

# S K E N È

**Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies**

---

**10:2 2024**

Memory and Performance.  
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,  
and Eugenio Refini

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

---

*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpierti*

<i>Executive Editor</i>	Guido Avezzù.
<i>General Editors</i>	Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi.
<i>Editorial Board</i>	Chiara Battisti, Simona Brunetti, Camilla Caporicci, Sidia Fiorato, Sotera Fornaro, Massimo Fusillo, Felice Gambin, Alessandro Grilli, Chiara Lombardi, Lorenzo Mancini, Michele Marrapodi, Stefania Onesti, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Antonietta Provenza, Susan Payne, Cristiano Ragni, Antonio Sánchez Jiménez, Alessandra Squeo, Alessandro Stavru, Emanuel Stelzer, Savina Stevanato, Martina Treu, Gherardo Ugolini, Antonio Ziosi.
<i>Managing Editors</i>	Valentina Adami, Emanuel Stelzer.
<i>Assistant Managing Editors</i>	Marco Duranti, Roberta Zanoni.
<i>Editorial Staff</i>	Chiara Battisti, Petra Bjelica, Francesco Dall'Olio, Serena Demichelis, Carina Fernandes, Sidia Fiorato, Beatrice Righetti, Carla Suthren.
<i>Typesetting</i>	Elena Festa, Cristiano Ragni.
<i>Advisory Board</i>	Anna Maria Belardinelli, Anton Bierl, Enoch Brater, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Richard Allen Cave, Rosy Colombo, Claudia Corti, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek, Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie, Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Mark Griffith, Daniela Guardamagna, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke, Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford.

Copyright © 2024 S K E N È.  
The Journal is a CC-BY 4.0 publication  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)  
SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies  
<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>  
[info@skeneproject.it](mailto:info@skeneproject.it)

Edizioni ETS  
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa  
[info@edizioniets.com](mailto:info@edizioniets.com)  
[www.edizioniets.com](http://www.edizioniets.com)

Distribuzione  
Messaggerie Libri SPA  
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione  
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL  
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna  
ISBN: 9788-8467-7127-8  
ISBN (pdf): 9788-8467-7126-1  
ISSN 2421-4353

## Contents

Memory and Performance.  
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino, and Eugenio Refini

GIOVANNA DI MARTINO – <i>Introduction. (Mis)Remembering Greece and Rome in Early Modern Performance</i>	5
NICOLA BONAZZI – <i>Adding and Subtracting: Plautine Volgarizzamenti at the Este Court and the Case of Girolamo Berardo</i>	13
ANNE MORVAN – <i>A Capricious Tragedy: Anello Paulilli’s Plastic Memory in the Performance of The Fire of Troy (L’Incendio di Troia, 1566)</i>	31
FRANCESCO DAL’OLIO – <i>Horestes “and a Tragedie of the kinge of Scottes”: Theatre and Politics at Elizabeth’s Court</i>	45
GIOVANNA CASALI – <i>Aristotle’s Presence in Opera Between Theory and Practice. A Case Study: Girolamo Frigimelica Roberti’s Ercole in cielo</i>	75
CHRISTOPHER LEO JOTISCHKY – <i>Roman Theatre in Greek, Greek Theatre in Italian: Dramatic Performance as a Vehicle of Latin-Greek Contact in the Early Modern Ionian Islands</i>	97
RAF VAN ROOY – <i>A Funeral and a Marriage at the Moretuses (1640s): Ceremonial Greek in the Early Modern Low Countries</i>	113
FRANCESCA BORTOLETTI AND EUGENIO REFINI – <i>Dionysus and the Youth Between Academia and the Polis: Rethinking the Intersections of Scholarship, Performance-Based Research, and Pedagogy</i>	133
GIOVANNA DI MARTINO – <i>Practice Research, Performance Pedagogy and Early Modern Aristophanes: Building (on) the Script(s). With an Appendix by MARCO MARTINELLI – Building the Chorus: Notes from the Director</i>	167

### Miscellany

DAVID LUCKING – <i>Famous Last Words: the Rhetoric of Death and Dying in Shakespeare</i>	215
RAFFAELLA VICCEI – <i>Tragic Actress and Human Voice. Maria Callas in Ifigenia in Aulide Directed by Luchino Visconti</i>	237
DAVID SCHALKWYK – <i>Bakhtin vs Shakespeare?</i>	253

## Special Section

- GHERARDO UGOLINI – *Excellent Suicides. Ajax and Phaedra at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse* 277
- PETER ECKERSALL – Monica Cristini, *La Mama Experimental Theatre – A Lasting Bridge Between Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2023. ISBN 9781003336235, pp. 210 291
- SOTERA FORNARO – *The Fire Within: Cenere by Stefano Fortin and Giorgina Pi (Biennale Teatro 2024)* 299

SOTERA FORNARO\*

## The Fire Within: *Cenere* by Stefano Fortin, and Giorgina Pi (Biennale Teatro 2024)<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

Stefano Fortin's *Cenere*, directed by Giorgina Pi and staged at the 2024 Biennale Teatro, narrates an inconsolable solitude and an author who questions the meaning of his own words. The word *cenere* (ash), which gives the text its title, has an evocative and metaphorical value, for which we need to reference the documentary cinema of Werner Herzog. The article also highlights the thematic connections with Florian Zeller's *The Son*, a play portraying the distress of a generation that accuses their fathers of stealing their future and hope.

KEYWORDS: Stefano Fortin; Giorgina Pi; Biennale Teatro 2024; volcano; Werner Herzog

### 1.

In 1977, Werner Herzog directed a documentary about La Soufrière volcano in Guadeloupe, which was expected to erupt imminently. Defying the danger, Herzog and his crew filmed what was happening in the town below the volcano, from which residents had been hastily evacuated to avoid a disaster similar to the one that, at the beginning of the century, had destroyed a nearby city. The footage shows the streets of a deserted and dead town, even though life inside the houses seems reluctant to give up and still emanates from functioning objects: fridges and air conditioners left running, phones ringing, faucets leaking. Abandoned pets wander the streets, slowly starving to death. Wild animals, like boars and deer, lazily take over the human environment. The images document the agony for and the anticipation of catastrophe, narrated by a voice devoid of emotion – stark, epic. The documentary's emotional atmosphere emanates from the looming shadow of the volcano, hidden and revealed by the erratic movement of immense clouds of ash. Vapours rising

<sup>1</sup> *Cenere*, directed by Giorgina Pi. Script: Stefano Fortin. A Bluemotion project starring: Valentino Mannias, Sylvia De Fanti, Giampiero Judica, Francesco La Mantia, Alessandro Riceci, Giulia Weber, Valerio Vigliar, and Cristiano De Fabritiis. Music: Valerio Vigliar. Sound project: Collettivo Angelo Mai. Lights: Andrea Gallo. Production: La Biennale di Venezia and Bluemotion in collaboration with Angelo Mai. A special thanks to the Press Office of the Biennale for providing the unpublished script.

\* University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli" – maria.fornaro@unicampania.it

from the ground and the shifting, glowing earth around the crater create an unstable, ever-changing landscape. Then, a rain of ash begins to fall – a thick, dense, fine ash that envelops trees, meadows, flowers, and cut wood, seeps through windows, weighs down birds' wings, and settles on objects, turning them into fossils, as if they belonged to an ancient time. Miraculously, the eruption did not occur, but the allure of volcanoes, a metaphor for inescapable death and the immense power of nature compared to human frailty, permeates Herzog's later works, from *Into the Inferno* (2016) to *The Fire Within: A Requiem for Katia and Maurice Krafft* (2022; see Dottorini 2023). The footage in this latter documentary was all shot over decades by the couple of volcanologists who died beneath Mount Unzen in Japan while filming its eruption. The narrator's voice-over commentary becomes especially sparse here. It's not a biographical recollection of the two protagonists – far from it. Through the Kraffts' documentaries, Herzog demonstrates the power of images and their ability to express, much more than words, that 'fire' which consumes those who love the pursuit of knowledge and wish to leave a trace, even at the cost of their own lives. *The Fire Within* thus becomes a journey into the imagination of the two volcanologists, unfolding as a process of waiting. The film narrates the moment of suspension before the catastrophe, with full awareness of the danger. Yet, the catastrophe arrives unexpectedly and suddenly: when the mountain explodes, the torrents of pyroclastic material are so vast and fast that escape is impossible. This was the fate of the Kraffts during their final expedition. The extraordinary footage, revisited by Herzog, is all metaphorical: even scenes from the couple's youth signify the anticipation of an inevitable end.

The dark clouds covering the sun, the ash rain enveloping everything, the steam rising from the ground, the glowing red lava flows from the crater – these are symbols and metaphors of a waiting that concerns us all: the wait for death. The images convey the ambivalent emotions of this waiting, as well as the awe inspired by the images themselves. In this way, the power of cinema is celebrated, and the wonder generated by film is staged. Inseparable from the images, the music also generates wonder. This raises the question: is it possible for words to have the same emotional power? Do the things we describe with words contain the same emotional plurality as images?

## 2.

The play I am concerned with here helps us answer this question. Its title, *Cenere*, is thematically linked to Herzog's films about volcanoes. The word *cenere* (ash) signifies both a material and a metaphor derived from the quality of the material itself. To say *ash* means to speak of death, dissolution,

the decomposition of solid bodies, and pulverisation. Ashes, par excellence, have always been those of the dead, from ancient Greek tragedy onward. The word *cenere* thus evokes the emotional atmosphere of awaiting the end, but also – like the clouds unleashed by a volcano – an obstruction to vision and a shroud capable of paralysing life, of stopping time. One immediately thinks of the ash that buried and simultaneously immortalised the cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Ash is also a fertiliser, as seen in the garden of lush, purple roses nourished by the ashes from the Auschwitz chimneys in Jonathan Glazer’s film *The Zone of Interest* (2023).

Ash also has the power to freeze a moment in time, even the most intense expression of emotions, like the embrace of terrified lovers caught in a devastating fire, who died clinging to each other, as depicted in Christian Petzold’s latest film *Red Sky* (*Roter Himmel*, 2023). From the ashes, the Phoenix is reborn in myth, and life itself emerges from ash, in a well-known biblical metaphor. Ash is what remains of a burning fire, and even before cooling down, it too can burn. The title of Stefano Fortin’s play, a text awarded at the 2023 Biennale Teatro for the under-35 category and staged as a national premiere at the 2024 Biennale Teatro under the direction of Giorgina Pi, is both metaphorical and highly evocative. The ash thus becomes a metaphor for the curtain behind which the action unfolds and from behind which the narrator himself speaks – a metaphor reminiscent of a famous line by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in his compact treatise *On Epic and Dramatic Poetry* (1787), written in collaboration with Friedrich Schiller. Goethe writes that it would be better if the rhapsodist, like a “superior being”, “read behind a curtain” in order to achieve pure objectivity (1988, 251).<sup>1</sup>

### 3.

*Cenere* unfolds as a prologue followed by three separate scenes. The prologue consists of stage directions that describe the gradual and unceasing fall of ash upon the stage.<sup>2</sup> This ash will continue to fall steadily throughout the play, symbolising an unstoppable process of accumulation, like the passage of time or the inescapable layering of memories and losses.

<sup>1</sup> “Der Rhapsode sollte also in höheres Wesen in seinem Gedicht nicht selbst erscheinen, er läse hinter einem Vorhange am allerbesten, so daß man von aller Persönlichkeit abstrahierte und nur die Stimme der Musen im allgemeinen zu hören glaubte”.

<sup>2</sup> “The prologue consists of stage directions describing the slow and continuous fall of ash onto the stage. Initially untouched and primordial, it will continue to fall uninterrupted for the entire duration of the play, as part of an irreversible process of accumulation” (*Niger et Albus* 2024, 137).

It is an ever-present force, both haunting and unavoidable, marking the space and filling it with a physical representation of the irreversible.

The three scenes then present distinct moments of human interaction and confrontation with loss. In the first scene, *No*, a son is called to breakfast by his parents – a seemingly simple, everyday gesture that evokes the intimacy and fragile normalcy of family bonds. The boy's rejection signifies a total rejection of the world represented by his parents, which, however, is a consequence of feeling excluded from their lives. The family reveals itself not as an ordered cosmos of affections but rather as a nucleus ready to explode, held together more by hate than by love. The parents are no longer able to find the words to communicate with their son, whom they had hoped would remain a child forever. The son, on the other hand, has not had the time to learn his parents' language or to take possession of their memories.

The situation hinted at in this text recalls some of what we consider the most intense works in contemporary theatre: Florian Zeller's trilogy *The Father – The Mother – The Son*.<sup>3</sup> Especially this last play, from which a film was made in 2022 directed by Zeller himself, has notable thematic connections with Fortin's text. *The Son*, in fact, tells of an adolescent's inability to communicate his maladjustment to his parents and of the parents' inability to understand the depth of their son's distress and suffering. In Fortin's text, the boy does not pursue any path of treatment. In Zeller's *The Son*, however, there is an attempt at treatment, which is interrupted by the parents, despite the doctors' warnings about the danger of the apparent calm in a mentally ill person who has attempted suicide. But the parents assume that their love will be enough to save him, unable to accept that their love is one of the causes of their son's existential pain, and thus, in a certain sense, they condemn him to die by suicide using a symbolic object – the father's gun. This object is therefore not emotionally neutral, just as in Greek tragedy it is not indifferent that Ajax kills himself by falling on the sword gifted to him by his enemy Hector.

The second scene, *Here*, shifts to the tragic encounter where a police officer must deliver the devastating news of a son's death to his parents, confronting them with an absence that is absolute and shattering. The third scene, *Everything*, is a monologue by a victim who reflects on their identity and recounts what has happened to them, laying bare the personal depths of trauma and existence altered by loss.

<sup>3</sup> Brought to the stage very effectively, from 2022 to the present, under the direction of Piero Maccarinelli, with Galatea Ranzi and Cesare Bocci as the lead actors. It's worth noting that the first play of the trilogy, *The Father*, was later adapted into a film directed by Zeller himself, with Anthony Hopkins winning the Oscar for Best Actor in 2020.



Beyond these characters, the author's voice also manifests as an active presence on stage, a voice that observes, comments, and occasionally intervenes through the "author's notes". These notes, which vary from one production to another, create a dialogue between the staged events and the world outside, grounding the play's themes in the broader, ever-shifting reality around us. Thus, the structure of the text seems almost to represent a middle ground between a series and a documentary, oscillating between fiction and testimony.

#### 4.

The sequence of scenes creates a strong narrative tension: the audience "feels" that something is about to happen, and this something could be external, like a sudden and disastrous eruption, or internal, affecting both the characters and the author. The ash that continues to fall relentlessly is the tangible sign of a catastrophe, experienced with detachment and resignation. In the end, the boy takes his own life, but this is perhaps the only tragic outcome that can be sensed from the very beginning. Yet, something unexpected remains, something literally unspoken, which saturates the atmosphere and against which there can be no rebellion. This bleak atmosphere is amplified by the character of the author, who is also the character of the victim. Throughout, this figure appears to burn his own words in a futile, painful ritual, suggesting a struggle to express, purge, or perhaps destroy memories and emotions too heavy to bear. The ash falling upon this ritual can be likened to distant, almost inaudible sounds that gradually intensify. Another meaning of the "ash" emerges: it is that of the work repudiated and burned by its own author, like the *Virgil* of Hermann Broch. Indeed, a novel that Fortin might have drawn inspiration from, especially for the text's structure in "scenes" or "panels", is *The Death of Virgil*. The poet or writer assumes the role of demiurge, yet a demiurge without any power except through words, which, however, cannot alter reality nor direct it in any way other than that chosen by human beings.

#### 5.

If the author metaphorically sets fire to their own work, feeling it inadequate and incapable of grappling with pain, what remains instead is the final letter of a young man who took his own life, Michele, published in 2017 in a newspaper at the request of his parents:

. . . I tried to be a good person, made many mistakes, tried many things, sought to give myself meaning and purpose using my own resources, tried to make an art of my suffering. But the questions never end, and I'm tired of hearing them. And I'm tired of asking them, tired of meeting everyone's expectations without ever seeing mine fulfilled, tired of putting on a brave face, of pretending interest, of deluding myself, of being mocked, of being cast aside. From this reality, you can expect nothing. . . . This is absolutely not the world I was supposed to inherit, and no one can force me to continue being part of it . . .

These words are eerily similar to those spoken by Nicolas, the character of the son, in Florian Zeller's previously mentioned play: "It's just... It's just that I'm not made for living. I can't manage it. And yet I try, every day, with all my strength, but I just can't. I'm constantly suffering. And I'm tired. I'm tired of suffering" (Zeller 2019, 195).

In the letter, Michele articulates the relentless disillusionment and sense of betrayal that permeates his generation, a sentiment that resonates deeply within *Cenere*, where ash and fire metaphorically express the same internal struggle. The ash represents not only destruction but also the residue of unfulfilled dreams and expectations, of a life that felt robbed of joy and stability. It is as if Michele's words, imbued with both resignation and accusation, are embodied in the ceaseless fall of ash on the stage – an ever-present reminder of loss, of a world that has betrayed its promise, and of a generation left to reckon with what remains.

This cycle of introspection and self-destruction made visible through the recurring motifs of fire and ash, becomes not just an image of despair but a meditation on the weight of memory, the persistence of trauma, and the fragments of ourselves that remain in the aftermath of loss. The relentless fall of ash represents the layers of unshakable memories that cling to the present, forming a dense sediment of past and present struggles. In this space, the author and protagonist appear trapped in a liminal realm between destruction and the impossible task of coming to terms with their inner turmoil. It is a portrayal of existential endurance, one in which the act of writing, remembering, and speaking becomes an act of survival amid the ashes of a fragmented self. The only thing one might perhaps reproach Stefano Fortin for is dwelling too much on the "author's notes", meaning the reflections of the author's voice and the connections between the narrative and the present moment of the staging. This kind of "self-confession" sometimes distracts the audience and ultimately makes the metaphorical and universal impact of what is staged – including the curtain of ash – less powerful.

To sum up, three main themes resonate in the three 'scenes' that structure the play. The first is silence, born from incommunicability, which tightens an anguished knot around a family unable to name their pains, whether

physical or psychological. The second is the anticipation of something terrible and sorrowful, something sensed but, until the last moment, hoped to be avoidable. The third is time, which is only a feeling. Conventionally, we believe that the young have time, but then something happens that can overturn this assumption, and time ends or is made to end, because the future equates to hope, and those who have lost hope – or never had it – lose any sense of what could be.

Time is like a volcano, showing signs that it may soon split the mountain, its eruption awaited with the knowledge that if one gets too close to witness the force and spectacle of molten lava, there won't be time to escape. Time is like ash that makes the sky impassable, marking distances and rendering them unbridgeable.

## 6.

Let us return to the thematic connection between Fortin's *Cenere* and Werner Herzog's films, which I mentioned earlier. In its own way, *Cenere* also documents an eruption from afar: the 2010 eruption of an Icelandic volcano that grounded air traffic across half of Europe – not due to its magma, but to the vast amount of ash it produced, which spread indiscriminately over much of the continent, as well remembered by those who experienced it. That natural, uncontrollable, distant, and seemingly random wind becomes decisive in the lives of the play's characters. That eruption metaphorically "pulverises" the bond between the son and his parents, and between the son and a life he refuses. The ash from the volcano spreads over everything, appearing to suffocate every breath of life. Thus, the entire text is permeated by a sense of "inconsolable solitude" (*Niger and Albus* 2024, 135).

In the play, ash represents the obstacle to expressing emotions, the barrier between bodies, and the distance imposed. But it is also what fertilises, within the closed core of what we call the 'heart', another explosion – almost like a *mise en abîme* of the volcano's eruption within the body of a single individual. We mean the explosion of anger and unhappiness. The character of the author is simultaneously the victim and "sets fire to his own words. The ashes that fall on this desperate ritual are like distant sounds: gradually, as in the slow pan of a camera, they turn into the deafening live noise and feedback of a rehearsal room, and a close-up on the protagonist's face" (137).

On one side, there is the invisible, erupting volcano, which we must imagine; on the other, on stage, are the devastating inner eruptions of the characters, which we also have to imagine – in the hinted words, the silences, and the interrupted gestures. It seems that the narrator/author is also observing from afar, recounting the characters, himself, and other

events from history – the grand European history of the past forty years – events that settle like ash on memory, fossilizing recollection.

Words, therefore, are born from words, in a movement of tension and release with respect to the audience. They disintegrate and recompose themselves like the Lucretian atoms evoked in the motto affixed to the script, questioning their own existence. They are both raw and documentary, yet simultaneously become metaphors for what is happening on stage: for theatre, representation, vision, listening, and the projection of emotions. This is a *theatre of words*, where the text transforms into imagery through skilful direction and sound design, as well as the abilities of the entire cast – especially the outstanding Valentino Mannias, who skilfully splits himself to give voice to both the author and the youngest character, embodying many of our own anxieties along with them.

It is to be hoped that, after Venice, this artistic project will circulate through Italian theatres, carrying with it a message steeped in an ethics of memory and respect for suffering – light yet potentially as lethal as the ash from a volcanic eruption.

## Works Cited

- Dottorini, Daniele. 2023. “La materia incandescente del cinema. *The Fire Within: A Requiem for Katia and Maurice Krafft* di Werner Herzog”. *Fata Morgana web*: <https://www.fatamorganaweb.it/the-fire-within-a-requiem-for-katia-and-maurice-krafft-werner-herzog/> (accessed 25 November 2024)
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. 1988. “Über epische und dramatische Dichtung, Hamburger Ausgabe”. In *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur. Maximen und Reflexionen*, edited by Erich Trunz, 249-51. München: Beck.
- Niger et Albus*. 2024. *Biennale Teatro Venezia, 15-30.6.2024, Catalogo*, 134-39. Venezia: La Biennale.
- Zeller, Florian. 2019. *Le Père - La Mère - Le Fils*. Paris: Gallimard.