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Performing *The Book of Esther* in
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Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

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<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>
info@skeneproject.it

Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com
www.edizioniets.com

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YVONNE BEZRUCKA*

Catharsis at the Bekka. Mariacristina Cavecchi, Lisa Mazoni, Margaret Rose, and Giuseppe Scutellà's *SceKspir al BeKka*¹

Abstract

The book focuses on the use of performing chosen scenes from playwrights of the past – in this specific case William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* – to exteriorise hidden emotional knots – so to compare the effects these produced before, and after being acted out. Love, rage, jealousy, violence, and other offences connected with the topics of the play are thus discussed, examined, and finally performed. The performing part is thus a real cathartic experience, in that the consequences of violence and death are tested via an always unique performance. The actors become the real Kantian 'as if' – via the *als ob* experiential jump – as if they really were the enacted character. We also, as spectators, cathartically dissect the text via our emotions until our theatrical, hypothetical self – embodying a different other –, is given the possibility of becoming a new, and changed, self.

KEYWORDS: performing arts; benefits of enacting deeply felt experiences; *als ob* Kantian theory; emotional-freeing catharsis; rage let-out; Shakespeare and the law

Talking of catharsis today, and not being an auditor in a class on Ancient Philosophy, is something a bit out of the ordinary, but this is, indeed, the experience that awaits the audience of the *pièce SceKspir at the Bekka*, a happening and a performance that took place at the Cesare Beccaria Minors' Penal Institute in Milan. The enlightened ideas of Cesare Beccaria² – a forerunner of Michel Foucault's attack on prisons and their penal code (cf. Foucault 1975) – criticised capital punishment and the law itself in its double-standard of averring and justifying committing murders, paradoxically, with the intent to prevent and stop them. Beccaria saw the prison as a useless institution, incapable,

¹ Milano: Edizioni Clichy, 2020. ISBN 9788867997077, pp. 216

² Cesare Beccaria's juridical work, *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764) made him one of the most enlightened voices speaking against the death penalty and its effectiveness as a detriment and preventive action. On this see Bezrucka 2008.

* University of Verona- yvonne.bezrucka@univr.it

most of times, of producing remorse for the misdeeds done. The eighteenth-century Italian lawyer and penologist was the first to study the usefulness of death sentences – capital punishment – as a deterrent and its effectiveness in producing doubts and real remorse in the offenders.

These are the right premises through which we should observe the performances being staged at the BeKKA. Romeo Montecchi (Montague), personified by a young convict of the Bekka, becomes Shakespeare's protagonist with Juliet of the eponymous *Romeo and Juliet* play. Romeo is being put under trial via the use of the contemporary laws pertaining minors, with the result of a bold and engaging re-actualisation of the old medieval laws into the prison laws of the present legal system. This is also the frame for a discussion about what is right, and what is not, in the present legal arena. The essays in the book address various topics. Let us summarise what the various contributors have to say.

Elio Franzini, the Rector of the Università Statale di Milano, speaks of the play in the light of the new rational thought of the Enlightenment engaged in trying to stop the internal infernal drives – the focus-theme of the play – depicting individualities living their lives in a new epoch and its still provisional new syntheses.

Francesca Perrini, Director of the Minors' Centre for Juvenile Justice of the Lombardy area, sees the performance at the Bekka as a possibility for the young convicts to examine one's identity via the embodiment and personification with another possible character as to measure their identity into the mirror of the other, generating thus the Aristotelian catharsis that produces change.

As Francesca Perrini did, Mariacristina Cavecchi and Margaret Rose have followed the development of the *pièce* "Romeo Montecchi: innocent or culpable?". They both believe in the social function of the theatre, for their actors and the spectators as well, who might change their ideas via the performance. They thus decide to conclude the representation with the duel between Romeo and Tybalt, imagining Romeo under a trial via our contemporary Italian Minors' Law. A procedure envisaged by the new law 448, D.P.R. 22.09.1988, which foresees the possibility of using artistic and educational opportunities for the young convicts to revise their deeds via the symbolical screen of theatrical performances. In this spirit, a fake trial has been set up to elaborate events and to see new outcomes via a common effort of the young convicts, followed by all foreseen legal authorities (cf. 20-1). Giving them the possibility to create a space of liberty where all is admitted, actors are, in reality, trying out an opportunity of 'being' different people from whom, at present, they are, so that not only the actors, but also the directors – as a final result – end up being at a loss for justifying both detention and penalty. Mariacristina Cavecchi thus gives her attention at the use of Shakespeare in the IPMs (Istituti Penali Minorili), not only in Italy, but also abroad, relying on the positive outcomes of such performances to induce a revision of one's life now cathartically seen via a different 'bodily' experience, rather than a merely rational one.³

Pierangelo Barone finds the resulting positivity of such experience in its

pedagogical dimension. Indeed, actors/convicts are given the possibility of becoming someone else in performing other human beings different from those who we as spectators, and them as actors, are, and different also from those we might find in our usual environment, places, and spaces.

Daniela Carpi studies and illustrates the caesurae between the Middle Age and the Renaissance from a legal point of view. Indeed, Carpi has dedicated great attention to the Critical Legal Studies which she has initiated and spread in Italy via AIDEL (Associazione Italiana Diritto e Letteratura, founded in 2007). She thus sees *Romeo and Juliet* as a paradigmatic upturn of the Medieval private and vindicative justice, that will, from then on, and progressively, change into a public system of judgement, laid in the hands of authorities that study and challenge it, and, that are thus also entitled to change the common law itself. Private vendetta and personalistic law, characterised by corruption, are neither tolerated nor respected anymore. In her essay Daniela Carpi compares *Romeo and Juliet* with *Hamlet*, focussing on their different value systems. In *Hamlet* the two systems come to a final collision when the – up to then – Prince's full authority is challenged and disrespected, whereas in *Romeo and Juliet* the process is ongoing, diffused, and already spread in all layers of society. Equity will thus need to come in, to limit the sharpness of the letter of the law, mitigating it, via the consideration of all circumstances of a crime, that the Common Law foresees. Carpi thus concludes her essay examining the legitimacy of rank created by the link between name, surname, and identity. Duties related to a family name often outreach the will of those in question: Romeo represents thus the ethical reading of a name that is more than a name being connected to an ancestry. Hence, Carpi focusses on the authority of the *patria potestas* towards Juliet which greatly limits her liberty and rights, an outcome Shakespeare contests.

The second part of the book focuses on more technical aspects. Margaret Rose, with Cavecchi, Manzoni, and Scutellà, directed a creative lab to rewrite *Romeo and Juliet*, using the play to focus the audience's attention on the male protagonists, setting the plot in the present time (2018), where the foci of attention are the prison and the court of law. The actors belong thus to different ethnicities and are heterogenous also for class and education. Competing groups react strongly to sexuality. Romeo is prepared to renounce to his name for Juliet and kills Tybalt. Also, as the trial is being debated, the actors discuss with the stage director reflecting on the play to understand their present reality.

Simone Pastorino develops a way of focusing on the law concerning minors which provides opportunities to reflect on events, facts, and their consequences, via the minors' penal law, during their detention and its consequences.

Lucio Camaldo focuses on the possibilities that young convicts have, after taking some personality test, to educate themselves whilst in prison. The performance therefore focuses also on the possibility for young convicts to claim their rights in the suspension of the detention period, and in obtaining

³ Cf. my encyclopedia reference on 'performing arts': Bezrucka 2011.

thus a minors' probation time. These possibilities are tested out by the Romeo-actor in some specific scenes.

The book ends with Giuseppe Scutellà's theatrical text on Romeo, which is the result of twenty-five years of performing Shakespeare in prison, a proof of the constant value of performance and the performing arts, in its both bodily and mind-changing cathartic overtures.

It is thus this openness of a text that also gives to art its due: 'personalising' a text which talks about the lives of others, into a bodily experience of something that we probably will never live out in real life. Sometimes, it is only via the identification with an intermediary actor, proxy, or an avatar, that the gift of the hermeneutic and cathartic process entailed in art can really start.

The advantage of personifying another human being becomes clear via the programme of the Beccaria minor convicts' theatre group – underage minors who are out of prison only on probation – to permit them to participate in the play as to see whether they can be freed as to re-join the civil society. They are led by a series of experts, some of whom we have already mentioned in their activities in the theatre lab. The Teatro PuntoZero Beccaria lab, BeKKA in short, proposes thus activities that free the convicts from the limits of prisons in that as actors they are invited to free themselves from inhibitions and fears. Actors by magic become thus others evading the person they are in real life. In line with the principles of the Restorative Justice, according to which imprisonment is an *extrema ratio* wherever possible to be avoided.

The activities of PuntoZero comprise also the opportunity of a formative course with external staff to prepare experts to act within prison environments and detention contexts. In this sense, the essay by Simone Pastorino, on the necessity, in the case of minors, of a multidisciplinary intervention is of relevance, as is the legal context of the probation period examined by Lucio Camaldo.

Mariacristina Cavecchi and Margaret Rose, since 2012, have concentrated their attention on the social evolution of our society and its major changes via courses at the Università Statale of Milan, addressing their students via Shakespeare's theatre, and courses on themes like: immigration, integration in a multi-ethnic society, exactly what is needed to have the right instruments to address our contemporary world. For all these reasons this is a very special book worth reading and studying.

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