





# **S K E N È**

**Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies**

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**7:1 2021**

Virtual Theatre

Edited by Sidia Fiorato

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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*Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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Published in June 2021

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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies  
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SIMONA BRUNETTI\*

## **Connections: A Virtual Theatre Experiment in a Medieval Village**

Abstract

During the 22<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Collinarea, Festival di Teatro Arte e Tecnologia (Collinarea, Theatre, Art and Technology Festival)* the event *Connections*, created by Mirco Mencacci and by Artistic Director Loris Seghizzi, took place in Lari. The whole village was cabled with optic fibres to set up the first theatre experiment with different and separately located stages. The social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic offered the occasion to stage a polytopic performance in the streets of the village, located in the Tuscan hills. The play, just like any TV broadcast, was coordinated remotely from a control centre at the municipal theatre. Each of the three sites set up for the event included a stage for live performances and used screen mirroring to stream the event in a sort of intertwined narrative. This paper describes the performance with a focus on its contemporary rewriting of Sophocles' *Ajax* by the theatre companies Civilleri-Lo Sicco and Scenica Frammenti.<sup>1</sup>

KEYWORDS: virtual stages; polytopic performance; Sophocles' *Ajax*; contemporary rewriting

### **1. Virtual Theatre in the Tuscan Hills**

In July 2020, the project *Connections* was presented in Lari during the 22<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Collinarea, Festival di Teatro Arte e Tecnologia*.<sup>2</sup> Lari is a charming medieval village in the province of Pisa, between Livorno and Pontedera. This unique event was the outcome of the project of the same name by Mirco Mencacci, in collaboration with the artistic director Loris Seghizzi. Over the years, the historic festival organised by Scenica Frammenti<sup>3</sup> has become for two reasons a point of reference for Italian contemporary theatre. First, for its interesting artistic cross-fertilizations and for the important international collaborations it has hosted and promoted. And second, for the deep roots it

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Edward Tosques for his prompt and close revision of the English version of this essay. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the *Collinarea* festival see CF.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the activity of the company see SF.

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has struck in the surrounding towns through its annual presentations of an intense, widespread cultural and educational activity.

The project *Connections* offers a new way of experiencing performances through an innovative and advanced technology. As the organisers have said, it is “a permanent, interactive and immersive infrastructure” designed to enhance the artistic identity of the small localities, and thus enhance their available theatrical space. It is also a flexible model, easily replicable and adaptable to different settings on an as-need basis. In the case of Lari, which was the pilot site of the project, the characteristic medieval features of the local architecture were first thoroughly evaluated to best exploit their features for the event; in particular, the long road surrounding the Castle that overlooks the valley, which interspersed with squares, striking views and the municipal theatre. Subsequently, the village was cabled after on-site studies by SAM Studio and its director Mirco Mencacci to balance the audio signal and avoid frequency interferences.<sup>4</sup> And last summer it was decided that a performance experiment through separately located stages would be organised for the upcoming annual *Collinarea* event.

As Seghizzi stated in a radio interview, social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic fostered the initiative and its planning, “perché è stato l’anno delle connessioni e perché molte persone sono state costrette a rimanere a casa. Questo distanziamento sociale . . . limita molto la possibilità di accoglienza del pubblico” (Raponi 2020; “because this was the year of internet connections and many people had to stay at home. Social distancing . . . greatly limits the possibility to welcome the audience”). The pre-pandemic logistical plan of the *kermesse* included squares crowded with people for ten days in a row and a programme with at least three performances nightly; access restrictions imposed on the plays for Summer 2020 (in particular, seating arrangements ensuring a 1 metre distance between participants, contact tracing and face masks) would have probably led to a drop in ticket sales. Thus, the idea of integrating a virtual way of enjoying the event turned into a useful resource capable of “riportare le persone nelle piazze” (Pino 2020; “bringing people back to gather in the squares”) after months of lockdown.

For the inauguration of the festival three specific areas of Lari (the Vicari Castle, Piazza Matteotti and the municipal garden) were equipped with a powerful sound system, video projectors, microphones and cameras, all coordinated remotely from a control centre located in the municipal theatre. The performances offered a showcase by Francesco Mandelli, a TQS concert (*Tutto Questo Sentire*) starring Olivia Salvadori, Sandro Mussida and Rebec-

<sup>4</sup> SAM is a recording studio on an international level which, since the 1980s has provided, digital and analogical technology, as well as a qualified staff to assemble musical products for diverse uses and applications. To learn more about the studio see SAM.



ca Salvadori, and the *Ajax* play (a project staged by the Scenica Frammenti theatrical company and the association Civelleri-Lo Sicco).

Throughout the evening, actors, musicians, and technicians worked in a traditional interactive way of using 3D projection mapping and sound addition for both an on-site selected audience and two other groups of viewers in two other iconic locations in Lari. In fact, as the map included in *Collinareas*'s complete programme shows (fig. 1), in each of the three sites, near the live performance stage spectators could view simultaneously what was going on in the other two sites, and this created a polyphonic interweaving of voices and actions.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, by purchasing a full ticket for the entire evening in Piazza Matteotti – in which the event was scheduled at 10:15pm – spectators could also attend the screening of the event performed at Vicari Castle (starting from 8:00pm) and at the municipal park (from 9:00pm).

However, watching a live performance in a square and then following another event on-screen, would not be such an important subject of discussion if, along with this peculiar use of technology, a more innovative and not yet tested solution had not been staged. The *Connections* project also had a single performance developing in different, reciprocally connected locations. For instance, an artist might be painting inside the Castle while, simultaneously, an orchestra played a musical accompaniment from a square with a church in the background, a *corps de ballet* danced in the theatre, some actors played in the municipal park, etc. In this case the director's role would become central, just as in a TV studio, not only in checking the quality and the power of the broadcast signal, but also in deciding what to project on the various screens.



Fig. 1 – Collinarea 2020 Festival Map.

<sup>5</sup> On the relationship between show and spectator, see Mazzocut-Mis 2012, 11-22 and Tavani 2012, 49-67.

While the theoretical and practical potentialities of the project are still under consideration, before examining the main characteristics of *Ajax* (performed live on three digitally connected stages), it is important to stress how, theatrically, the operation sets up, in a modern virtual key, a type of secular polytopic space of medieval ancestry, which “non si sostituisce ma si sovrappone agli spazi . . . nei quali si colloca” (Allegrì 1988, 231; “does not replace, but superimposes itself on the places . . . in which it is located”).

As is well known, early medieval theatre stages were usually itinerant and moved around cities in pageant wagons, and medieval theatre transformed existing architectures by implementing them with moveable structures which changed their usual function and scope (232). In both cases, the architectural structure did not change, while the whole city became a spread out theatrical space, freeing audiences to interact with this double typology of itinerant theatre, for example by choosing what to see, regardless of the scene sequence. While the succession, or points of view, of the audience did not change the substance of the scenes which were being represented, what did change was the spectators’ perception of the event they were attending.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as Sandra Pietrini observes:

Nell’Europa tardomedievale e rinascimentale convivono . . . due tipologie totalmente diverse di rappresentazione, basate su concezioni opposte dello spazio. Mentre la scenografia rinascimentale si fonda sulla concentrazione del luogo d’azione in uno spazio unitario, con eventuali cambiamenti successivi di scenografia, i Misteri (come già alcuni drammi liturgici) prevedono la compresenza di elementi che rappresentano posti diversi.

La struttura scenografica a *mansiones*, benché sia utilizzata fino a un’epoca molto tarda, è una tipologia propriamente medievale, fondata sulla stessa concezione spaziale delle arti figurative precedenti al Rinascimento. Si fonda su una disposizione parattattica, con sequenze di azioni compresenti a suggerire uno sviluppo narrativo . . . Mentre in Italia si affermò la scena prospettica unificata, nel resto d’Europa la concezione multipla e simultanea dello spazio continuò a dominare l’immaginario figurativo almeno fino al XVI secolo, sia nelle rappresentazioni dei Misteri sia nelle arti figurative. (Pietrini 2017, 77-8)

[In late medieval and Renaissance Europe . . . two completely different types of representation coexisted, based on opposing conceptions of space. While Renaissance set designs were based on the place of action and its focus in one single area with possible scenographic changes, Mystery plays (such as liturgical dramas) implied the coexistence of elements which represented different places.

*Mansiones* set designs, though used until a much later period, were typically medieval, relying on the same conception of spatiality that we find in pre-Renaissance fine arts. They were built using paratactic dispositions, with simul-

<sup>6</sup> On this subject, see: Weimann 1989, 173-193.

taneous sequences of actions suggesting a development in the narrative . . . While in Italy the unified perspective scene became established in architecture, in the rest of Europe the multiple and simultaneous conception of space continued to dominate the figurative imaginary at least until the sixteenth century, both in Mystery plays and in the fine arts.]

As I have argued elsewhere, in 1637, with the inauguration of the Amsterdam Schouwburg, Jacob van Campen put together multiple spaces on the same stage, all characterised by a variety of styles in use in England, Spain and in Flanders, namely typical street performances, panels with painted backdrops, and installed structures (as in the Chambers of Rhetoric), following the model of those used in Jesuit theatre (Brunetti 2018, 203). Thanks to digital technology, which makes it possible to project, on a single, large screen, events taking place at the same time in different and separate locations, in our view, a production like *Ajax* is connected to that vision (paratactic and unitary at the same time) which Kernodle calls “Stage Façade” (1944, 111-54).

## 2. A Scenic Rewriting of Ajax with Graffiti and Social Media

The contemporary rewriting of Sophocles’ *Ajax*, which made its debut at the *Collinarea* festival, is the result of a multidisciplinary project for young people under 20, which saw the collaboration of Manuela Lo Sicco with twelve young people from Lari and Palermo. The play is the result of a joint effort of creation and direction by Civillieri-Lo Sicco and Scenica Frammenti.<sup>7</sup> It revisits and revises the tragedy’s main themes through the eyes of the young protagonists. The group availed itself of both SAM Studio’s audio direction and Benson Taylor’s sound effects.<sup>8</sup>

Sabino Civillieri and Manuela Lo Sicco, both former actors of the *Sud Costa Occidentale* company, founded in 1997, trained at the permanent workshop run by Emma Dante, which is based on the concept of the actor as author. Through a continuous and exhausting training, the actors acquired a new language, a new modality of representation, in which, as Anna Barsotti wrote, the theatre is work, “dissociazione, malattia, ma anche gioco vitale contro la morte” (2009, 121; “dissociation and sickness, but also a lively game against death”). The actors and Emma Dante created some plays which deeply influenced the Italian theatre at the beginning of the twenty-first century: *mPalermu*, *Carnezzeria*, *La Scimia*, *Cani di Bancata*, *Le Pulle*, *Ballarini* (*Tri-*

<sup>7</sup> The performance was co-produced by Associazione Civillieri-Lo Sicco, Scenica Frammenti, Collinarea Festival, Teatro Libero di Palermo e TMO (Teatro Mediterraneo Occupato di Palermo).

<sup>8</sup> Taylor is a British composer and producer who has worked for many cult films and TV series. For further information see BT.

*logia degli occhiali*), *Bestie di scena*. These original productions won several awards, including the Scenario and the Ubu prizes.

In 2009 they founded the Association Civilleri-Lo Sicco in order to carry out, with expressive rigour and hard work, some projects which were utterly and provocatively deemed useless to society but which were artistically significant. At the same time, they engaged in the search for their own artistic identity and creativity. In recent years they have run a great number of workshops aimed at discovering theatrical language, with particular attention to group dynamics and collective listening.<sup>9</sup>

Loris Seghizzi is an actor and also a scriptwriter, a director, and an impresario. A son of artists, in 1998, following the historical-artistic heritage of his parents, he decided to found his own company, Scenica Frammenti. This company is a sort of continuation of the touring company founded in the early 1900s by his grandparents, Fausto Barone and Assunta Tampone, and it is also a continuation of the project of “prosa viaggiante” (lit. “itinerant prose theatre”) started by his parents, Francesco Seghizzi and Vincenza Barone. After performing in Italian theatres and squares prose works of some great contemporary writers and some original productions mostly dealing with social issues, his parents settled in Tuscany and started experimenting new forms of performance, such as children’s theatre or operetta (Niccolini and Seghizzi 2012; SF). From the very beginning Scenica Frammenti has offered a new-generation artistic project combining traditional Italian theatrical technique with the theories of the great Masters of the late twentieth century (Penzo 2019, 141-3; Perrelli 2007 and 2016) or, more in general, of the Nuovo Teatro (lit. “New Theatre”) (Mango 2019, 197-248; De Marinis 1987).

The rewriting of *Ajax* originated through an artistic encounter between artists defined by two different trainings: the theatre of Emma Dante and the theatre of Italian “famiglie d’Arte” (families of professional actors having a generations-long theatrical tradition). Through these techniques they learned two specific acting methods that they intensely explored, internalised and in part re-elaborated, to find new forms of expression to share with young practitioners. Like what Loris Seghizzi plans to do in the Tuscan territory, also Sabino Civilleri and Manuela Lo Sicco also have been cooperating for several years with many Sicilian trends, including La Scuola dei Mestieri of the Biondo Stabile Theatre of Palermo.

As is generally known, in Sophocles’ *Ajax* the events that trigger the tragedy have already taken place beforehand: Achilles’ armour has unjustly been given to Odysseus instead of Ajax, who has disdainfully refused Athe-

<sup>9</sup> For further information and to know more about the various artists, see their biographies in CLS and their interviews with Patrizia Bologna (Bologna and Lo Sicco 2006, 170-6; Bologna and Civilleri 2006, 177-82).

na's help in battle. To punish him, the goddess has deluded him into slaughtering cattle instead of the Greek army leaders. The action takes place in the Greek camp, just outside Ajax's tent, where Athena shows Odysseus that the hero is still prey to madness, while the king of Ithaca shows compassion towards him. After regaining his senses, Ajax cannot bear the shame of what he has done and, lying to his brother and closest friends about his future, he takes his life in a clearing. However, Menelaus and Agamemnon deny Ajax a proper burial as punishment for having threatened the integrity of their army; Teucer strongly contests their decision and claims his right to give his brother a proper funeral. Eventually, the quarrel is solved by Odysseus, who makes the burial possible, paying respect to the fallen enemy with full honours (Rodighiero 2013, 202-3).

As Guido Avezzi points out, the story relates to some typical topics of classical theatre, above all, the dispute over Achilles' armour and the vision of the hero as the embodiment of a system of values universally recognised and shared (2003, 117). Aside from these arguments, a key element which helps us understand the motives behind the myth's rewriting can be synthesized in the dynamics of vision – “la possibilità o l'impossibilità di vedere o di essere visti” (Avezzi 2000, 108; “the possibility or impossibility to see or be seen”) – combined with the theme of the hero's shame: “tornato in sé, [Aiace] può finalmente vedere gli altri quali sono e insieme comprendere di essere visibile nella condizione che a lui stesso è divenuta percepibile, e prova vergogna” (110; “Having regained his senses, [Ajax] can finally see the others for who they really are, he understands that he is likewise visible in his delirium, and he is ashamed of it”):

AIACE

Ma c'è una cosa che credo di sapere: se Achille, vivo,  
 avesse dovuto assegnarle lui, le armi,  
 come premio a chi eccellesse per valore,  
 nessun altro le avrebbe prese al mio posto.  
 Adesso, invece, gli Atridi le hanno fatte avere a un mascalzone intrigante,  
 non hanno tributato onore alla mia forza.  
 E se il delirio che mi sconvolge gli occhi e la mente  
 Non mi avesse deviato dal proposito,  
 costoro non avrebbero mai più potuto decretare contro nessuno  
 una sentenza del genere.  
 Ma ora la dea, figlia di Zeus, l'indomabile, dagli occhi di Gorgone,  
 mentre già alzavo il mio braccio contro di loro,  
 mi ha tratto in inganno, ha iniettato in me un delirio malato,  
 ha fatto sì che bagnassi le mie mani nel sangue di questi armenti.  
 E quei due che l'hanno scampata contro la mia volontà, ridono di me:  
 se un dio vuole colpire, anche l'infame sfugge al più eccellente.  
 Che cosa devo fare, adesso?

...

Lascero' soli gli Atridi per tornarmene a casa, attraversando l'Egeo?  
 E con che faccia andro' a farmi vedere da mio padre Telamone?  
 Come sopporterò di guardarmi, quando mi presenterò nudo,  
 senza i trofei che incoronarono la sua immensa gloria?

No, non posso sopportarlo!

(Sophocles 2004, 107-8, ll. 441-57, 460-66; translation by Angelo Tonelli).

[AJAX

And yet, I think I know this, at least: that if Achilles were alive  
 and had been going to award the victory for supreme valour  
 in a contest for his own arms,  
 no one else would have seized them instead of me.

But as things are, the Atridae have made them over to a man depraved in his  
 character,

rejecting my mighty deeds.

And if my eyes and mind

had not become disordered and swerved away from my intended design,  
 they would never have voted such a judgment  
 against another man.

As it is, when I was already directing my hand against them,  
 the daughter of Zeus, the invincible Gorgon-eyed goddess,  
 frustrated me by casting a maddening sickness upon me,  
 so that I bloodied my hands among beasts like these.

And they have escaped, against my will, and are laughing.

But if one of the gods causes harm, then even a coward can escape the stronger  
 man.

And now what must I do?

...

Shall I abandon the station of the ships, leaving the Atridae alone,  
 and go home across the Aegean sea?

And when I appear, how will I show my face to my father, Telamon?

How ever will he bring himself to look upon me, when I appear naked,  
 bereft of those prizes which he won as a great crown of glory?

The deed cannot be endured.

(Sophocles 2011, 268-73; ll. 441-57; 460-66; translation by Patrick J. Finglass)]

In the early twentieth century, thanks to theorists and directors like Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia and Bertolt Brecht, “una nuova scrittura del teatro basata su una nuova grammatica” (Mango 2012, 106; “a new kind of script writing with a new grammar”) was born, though it had already found an important theoretical expression in the mid-nineteenth century in the libretti that Richard Wagner wrote for his operas (Artioli 1972, 65-82; 157-79). Antonin Artaud’s subsequent reflections confirm the primacy of action over script (see Artioli and Bartoli 1978), thus clearing the way for

una dialettica di scritte, quella scenica e quella drammatica, che è dire una cosa diversa da messa in scena e testo letterario, perché si tratta di uno spostamento ulteriore che vede la dimensione drammatica del teatro distaccarsi dall'assoluto letterario e farsi immediatamente atto creativo della scena. (Mango 2012, 110)

[a dialectic of texts (the representational and the dramatic one), which distinguishes itself from the mere concepts of *mise-en-scène* and literary text, because it implies a further step by which the dramatic dimension detaches itself from the literary absolute and immediately becomes an act of creation on the stage.]

The rewriting of *Ajax* is an example of this very compositional process which, also in the light of the theories developed after Brecht's political theatre in the second half of the twentieth century, sees civil commitment as one of its greatest strengths. A dramaturgical intuition is followed by the performance mainly through a long process of training and reworking based on individual and collective improvisation, in which the body of the actor is central.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noticing that not always is this final script preserved on paper. The hard work on the myth (and, accordingly, on the fable) undertaken by Emma Dante and her young practitioners (Barsotti 2008 and 2017; Scattina 2019) has allowed Civilleri, Lo Sicco and Seghizzi to recontextualise the tragedy into the world of youth gangs of graffiti artists and the world of social media. Therefore, instead of Achilles' armour, the dispute revolves around the ownership of his jacket, "giusto premio al writer più meritevole" (CDRA, 2; "the just reward for the best writer"); revenge is taken by crossing out the artists' graffiti and removing the group's tags; finally, the cause for the protagonist's suicide in the end is a video gone viral:

TECMESSA

È vero quello che si dice.

Rapito da follia, il glorioso Aiace si è macchiato di infamia. È stato lui a trafugare le bombolette, la sua mano impazzita ha massacrato ogni cosa.

Trascinava, sollevava e colpiva le nostre giacche come montoni dalle zampe bianche. Ha rovesciato l'urna... urlando insulti abominevoli che un demone, non certo un uomo, gli suggeriva. (CDRA, 6)

[TECMESSA

It's true what they say.

In a frenzy, the glorious Ajax has disgraced himself. It was he who stole the color cans, his crazy hand destroyed everything.

He dragged, lifted and struck our jackets as if they were white-legged rams.

<sup>10</sup> Among several monographs on the subject, I recommend De Marinis 2000 and 2004; Mango 2019; Perrelli 2015 and Randi 2020.

He turned the urn upside-down... shouting such terrible things suggested by a demon, not a man.]

It is easy to see that in the original lines quoted above, the Italian translation of Sophocles' text by Angelo Tonelli is significantly cut, interpolated, but quite accurate in its meaning.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Real and Virtual Interactions in a Polytopic Space

As already mentioned, Sophocles' *Ajax* takes place "nel campo dei Greci che assediano Troia" e "in una radura, dove ci sono arbusti in riva al mare" (Sophocles 2004, 94; "in a Greek camp where the soldiers are besieging the city of Troy" and "a clearing where some shrubs grow by the sea"). In the Lari staging the scenes are set on three different stages in three different locations of the village. The fact that the choice of a specific setting depends on the specific aspects of the characters is not of secondary importance; in fact, Ajax acts from above, namely from the Castle courtyard, until the moment of his fall and his final escape; Athena pulls the strings from the city park; finally, Odysseus and the Crew mostly act in Piazza Matteotti.

Unlike the classical version of the tragedy, the re-written play also includes a backstory: both the announcement of Achilles' death and the funeral ceremony take place, and immediately after it, the "Crew of graffiti artists", led by Menelaus, elects Odysseus as their leader. The latter represents

<sup>11</sup> "TECMESSA Come posso pronunciare parole indicibili? / Conoscerai uno strazio uguale alla morte. / Rapito da follia, questa notte / il glorioso Aiace si è macchiato di infamia: / guarda dentro la tenda, / e vedrai vittime intrise di sangue, offerte sacrificali scannate con le sue stesse mani. / . . . / TECMESSA ÓMOI Di là! / Di là è venuto, trascinando la mandria prigioniera! / Una parte delle bestie le ha scannate al suolo, nella tenda, / e il resto le ha squartate in due , colpendole nei fianchi! / Solleva in aria due montoni dalle zampe bianche: / a uno taglia la testa e la punta della lingua, poi le scaglia via. / L'altro lo lega ben dritto a un palo, / afferra una grossa cavezza per legare i cavalli / e lo colpisce con questa doppia frusta sibilante, / coprendolo di insulti abominevoli, / che un demone, non certo un uomo, gli suggeriva" (Sophocles 2004, 101, ll. 214-20, 233-44; translation by Angelo Tonelli; "TECMESSA How indeed am I to tell an unspeakable story? / You will learn a suffering equal to death. / Captured by madness, our famous Ajax / has come to grief during the night. / Such are the victims you could see within the hut, / rent by his hands, bathed in blood – the sacrifices of this man. / . . . / TECMESSA ÓIMOΙ So it was from there, / from there that he came to us /leading the flock in chains. / Of some he cut the throats on the ground inside, / while he slashed the sides of others and tore them apart. / Lifting two white-legged rams, / of one he cut off the head and tongue / and threw them away / But the other he tied straight upright to a pillar, and, / seizing a huge strap from a horse-harness, / struck it with a shrill-sounding double whip, / uttering terrible insults, / which a god taught him, not a man" (Sophocles 2011, 207-213, ll. 214-20, 233-44; translation by Patrick J. Finglass).



the voice of change and he, instead of the incorruptible Ajax, is asked to wear Achilles' jacket. This story is narrated by a Messenger to the audience sitting in Piazza Matteotti (*CDRA*, 1), and it is also simultaneously staged in the Castle courtyard, as follows:

ODISSEO

Accettate dunque il mio consiglio: troppi di noi sono caduti in campo, uno dopo l'altro, ogni giorno. È tempo di cambiare. Votate me, Odisseo.

AIACE

Io invece credo sia il tempo di rispettare il volere di chi ci ha guidato fino a ieri. Votate me Aiace.

VOCE DAL CORO

Il suo migliore amico.

È sempre stato al suo fianco, clandestino nella notte. Aiace!

TECMESSA

Aiace! insieme hanno guidato la nostra Crew.

VOCE DAL CORO

Odisseo! L'unico che può guidarci con forza e astuzia verso un cambiamento.

TEUCRO

L'incorruttibile che difende la nostra identità. AIACE!

VOCE DAL CORO

Odisseo! che ci condurrà in altri luoghi, mai più per strada!

VOCE DAL CORO

Odisseo!

VOCE DAL CORO

Odisseo!

MENELAO

Odisseo! (*CDRA*, 2)

[ODYSSEUS

Take my advice: too many of us have fallen in battle, one after the other, every day. It is time for a change. Vote for me, Odysseus.

AJAX

I rather think it is time for us to respect the will of the one who has led us until yesterday. Vote for me, Ajax.

A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS

His best friend.

He always stood by his side, secretly in the night. Ajax!

TECMESSA

Ajax! Together they guided our Crew.

A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS

Odysseus! The only one who can lead us towards change with his strength and his cleverness.

TEUCER

The incorruptible man who defends our identity! AJAX!

A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS

Odysseus! The one who will take us to different places, but no longer on the streets!

A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS

Odysseus!

A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS

Odysseus!

MENELAUS

Odysseus!]

Once the election declares Odysseus' victory, the Crew moves from the Castle courtyard to Piazza Mattetti. In the meantime, Athena too watches the election from the city park, and she casts a spell on Ajax, who has been left alone on the 'crime scene' with Tecmessa.

ATHENA

Congratulazioni da Athena! La giacca del glorioso Achille è ora vestita da Odisseo. Riscriverò gli algoritmi. I social impazziranno, i followers e i likes aumenteranno in modo esponenziale. Ho deciso: sarai tu il tag del futuro. ODISSEO È L'INFLUENCER DI UNA NUOVA ERA. Questo è il giusto premio al writer più meritevole, colui che è stato capace di portare genio e dialogo. #FUTURO. (CDRA, 2)

[ATHENA

Congratulations from Athena! Now Odysseus wears Achilles' glorious jacket. I will rewrite the algorithms. This will make social media go wild, the number of likes and followers will increase exponentially. I have decided: you are going to be the tag of the future. ODYSSEUS IS THE INFLUENCER OF A NEW ERA. This is the just prize for the best writer, the one who was able to bring about ideas and discussion. #FUTURE.]

The intersection of these first scenes and their complex paratactic connection are carried out efficiently through the projection of two different streaming sequences on the screen positioned behind the actress who plays the goddess (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – Athena (Manuela Lo Sicco) conjuring a spell in front of the projection of two different streaming sequences (Sofocles, *Ajax*, Collinarea Festival, 2020).

This is the first configuration of a virtual stage used in the performance. In this way, while a scene with a single stage is transformed into a polytopic one when necessary, the dynamism of vision expressed in the tragedy through the asymmetrical relationship between humans and gods shifts to a concrete level. From the city park Athena can see Odysseus in Piazza Matteotti, while he can only hear her speak; but at the same time, she can also speak to Ajax and be seen by him.

The spell cast by Athena in her “social” language introduces the second modality of a virtual scene, connected to the projection of images onto monuments with a sophisticated technique called 3D Videomapping. “La realtà virtuale offre . . . un’esperienza completamente immersiva e interattiva al soggetto” (“Virtual reality offers . . . a completely immersive and interactive experience”), writes Elisabetta Locatelli, because it reproduces the process of perception of reality through the use of technology (Diodato and Locatelli 2012, 197).

After threatening war against Odysseus and his companions – “prima crosserò tutti i loro graffiti e cancellerò la Crew” (CDRA, 3; “first I will cross out their graffiti and then I will cancel the Crew”) – in the Castle courtyard Ajax “*distrugge tutto. Sembra muoversi alla cieca. Prende le bombolette lasciate sul sepolcro e inizia a imbrattare, coprire, cancellare*” (ibid.; “*destroys everything. He does not seem to know what he is doing. He takes the spray cans left by the tomb and begins to paint, cover, erase*”). In the meantime, the hero’s wrath is physically represented by the Crew in the square, who move following Athena’s directions: all wrapped up in a plastic sheet, they move around at random, interacting with a 3D projection which seems to destroy the arches of the surrounding buildings (fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – The Crew wrapped up in a plastic sheet interacting with a 3D projection which seems to destroy the arches of the surrounding buildings (Sophocles, *Ajax*, Collinarea Festival, 2020).

While the typical medieval configuration of the theatre resumes when the scenes overlap with the urban architecture, a clever use of dual and/or simultaneous actions is employed. In the already mentioned opening monologue in Piazza Matteotti, the Messenger summarizes what is happening in the Castle courtyard in the manner of an estranged Brechtian narrator, at times using the same words. However, this type of repetition recurs several times during the show, both in Tecmessa's words to Ajax (once again repeated by the Messenger), or in Teucer's words.

A further virtual modality used during the show, more basic but also more effective than the previous ones, is having a group of actors rush from one side of the village to the other while part of the audience remains in the same place, thus recreating the illusion of the itinerant medieval theatre, in which the action takes place dynamically in the streets. As explained above, after the opening of the show, Odysseus and the Crew move from the courtyard to Piazza Matteotti. Then Odysseus goes back to the Castle to film Ajax's act of rage and send the video to Athena, but the Messenger too (urged by Teucer to find his brother) goes in the same direction. And while Ajax comes down only to escape to the woods before committing suicide (in a clear metaphorical descent), the Crew chasing after him express through their chaotic movement, the idea of the loss of a guide, a point of reference.

The choice to virtually transform interpersonal relationships through an intradiegetic technique seems particularly apt for keeping abreast of young people's tastes and bringing them closer to theatre. It seems also a good way to face current social issues like cyber bullying. Ajax's rage, the symbol of

the injustice he has suffered, amuses Athena, who asks Odysseus to send her a video just to make it go viral:

ODISSEO

Provo pietà per questo infelice.

ATHENA

Finiscila! Accresci il tuo orgoglio! Inviarmi il video di Aiace, così, come lo vedi adesso e grazie alla mia opera sarà condiviso all'infinito, tutti lo disprezzeranno. E così sia.

MENELAO

Quello che ha fatto Aiace è imperdonabile, merita di essere punito. (*Ride*). Guardalo come piange e si dispera, lui che pensava che lamenti del genere si addicessero solo ai vili e ai meschini. Riprendilo nel suo squallore! Inviamo a tutti il video della femminuccia. #La Bella Addolorata (*Ride*).

*Odisseo riprende Aiace. La scena si chiude con Odisseo che invia il video. Notifiche sui telefoni di tutti. (CDRA, 5)*

[ODYSSEUS

I pity this poor wretch.

ATHENA

Stop that! Be proud! Send me footage of Ajax, just like you see him now, and I will make sure that it is shared over the internet and that everybody will despise him. And so be it.

MENELAUS

What Ajax did is unforgivable, he deserves to be punished. (*He laughs*). Look at him, look how he cries and despairs, he who thought that only petty, vile men could cry like that. Capture him in all his misery! Let us share the footage of this cry-baby. #cryingbeauty (*He laughs*).

*Odysseus films Ajax. The scene ends with Odysseus sharing the footage. Everybody's phones ring.]*

In Sophocles' tragedy, Ajax feels ashamed because he did not succeed in avenging himself. Avezzù writes: "si badi che la follia dell'eroe non consiste nel rivolgere le armi contro gli antichi compagni, ma nell'annebbiamento che gli fa mancare lo scopo" (2003, 118; "note that the hero's madness does not lie in the clash with his old companions, but in his lack of vision, which prevents him from achieving his purpose"). In this play, however, Ajax cannot stand the fact of being exposed on social media.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the most interesting aspect of this shift of meaning is included in the stage directions at the end of the passage quoted above. It is realised theatrically through 3D mapping, with lots of emojis projected onto

<sup>12</sup> On this topic see Sacchi 2020 and Nicolini 2020.

the façade of the palace in Piazza Matteotti; many “angry emojis” comment on the footage which has been shared by all the members of the Crew (fig. 4). In this case, the power of social media makes even the most inattentive spectator perceive the violence which is unleashed through this stream of “likes” and “dislikes” and which nowadays, for young people, may be the only means for establishing human relationships. The hero’s isolation and estrangement,<sup>13</sup> both resulting from the abuse of instant messaging, are perfectly epitomised in the following dialogue:

VOCE DAL CORO

No, dobbiamo bloccare la diffusione del video. Riscattare la sua immagine.

AIACE

Ormai è già virale.

MENELAO

Il suo profilo è già stato bannato.

VOCE DAL CORO

Facciamo un altro profilo allora!

VOCE DAL CORO

Ma non lo capite? È troppo tardi. Il suo destino è ormai segnato. (*CDRA*, 7)

[A VOICE FROM THE CHORUS

No, we must stop sharing the video and redeem his image.

AJAX

It’s too late, it went viral.

MENELAUS

His account has been disabled.

ONE VOICE FROM CHORUS

Let’s create a new one!

ONE VOICE FROM CHORUS

Don’t you understand? It’s too late. His fate is sealed.]

<sup>13</sup> To know more about the vision of the figure of Ajax as an isolated hero in the 20th century see: Rodighiero 2010, 29-54.



Fig. 4 – “Angry emojis” shared by all the members of the Crew projected onto the façade of the palace in Piazza Matteotti (Sophocles, *Ajax*, Collinarea Festival, 2020).

From this point on in the play, just as in Sophocles’ tragedy, the hero is gradually estranged from society, a process that leads eventually to his suicide after he is transformed into a wolf. Moreover, in Lari, the long dispute over Ajax’s burial has been omitted in order to concentrate the attention of the audience on the hero’s tragic choice. As a final scenic solution, after a “soggettiva di Aiace che corre nel bosco” (CDRA, 10; “close-up of Ajax running in the woods”), the connection between the three stages is momentarily suspended on the screens, only to re-start in unison (fig. 5).

*Aiace è in Municipio sistema la sua telecamera, prende un microfono. Si inginocchia davanti alla corona funebre preparata da Athena. Aiace riprende se stesso.*

#### LUPO/AIACE

Sono pronto. Tu per primo Dio, dammi il tuo aiuto! Non è grande il favore che ti chiedo. Fa che la notizia arrivi per primo a mio fratello Teucro, che sia lui il primo a sollevare il mio corpo, non vorrei che lo gettassero in pasto ai cani. Ti prego. Che mi addormenti con dolcezza, e sia indolore e rapido. Sappiano che muoio infelice, per colpa di quelli che credevo fossero amici. E tu Sole, quando vedrai la mia casa frena le redini dorate e annuncia il mio destino a mio Padre e a mia Madre che farà risuonare per tutta la città le sue grida di dolore. Luce del giorno, fiumi, sorgenti, terra che mi hai nutrito, addio! (ibid.)

*[Ajax is at City Hall, where he sets up his camera and talks through a microphone. He kneels down before a funeral wreath prepared by Athena. Ajax films himself.*

#### WOLF/AJAX

I am ready. God help me! I am not asking for too much. Please, let Teucer be the first to hear about this, let him be the first to lift my body, I do not want it to be thrown to the dogs. I beseech you. Let me fall asleep gently, may my

death be as quick and as painless as possible. Let them know I'm dying in misery because of all the people I thought were my friends. And you, Sun, pull the golden reins when you see my house and announce my end to my Father and my Mother. She will cry out in grief and her voice will resound throughout the entire city. Daylight, rivers, springs, earth which nourished me, farewell!]

It is important to note that here the suicide weapon is a plastic sheet like the one used by the Crew to represent his folly, so as to make more evident the connection with Athena's spell (fig. 6).

The final identification of this contemporary Ajax with a wolf introduces another social issue, this time more related to the Tuscan territory than to Sophocles' text. In the last few years, thanks to the intense activity of environmental organisations to repopulate Tuscany with wolves, an unjustified fear has grown of the presence of this wild species in the woods and in the scrub.

Just like Ajax, who is isolated and exposed for his insane actions, also wolves too are accused for preying on livestock to indulge their wild nature. Both are objectively victims of their savagery, and for this reason they are pushed to extinction. The implicit question the play poses to the audience is whether this solution is necessary. At the end of a play like this, in which the virtual aspect is essential, the spectators go back home with the absolute certainty that human relationships are the most important "connections" *Collinarea* can offer.



Fig. 5 – Ajax/Wolf (Stefano Mazza) playing live and in unison on the screens of the other two stages (Sophocles, *Ajax*, Collinarea Festival, 2020).





Fig. 6 – Ajax/Wolf (Stefano Mazza) pushed to commit suicide with a plastic sheet (Sophocles, *Ajax*, Collinarea Festival, 2020).

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