint the words according to the musical form of the canon. *Qual è la parola* (*What Is the Word*)[20] establishes the finale of the show. With its sobbing syntax, this lyric conveys the sense of poetic creation as it unfolds and the stumbling attempts in the search for the mot juste, representing, in a way, Beckett's spiritual testament.

Beckett's poems are recited on the stage by three performers: Frasca himself and a mirror figure of him, Patrizia Valduga, a poet and translator of texts from English and French. Then there is Caroline Michel, a French actress who speaks Italian. For the production, Paci Dalò planned an empty space, which is defined by the light component and by its increased or decreased impact on the dark background. A scrim is arranged in front of the actors, and one more on the back wall. The stage is filled with minimal scenic props: three high-backed metal seats, located at the back of the scene on the right side, and three microphone stands, which the actors move as they perform. Frasca, Valduga and Michel wear black coats, and their score involves gradual movements within the stage habitat (crossing the floor, changing position from standing to sitting, moving microphones), with long action times for entering and exiting the scene. On the veils of transparent tulle live-feed footage of the performance is transmitted. Cameras film the actor's bodies, while a video mixing operator morphs their features and blends them with archival images. Details of the human figures are reshaped and re-proposed during the live show, turned into "textures, spectrographies" (Paci Dalò, interview with the author 2016). In isolating physical sections, the shots "diventano altro, una struttura cangiante, in movimento, una struttura di luce, non necessariamente legata a un'immagine riconoscibile" ("become something else, an iridescent structure, in motion, a structure of light, not always linked to a recognizable image", interview with the author 2016).

While the staging presents mostly a static tableau, it is light, sound and image contents that actually produce motion. The visual flow of the performance reveals different correlations with Beckett's iconographic catalogue. The shooting in detail of Caroline Michel's mouth, for instance, is an explicit quotation of *Not I*. Besides, the choice of body fragmentation that characterizes the visual scape leads back to Beckett's theatre, a theatre

[19] The original French title is *Nuit qui fais tant.*
[20] Beckett wrote the poem in French in 1988 with the title *Comment dire.* The following year he translated it into English.

that – in Frasca's opinion – connotes itself as "un sistema di smembramento del corpo" ("a system of body dismemberment", interview with the author 2016). Beckett's words, too, emerge as a visual component, literalized in the video sequences: body pieces alternate, at times, with the appearance of text pieces. Words take shape visually and replace what had been previously projected on the tulle:

> Di tanto in tanto comparivano porzioni di testo, proprio come c'erano porzioni di corpo, quello dei performer. Il fatto che lo spettacolo fosse sostanzialmente al buio, permetteva di ottenere il massimo con il minimo e andare nella direzione beckettiana della sottrazione: sottrarre il corpo quanto più era possibile e farlo apparire di tanto in tanto, frammentato dalle riprese oppure affiorando dal buio. Eravamo tutti vestiti di nero, con dei cappotti fortemente beckettiani, evocativi del suo universo. Dovevamo sparire nel nero anche noi, sulla scena. (Frasca, interview with the author 2016)

> [Portions of text appeared randomly, just as there were portions of bodies, those of the performers. The fact that the show was substantially in the dark permitted the greatest effect with the least effort and, in this way, to comply with Beckett's principle of subtraction: to subtract the body as much as possible and only let it appear from time to time, fragmented by the footage or surfacing from the darkness. We were all dressed in black, with coats strongly evocative of Beckett's universe. We also had to fade away into the darkness of the stage.][21]

As for the sonic fabric of *Qual è la parola*, it is woven from a broad warp (the verses of the text) and a weft of musical phenomena. Beckett's words are inserted into a variegated phonic tapestry, resulting in an extemporaneous composition with a jam session dimension. Live electronics – that is, electronic sounds produced and mixed in real-time – is combined with the sampling of materials previously included in a music database, such as Feldman's and Paci Dalò's pieces. Linguistic ramifications enrich the aural aspect of Beckett's words: the performers give voice to several poems not only in their Italian translation but also in other languages (now French, then English), overlapping the lyrics as in a musical canon. *Qual è la parola* clearly appears to insist on the acoustic signifier of the word, which is treated mainly as a sound unit, creating what Paci Dalò and Frasca define as a process of vocal and linguistic "dispersion" ("dispersione delle voci e delle lingue", *Qual è la parola*, theatre programme 2006).

[21] Translation mine.

2. *deForma_09* (2009).²² Fragments of a Beckettian Discourse

Tam Teatromusica was founded in 1980 by three members whose experience is not strictly rooted in theatre: Michele Sambin, a graduate in Electronic Music from the Conservatory of Venice, is a painter, a video artist and a director of experimental films; Pierangela Allegro's background is connected to the visual arts, having studied set design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice; Laurent Dupont, instead, trained as a dancer. While Dupont pursued a different path, Sambin and Allegro have guided Tam in multidisciplinary projects that implement the enmeshing of music, space, image and gestural movement.

Being influenced by composer Mauricio Kagel and his theory of "instrumental theatre", Michele Sambin considers music as the underlying pattern in the design of Tam's performances. Commenting their first production *Armoniche*²³ – which can be translated both as "Harmonicas" and "Harmonics" – he writes:

> La musica come punto di riferimento costante: ciò che accade sulla scena da un punto di vista spaziale, gestuale, sonoro è determinato da una struttura musicale e non da una sequenza narrativa. Più un comporre con suoni e gesti che raccontare. Suono e azione vengono composti simultaneamente . . . (2010)

> [Music is a permanent point of orientation: what happens on the stage is determined by a musical structure and not by narrative sequences, whether from the point of view of space, gesture, or sound. [Conceiving a performance means] composing with sounds and gestures rather than telling a story. Sound and action are simultaneously composed . . .]²⁴

Tam's performance practice generates an abstract kind of music-theatre, with a highly formalistic aesthetic, involving both sound and vision, and having the actor's voice and body as its central focus. Although the group's stagings are not drama-based, that does not necessarily imply the absence of a textual component. According to Pierangela Allegro, using words in performance means "scrivere con la voce" ("writing with the voice", 2012, 483), treating words as sound made voice. In Tam's productions:

²² deForma_09, concept and direction by Michele Sambin, Teatro Maddalene, Padova, 13 March 2009. Live digital painting: Michele Sambin. Texts from Nohow On by Samuel Beckett. Performers-musicians: Pierangela Allegro, Alessandro Martinello, Alen Sinkauz, Nenad Sinkauz. Sound design: Kole Laca. Production: Tam Teatromusica, Dipartimento di Storia delle Arti Visive e della Musica dell'Università di Padova, Comune di Padova, Audio Art Festival Cracovia.

²³ According to Cristina Grazioli, the project *deForma* is an expansion of this first work. See Grazioli 2014.

²⁴ Translation mine.

le parole espresse con la voce sono . . . eredità di altri autori, furti consape-
voli che indicano una predilezione per la riscrittura in grado di trasformare
la scrittura originaria in una superficie rugosa, materica, dietro alla quale è
sempre possibile intravvedere la precedente superficie . . .
Il senso sta nell'attingere a ciò che ha già una sua esistenza e che può essere
trasfigurato attraverso un successivo intervento per trovarsi a vivere un'al-
tra vita oltre a quella d'origine . . .
Nella scelta ridotta all'osso, le parole possono mostrare la loro potenza sen-
za rischiare la confezione del discorso, il realismo del dialogo (483-4).

[The words delivered through the voice . . . are an inheritance from other
authors. It is intentional stealing that reveals a propensity towards a rewrit-
ing process. Such process can transform the original writing into a rough,
tactile surface, behind which the original one can always be recognised . . .
The purpose is to draw on what has its own existence and can be reshaped
through a further transformation so that it can live a new life in addition to
its initial one . . .
By selecting fragments out of a text, I let the words show their strength
without risking the fabrication of a speech, the realism of a dialogue".][25]

The production at the core of my discussion, *deForma_09*, is a striking ex-
ample of this "rewriting" praxis, arising from a meditation on the nature
of sound in relating space. The work is the third part of a broader pro-
ject which ran from 2007. The first piece, *deForma_07*, was designed for
an event dedicated to music and conceived as a sonic promenade experi-
ence through a desecrated church. The second 'episode', deForma_08, was
held in non-theatre venues, first at the Museum of Contemporary Art in
Warsaw and then in a hall of the Conservatory of Music in Krakow. *deFor-
ma_07* and *deForma_08* featured similar textual references,[26] taken from
notes by the composer Teresa Rampazzi,[27] and an air stage parallelepiped
made of elastic material. While maintaining this floating prop, *deForma_09*
preferred to present selected excerpts from Beckett's prose fictions Compa-
ny and *Worstward Ho*.

In the development of the stage project, Beckett' words do not consti-
tute a pre-verbal track. As Pierangela Allegro states: "Non è stato un tes-
to a servirmi da stimolo per creare un'azione scenica, ma è la performance
che mi ha suggerito un certo tipo di testo, un certo tipo di autore" ("The
text didn't serve as an impulse in creating the performance. On the contra-
ry, the performance itself suggested a specific type of text, a specific type of

[25] Translation mine.

[26] The text of *deForma_07* is found in Allegro 2010a.

[27] Teresa Rampazzi (1914–2001) was a composer and a pianist. One of the pioneers
in the production and dissemination of electronic music in Italy, she was a mentor to
Michele Sambin.

author", Allegro-Sambin 2015, 172). Therefore, it is the sequence of the actions and the space conformation determined during the workshop phase that leads the artist towards Beckett's writing. In particular, being one of the actors on the scene, she realises, from within the performance, to be in "una sorta di landa desolata, un unico luogo claustrofobico" ("a sort of desolate land, a single claustrophobic place", 172).[28] She clarifies the staging process in these notes:

> A questo punto del percorso, osservando le situazioni e lo spazio scenico creato, riconosco un clima beckettiano.
> Cerco le parole. Le trovo nel testo tradotto in italiano con il titolo di In nessun modo ancora . . .
> Esse aderiscono in modo tanto inatteso quanto naturale all'opera che sta prendendo corpo. Le estrapolo dal testo d'origine e . . . le ricompongo per affidarle poi ai performer perché le agiscano, su partitura, durante l'esecuzione scenica. (Allegro 2012, 490)

> [At this stage of the work, as I observe the situations and the stage space that we have created, I recognise a Beckettian ambience.
> I look for the words. I find them in a text that has been translated into Italian with the name In nessun modo ancora . . .
> They adhere as unexpectedly as they do naturally to the work that is taking shape. I extrapolate them from the source text . . . I reassemble the words and assign them to the actors. This way, they can perform the words during the staging. (translation mine)][29]

It is thereby a matter of a reverb effect between the scene and the written word: it is the stage that seems to call Samuel Beckett to be part of the work. During the preparatory phase of the show, Pierangela Allegro drafts a short script. Although retaining two lines by Teresa Rampazzi as a link to *deForma_07* and *deForma_08*, her efforts are aimed to combine the initial sentences from *Company* with several quotations from *Worstward Ho*.[30]

As a matter of fact, despite being written in different years, the two Beckettian pieces reveal several similarities. A "melodic ritualism" (Brater

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[28] Samuel Beckett is an influential figure in Pierangela Allegro's creative work. References to the author appear in Tam's production *Scritto Dentro* (2013) and in a recent art project by Allegro, *Calma di Vuoto* (2020). On *Scritto Dentro*, see Grazioli 2016.

[29] *In nessun modo ancora* is the Italian edition of *Nohow On*, translated by Gabriele Frasca in 2008 for the published Einaudi. It is composed by three prose fictions that had already appeared individually: *Company* (1979), *Mal vu mal dit* (1981), and *Worstward Ho* (1983). In 1989 they were collected in a single volume published by John Calder, to which Beckett gave the overall title *Nohow On*. The first Italian translations of *Company* and *Worstward Ho* appeared respectively in 1981 and 1988, edited by Roberto Mussapi.

[30] The text of *deForma_09* is found in Allegro 2010b.

1994, 144) pervades these fictions, which feature a fragmented syntax, rhythmic patterns, and profuse use of rhetorical devices such as alliteration, assonance and anaphora. As Brater points out, "sound" constitutes "the body and focus that gives" these texts "breadth, vigour and unparalleled coherence" (135). In *Company* Beckett – with a metanarrative expedient that imposes on the reader-spectator, right from the start, the imperative to imagine a human subject lying "on his back in the dark" – seems eager to photograph the process of imagination in its making. In Worstward Ho, the fading of the narrative aspect goes hand in hand with descriptive hypertrophy of a rhythmic nature, in which, between entire monosyllabic sequences and pejorative superlatives, the word ends up becoming "the ultimate dramatis persona" (138). Excerpts of this "minefield of musical self-quotations" (110) compose the score of the performers' vocal expression in *deForma_09*. The four actors-musicians (Pierangela Allegro, Alessandro Martinello, Alen Sinkauz and Nenad Sinkauz) speak their lines without any interpretative or narrative purpose. Four microphones positioned at the centre of the stage capture and boost their voices, while audio mixers digitally alter and distort the sound. The actual idea of distortion and metamorphosis underlies the entire production. As Sambin states (2009), the title deForma refers, on the one hand, to the verb 'to deform' and on the other hand – considering 'de' as an autonomous preposition and 'forma' as an ablative – it intends to translate the Latin expression, which means 'about the form'. On stage, a big parallelepiped rubber band embodies this idea. The structure is suspended on the ceiling and bonded to the performers through a system of ropes and pulleys over their backs. The bodies' movements determine continuous deformations of the white lines and frequent shifts from light to shadow.

At the beginning of the performance, in a darkened environment, only the tight structure is visible. The actors then emerge, standing in the four corners of the scene. While conceiving this transition, Allegro had in mind these sentences from *Worstward Ho*: "First the body. No. First the place. No. First both" (qtd in Allegro 2012, 491-2). The show proceeds through sounds and vocal juxtaposition ("A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine"), corporeal rhythms, solo and choral moments (looking for a "company"). The performers follow a movement scheme based on continuous approaches, imbalances, and falls, according to the adagio "Try again. Fail again. Fail better". This way, Allegro develops actions suggested by the context of the subjects described in **Company** and *Worstward Ho*. The show aspires to visualize a type of Beckettian space ("a sort of desolate land, a single claustrophobic place" Allegro 2015, 172) and the author's obsession with geometric boundaries. In a set-up recalling that of Quad, the actors experience the limit, as it happens in Beckett's late theatre: "Each play of Beckett's maturi-

ty created a meticulously specified set of boundary conditions . . . The plays are 'about' their boundaries: seeking them, reaching them, using them, living with them" (Scanlan 1996, 163). In this case, thus, the protagonists do not experience anguish. They explore the stage space while meditating on the reshaping of an object. According to Sambin, the reference to the alteration does not only concern the configuration of the parallelepiped; the concept of deformation is also connected to the manipulation that digital devices enact both visually and sonically. In this regard, the image landscape is dominated by what he calls "live digital painting" interventions. During the performance, the director uses Photoshop, a graphics tablet and a projector to draw on the stage and the performers' bodies, continuously morphing their contours while crafting a "dramaturgy of light" ("drammaturgia della luce", Grazioli 2010). The same applies to the audio-sphere. In deForma_09 the microphones and the mixers merge and distort audio contents such as musical sounds, spoken language, noises produced by physical actions (the beating of their chests, the clatter of footsteps). Samuel Beckett's words are remodeled through digital filters and become a sound particle, a sound between sounds, originating a Beckettian fragmented discourse:

> . . . se guardo ciò che facciamo vedo frammenti.
> E frammento aggiunto a frammento e così via darà luogo a un 'discorso' frammentato e quindi più utilizzabile per chi lo riceve . . . (Allegro 2009)

> [. . . if I look at our work I see fragments.
> And adding fragment over fragment a fragmented 'discourse' will take place, eventually more usable for the spectator . . .][31]

Tam Teatromusica introduces Beckett's "phonographic proses" ("prose fonografiche", Frasca 2008, XI) into the performance as frozen words, using them in their intrinsic acoustic qualities, as grids of physical vibrations passing through the stage space.

3. Conclusion

This essay has investigated two intermedial productions inspired by Beckett's prose and poetry, showing how digital devices offer new ways to embody his words and visions. In the conception of *What is the Word* Roberto Paci Dalò and Gabriele Frasca focus on the interrelationships between Beckett's lyrics, electronics and acoustic interventions. They also embed the author's different languages in the vocal stream, delivering an alterna-

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[31] Translation mine.

tive aural perspective of his verses. In deForma_09, Beckett's imagery acts as a stylistic and aesthetic influence that strongly impacts the performance configuration, while his prose is nestled in a polyphonic composition able to enhance the rhythmic-sonic value of the words. The two projects thus succeed in reinterpreting Beckett's non-theatrical legacy by applying his own approach to the stage work. A work that, in the author's own words, was "a matter of fundamental sounds" (Beckett-Schneider 1998, 24).

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