

## **Islands, archipelagos, bridges.**

Multi- and intercultural theatre in Italy and the concept of 'cultural identity'.

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*New relationships, not new aesthetics or contents, invade the habitat identified with the theatre, occupying the suburbs and go to previously unthinkable places and goals. It is not another 'theatre' that was born. Other situations begin to be called 'theatre'. [...] The personal need becomes action, crosses boundaries and goes into history.*  
*Eugenio Barba, 1996*

## **Cultural identity as anchorage point.**

My research on the theatre company AlmaTeatro focused on verifying objectives and actions of a reality which considers its work as a sociocultural (and indirectly also political) intervention on the multi-and intercultural society it emerges from. Hence, the first issues that I addressed in its investigation was the analysis of the relationship between theatre, culture and society, and the issue of 'intercultural theatre' – an expression with which this company defines itself (though with a sense of limitation, nowadays; see Balma Tivola 2008) and its activities. My work began in 1997, and was held until 2003, so covering period of seven years. Still today, although no longer with a full-time involvement, I follow its activities, internal relations, productions: in fact, this group is one of the most enduring reality of multi-and intercultural theatre in Italy, with more than thirty women coming from about fifteen different countries of the world who alternated in their participation to it.

When I started investigating the phenomenon, there were not ethnographic researches on the topic of 'intercultural theatre' in Italy yet. However, there were already many theatre realities, experiences and projects all over the country, that were born with the intent to understand the reality of migrations – in conjunction with the first significant and 'visible' arrival of immigrants in the late 80ies – and the future multi-and intercultural society the country was going to become.

Getting interested in the issue, I quickly realised that such a research would open up the investigation of different topics at the same time – from the analysis of immigration to Italy characteristics to its institutional management, from the multi- and intercultural policies related to the management of cultural identity and diversity to media communication about it, from the peculiarities of theatre investigation in terms of methodologies to the relationship this strategy of human expression maintains with the community and the society its members belong to, to the mapping and verifying the practices that can be gathered under the label of 'intercultural theatre' to the deepening of the ethnographic fieldwork specifically on one of it as case-study –

so that such a work would have many potential lines of flight. Nevertheless, there was one issue that represented a potential anchorage point: that of 'cultural identity'.

"Obsession of our time" (see Remotti 2011), cultural identity concept is held dear by us anthropologists as it allows us to decline the issue of 'culture' in its actual embodiment in human beings. Moreover, if we consider the concept in relation to individual experiential dimension, it brings the notion of culture back to personal self-determination, and hence explains the ways cultures change in time and space. In these terms it is conceived by Ulf Hannerz when he refers to one's personal exposition to specific 'portions of culture' resulting from the flowing of the cultural flux through those different frames in which culture is actualised. Here, cultural identity hence becomes a 'perspective' (Hannerz 1998:84), and the ensemble of such a perspectives large number (i.e. 'the culture') becomes a 'network of perspectives' (Hannerz 1998: 89) – a concept that perfectly gives the idea of the cultural production and distribution complexity in nowadays societies, but that also shows how the system can change according to its internal and external components (including those deliberately activated by social actors, in individual or collective form, to promote social change).

Arjun Appadurai reaches similar conclusions. Among the different panoramas of contemporaneity, today's cultural scene seems to be mainly characterised by the encounter of two imaginaries: that of people in movement and that of the representations generated by the dissemination of images and mass-media information in the world. The two dimensions are closely related, affect each other and converge together in the work of imagination but we are not talking of collective imagination: the actual crossroads of these panoramas lies, in fact, in the individual (see Appadurai 2001:52-53), who creates, crosses, and lives them.

Furthermore, the same concept was, and is, a strong reference point of the discourse promoted by much of multi- and intercultural theatre in Italy, and particularly by AlmaTeatro, and the critical reflection here developed has much in common with late anthropological theories on the matter. This must not represent a surprise, however, as the praxis of multi- and intercultural theatre – especially the one that develops between late '80ies and beginning of the 90ies in Italy – is mostly the one of community/social theatre, a context in which plays are "scene-centric" (Dalla Palma 2001), i.e. they proceed from performer's life and his relationships with the other members of the group as developed in the theatre laboratory. This way, the workshop itself becomes a sort of 'ethnographic fieldwork' in which the performers undergo shocks and discoveries in a way that is very similar to what ethnographers experience in their work<sup>1</sup>.

Finally, taking into account the issue of cultural identity can be a useful key to interpret those various cases that go by the label of multi- and intercultural theatre – that actually numbers any sort of realities in which can be glimpsed any kind of difference (between the performers, between these and the audience etc.). In particular, drawing upon the methodological proposal developed by Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins (2000) my proposal is to push the concept forward to even a more detailed breakdown into different levels in order to proceed to a more effective analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> In regards to the relationships between ethnographic and artistic practices much has been written recently, from articles underling mutual 'wannabe' attitudes (Foster 1996) to essays proposing productive encounters between the two fields (see for example Schneider & Wright 2006 and 2010).

This said, before getting into the matter and into the actual case-study, an introduction to media discourse and cultural policies in Italy about cultural identity and cultural diversity is needed.

### **Cultural identity and cultural diversity in the media and in cultural policy in Italy.**

The second dimension of the contemporary cultural scene as pointed out by Appadurai (2001) – that of media flows – is a consequence of technological growth through which communications which previously forced to face-to-face relationships now occurs without the need to go through a physical interaction. Receiving information is, therefore, definitely untied from the appropriation by direct experience – i.e. experienced first-hand – which characterised until recently individual's knowledge acquiring.

In Italy the issues of cultural identity and cultural diversity begin to be treated by the media in conjunction with the first meaningful immigrations in the country – something that involves the demand for information by the citizenship and that goes also with a reflection on future Italian multi- and intercultural society (see Marletti 1991; Belluati 1995; Belluati, Grossi and Viglongo 1995; Balma Tivola 2001). However, we are here witness of, in general, a cacophony generated by two contrasting perspectives: the first one is that of a stereotypical representation that insists on promotion of alarmism about the number of immigrants, about the illegal incoming, about the links between immigrants and crime. This inability to develop an articulated and coherent overview reflects the equal attitude on the part of the institutions over the last 30 years to look at the situation in a way dictated by the (actual or alleged) dimension of the 'emergency', so that the entire history of both discourses – that of the media and that of the socio-political activity – can be interpreted as "a sequence of collective alarm, exceptional operations and long oblivions" (Altin 2004:16).

The second perspective is that of the deepening of issues such as ethnic conflicts, debt of southern countries of the world, global economy, world's media interconnection, condition of the refugees, etc. – developed by television programs such as documentary services, dossier, talk shows and even ad hoc programs. One might be glad of this different media discourse about the phenomenon, however – not even needing a further look – this falls again under the re-proposition of stereotypes and prejudices: titles such as *Non solo nero* ("Not only black", 1988-1994) or *Un mondo a colori* ("A coloured world", 1998-2009) followed by comments inviting the audience to "take an exotic journey in our coloured towns" already chart the course of the following narrative. More recently, a dedicated satellite channel titled *Babel* (2010-today) and a new program within the state television titled *CRASH – Contatto, Impatto, Convivenza* ("Crash – Contact, Impact, Coexistence", 2013-today) leave no doubts about the perspective assumed to speak about the matter.

On the other side, the one of cultural policies on the matter, the situation seems even more confused and lacking of perspective: if press, radio, and television information is in Italy under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior (which is directly linked to the Government), the development of social policies concerning migrant presence are responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, and cultural policies relating to identity, diversity and multicultural coexistence are under the more general scope of

cultural policies, therefore managed in part by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage, Cultural Activities and Tourism, and in part – the one regarding the education – by the Ministry for Education, University and Research. However ERICArts report (see Council of Europe/ERICArts 2013) keeps on highlighting that immigrants in Italy continue to be perceived as a 'social problem' local authorities should be in charge of, and that those who are in charge of fostering multi- and intercultural society through specific actions (i.e. the Ministry for Cultural Heritage, Cultural Activities and Tourism) have rarely proposed any cultural policies aimed at this scope.

In fact, it is local institutions that in Italy have always – even with very little resources and passed off as social or interdisciplinary activities – promoted initiatives and experiments, such as the creation of many intercultural centres throughout the country, to promote dialogue and mutual understanding between different cultures, not to mention the crucial role in encouraging the developing of an intercultural society played by informal and/or non-governmental associations (such as religious, social or cultural ones). Performing activities including migrant people undergo this level of expression and institutional support – that of 'forms of life' (i.e. face-to-face interactions) frame in Hannerz's terms (1998).

### **Framework #1. Multi- and intercultural theatre in relation with (contemporary) society.**

Recent reflections on the relationship between cultural (and theatre) activities and contemporary society (see Schechner 1985 and 1999; Marranca & Dasgupta 1991; Fotheringham 1992; Savarese 1992 and 1997; Barucha 1993; Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli 1993; Pavis 1996; Gilbert 1996 and 2007; Ortolani 1998; Dalla Palma 2000 and 2001; Bloomfield 2003; Banham 2004; Banham Martin, Errol Hill e George Woodyard 2005; Balma-Tivola 2008) move all from the theories developed in the 70ies by Victor Turner, who argues that theatrical activity is not only a meta-comment of the society (i.e. a text through which one can interpret a culture, a society, a community, as stated by Clifford Geertz, 1988), but also an active agent of reflection – envisaging potential directions of change and appeasement when a society experiences a crisis (see Turner 1986).

Turner begins his reflection by defining the status of the 'symbols' – signs pointing to a certain meaning (or to different meanings at the same time) – which are fundamental elements of the social action. Symbols are described as 'dynamic socio-cultural systems', characterised by the variability; the variability that characterises them is the same that characterises individuals who refer to them not only to give order to the universe, but also in creative ways (see Turner 1986:53). However, the ways, places and times in which the reconfirmation and/or reprocessing of the meanings of the symbols take place vary depending on the type of society.

In post-industrial society some individuals are maintained by the rest of the society for conducting activities that challenge those values and symbols in which the community recognises itself: artists, writers, scientists, historians and all those who reflect critically on it – acting individually or collectively in their interpretation of the symbols, discuss them by recalling and analysing the conditions they developed – and propose alternatives in their meanings, become potential bearers of change and improvement of living conditions of the whole social community are, therefore, especially needed in relation to crisis situations and potential conflict that

would break apart the society. Facing these emergencies, artistic and cultural activities are indeed "a hall of magic mirrors" (Turner 1986:186) where issues are processed, evaluated, diagnosed in typical works of each genre. In particular, according to Turner, it's theatre and performance that would offer the best solution to the conflict. In fact, in the performance (from the French 'parfournir': 'to complete') the experience would be brought to light in its variables that are normally inaccessible to observation and everyday consciousness, and hence carried out and publically shared in the context of the performance (see Turner 1986:37).

If this is Turner's ideal *modus operandi* of the theatre in the post-industrial society, what we actually verify nowadays seems rather to represent its absolute negation: the professionalisation of roles, the separation between actors and spectators, the emergence of 'art fortresses' (see Schechner 1984) carry on poetics that align to the policies of the administration of the state aiming to maintain the status quo. In contrast to this trend that perverts the ultimate sense of the theatre, thoughts about returning the artistic experience lived by the individual and about the social function of cultural and artistic activities are frequent, and are manifested in experiments and actions by various groups and artistic movements from time to time referred to as 'marginal', 'avant-gardist', 'of research', etc. (see Turner 1986; Schechner 1984). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the theatrical activity interested in working on everyday social reality, from which it originates, is frequently expressed in the dimension and in the practice of theatre laboratory, a space and a time in which the performer "is not limited to interpreting a part or be living word of another word, but becomes the figure that draws on his experience and knowledge the images to tell witnesses able to deal in-depth with them"(Dalla Palma 2000:16).

Contemporary complex societies see also the emerging 'on the stage' of realities and experiences formed by individuals with different cultural or national origin. This phenomenon is relatively recent, and is accompanied by an increase in the number and frequency of movement of individuals in the world (see Breidenbach and Zukrigl 2000) – although there are also contexts in which the multicultural dimension in the composition of these companies is due, for example, to historical minorities and indigenous representatives, as in the Australian case (see. Gilbert 1998).

The expression 'intercultural theatre', which labels them, remains obscure and misleading if it is conceived as a potential genre: in fact, it may refer from time to time to different backgrounds of actors, directors, playwrights, public; to differences in performing traditions in human cultures, methods and production processes, in themes and contents developed in the shows; to reports and interventions in relation to national culture in which the activity takes place, etc. By considering a few examples it is quite clear that each experience has developed ideas, modes of action, research interests profoundly peculiar. Anthropology, on its side, has not given a single definition yet either. The only attempt – actually convincing and useful – to provide parameters through which classify the different experiences in potential 'ideal types' is represented by the model developed by Gilbert and Lo (2002).

Nevertheless it is possible to identify at least two features. The first is the presence, in all these practices, of the dimension of the 'encounter' and that of the 'negotiation' between different cultural sensitivity over time – e.g.

when a pre-existing dramaturgy (which could be a 'classic' text of history of theatre) is reworked to fit the needs of this – or in space – when different formal elements or contents are gathered from different cultures. The negotiation then reveals the second occurrence: the fact that meeting and discussion of forms and meanings are located specifically in a particular time and in a particular historical, political, and social context – so that they always maintain a strong relationship with the territory in which they take place, and are contextual to the specific multiculturalism in which they are born and developed from.

## **Framework #2: Holledge and Tompkins methodological proposal to analyse multi- and intercultural theatre experiences.**

Previous two dimensions concern three orders of reality that Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins (see Holledge and Tompkins 2000) identify as 'bodies': the body of the performer (individual, cultural and then theatrical), the body of the character (individual, cultural and then theatrical) and the body of the audience (collective). Premise to this scheme is a conception of the 'body' as "a threshold, a field of intersection of material and symbolic forces [...] one's primary location in the world, one's primary situation in the reality" (Braidotti 1994:219).

The body of the performer is the body with real materialism, set in a specific historical moment and geographic space. It is inscribed in both elements of biological order, and expressive cultural codes: within the firsts fall all those characters that, visually recognisable, concern the somatic dimension of the human being (skin colour, eye shape, face/mouth/nose shape, etc.) that already carry potential meanings (an alleged geographical origin, a presumed age, etc.). Around the somatic dimension there are also structures of meaning (and power) in which the use of body and voice is articulated (posture, movement, verbal and non-verbal communication modes, etc.) according to the different human cultures (see Mauss 1991)<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, different cultures associate specific body managements with social behaviours, therefore the body also carries (through more or less visible tracks) what it lived, and the experiences it is/was subjected: "legal precepts, social coercion, sexual and economic exchanges" (Holledge e Tompkins 2000:111).

The body of the character, instead, refers to the performing local traditions related to a character, and finds its origin in specific coding of the voice and the body used to dominate pre-existing "body techniques" (Mauss 1991) of the body of the performer. Through such codifications acting that stems can range from forms of realism to highly symbolic forms. Nevertheless, it is actually impossible to separate the body of the performer from the body of the character in the performative event, although through the techniques and theatrical practices adopted the first one is 'dominated' to shaping processes, emotions and energy.

Finally, the body of the audience is a collective subject consisting of numerous individualities, but that often 'acts' as a single: the emotional reactions of the spectators are expressed in sounds and variously articulated

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<sup>2</sup>On the other hand it is necessary to note that Eugenio Barba theatre anthropology (1993, 1996) formulates the hypothesis that at a level that precedes the cultural conditioning (inculturation) humanity share already a corpus of innate common skills related to posture and pre-expressive movements, which would return as the basis of scenic behaviour in all human cultures.

'energies' ranging to be perceived by the performer as a whole. In the process of setting up the show actors, playwrights and directors take into account the potential effects on the public of their choices: in this way they articulate the job by modulating it in order to let the viewer indulge in the pleasure of recognition, or with the aim of disseminating an alienating effect, etc. (see Holledge e Tompkins 2000:112).

By the relationships among the three bodies emerge features specific of three ideal genres: 'taxonomic', 'hybrid' and 'nomadic'. The taxonomic genre refers to the encounter between the performer's body and the character's body that identifies the two and highlights the boundaries between cultures that become in this way fully recognisable by the public. If this perspective can allow the deepening of a cultural context, there's a high risk of cultural reifications.

The hybrid genre is the one in which the encounter between bodies of performers and bodies of characters rises contradictions both in the production and in the receipt of performance: "performing bodies from different backgrounds are juxtaposed, and qualities of two or more cultures mix and merge as cultural signifiers jump from one body to another" (Holledge and Tompkins 2000: 113). This hybridisation, which recognises equal dignity to the cultures in the scene, is in turn subject to the risks connected to post-colonial or diasporic encounters – that means potential essentialist positions or otherwise assimilating. Therefore, to ensure that its impact is useful and effective, both parties involved should generate an almost chemical energy in their recombination: "is not the simple fusion of differences but rather a volatile interaction characterised by conflict between and within the constitutive cultures as a colonised society" (Gilbert and Lo 1997:7).

Finally, the nomadic genre is the result of the physical communication between performer and audience – communication discussing the boundaries of identity and bringing out a third way of relationship that takes place in the incessant flow between bodies beyond the visible. In explaining the type of relationship that develops between body of the public and body of the performer/character in the context of the nomadic theatre, Holledge and Tompkins propose to treat the theatre as a "desiring machine" – borrowing this concept by Deleuze and Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari (1975) describe the process of desire as a connection that makes the components of two different bodies as two parts of the same body. Theatre, in this sense, would act in such a way that the fixed borders of the bodies become indeterminate and what one experiences is the incessant flow – by the public and vice versa – of feelings, words and information through "invisible but palpable, energies and intensities" (Holledge and Tompkins 2000: 135).

Multi- and intercultural theatre in Italy presents a huge variety of solutions both in terms of the relationships between the three bodies as proposed by Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins: since the late 80ies, multicultural composition companies working on multi- and intercultural issues emerge (Teatro delle Albe, Koron Tlé, Mascherenere, CTL, Teatro di Nascosto, AlmaTeatro, etc.) as well cases of already existing companies that include migrant performers and develop works on the matter (Teatro Clandestino, Teatri di Vite, Teatro Kismet Opera, Proskenion, Rom Stalker, etc.), as well as a number of short-time specific projects – no matter the composition of the reality on stage – of 'community/social theatre workshops' about cultural identity and diversity issues.

Almateatro, the case-study here proposed, was born as this last to develop next as a real multicultural and intercultural company. Here I will take into consideration the ways it works verifying the relationships between the first two bodies – the one of the performer and the one of the character – and will leave apart the one of the audience, only taking it into account when discussing the intentions of the performances and the presumed audience expectations AlmaTeatro builds upon its performances.

### **The beginning of AlmaTeatro as a theatre workshop.**

AlmaTeatro is a multi- and intercultural theatre company composed by migrants and native women<sup>3</sup> born in Turin (Italy), at the Intercultural Centre for Women Alma Mater. The Intercultural Centre Alma Mater originates in the encounter in 1990 of a group of women from the House of Women (Italian feminist centre) and a group of migrants women. With the joint efforts of the two groups and with the support of municipality of the town and regional commission for equal opportunities, the Alma Mater Centre (named after the former school building that hosts it) will open in December 1993 and be managed by a new intercultural association specially formed named AlmaTerra. The Alma Mater is configured as a practical and symbolic place of intermediation between women from different backgrounds, and between them and the city. At the same time place of services and support for migrant women, it is designed as well as an informal space that promotes socialization and a context where job opportunities are created.

The way in which the Centre is conceived varies in turn depending on who is the observer: an immediate distinction is given by the identification of a "we/you" on the axis of cultural origin, so from time to time the "we" categorises native women, migrant women and/or cultural groups within the latter ("we black women", "we Muslim women", etc.). A second distinction is given by the belonging to specific projects ("we cultural mediators"). A third possible feeling of belonging/exclusion distinguishes between people – regardless of cultural origin – who participate actively in the life of this place compared to those who remain on the sidelines. Finally, a fourth distinction is determined on the basis of generations, so that the young ones – no matter if native or migrant – gather on common issues that do not share with the older ones.

A prominent place within the Centre is occupied by what some of the participants perceive as "the voice outside of Alma Mater"<sup>4</sup>: the AlmaTeatro. AlmaTeatro was born as well in the fall of 1993 as 'expressive workshop' – led by two Italian directors – for migrant women (not professionals of theatre practice) at the Intercultural Centre for Women Alma Mater in Turin. Rosanna Rabezzana, theatre director, had given a seminar on non-verbal communication to Italian and foreign women in the early days of the opening of the Centre and, after this first experience, will propose with Gabriella Bordin a continuative theatre workshop. This proposal will be passionately attended by migrant and native women and will bring on stage, in December of the same year, an action on migrations enthusiastically received by the audience.

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<sup>3</sup> From now on, I will use the distinction native/migrant instead of Italian/immigrant as the first terms better render the idea of fluidity connected to one's identity as felt by the members of the association and the protagonists of AlmaTeatro, who still do not feel permanently settled in a given place or cultural context.

<sup>4</sup>Interview to Flor Vidaurre, 1999.

At its beginning the group counts 18 actresses (from 12 different countries: Chile, Colombia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Italy, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, Russia, Somalia and Zaire) plus two directors (Italian). Excluding the two directors – always and continuously present in the life of the company – the composition varies considerably in the history of the company. At the beginning of my fieldwork (1997) they are 11 (representing 8 countries: Argentina, Colombia, Italy, Kenya, Morocco, Montenegro, Peru and Somalia). At time of finishing my PhD (2004) they are 7 (from Brazil, Colombia, Italy, Montenegro, Nigeria, Peru and Somalia), of which only two are in the company since its beginning. At the moment I'm writing this paper (2013), they are 7 (but from Brazil, Colombia, Italy, Montenegro, Peru and Somalia).

This period, in the words of the protagonists, there was a great enthusiasm, spontaneity, energy and above all the desire to "do something visible": to speak, to tell the world about themselves. In the explanatory statement and in the feelings described by the protagonists seem to be echoing that phase of the collective work of a newly established group that Victor Turner calls "spontaneous communitas", in which one experiences "a direct, immediate and total relationship, between different human identities, a kind of deep interaction between individuals. It has something 'magical'. [...] Individuals who interact are totally absorbed in a unique symbolic fluid event" (Turner 1986:92-93).

The reception of their first theatre action "gave the charge to transform this work into a show: Righibé"<sup>5</sup>. From now on, when introducing the theatre company, the following words will be used: "Within the Intercultural Centre Alma Mater lives and works the company AlmaTeatro, intended as laboratory, space of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of diversity. Through theatrical language, movement and writing we investigate our being migrant or native, commonalities and differences, but above all we reflect on the constant changes of our being together. The migration rips the net of our cultural belonging: AlmaTeatro is a place where we can weave together, not without conflicts, but with patience and discretion, recognising that our identities are continually redrawn from the encounter with the others" (Bordin and Rabezzana 1997).

The theatre laboratory is a space of expression, improvisation, research, openness, spontaneity, in which the actor is not alone, but meet other actors and in relation to these "modulates his lived and expressive output in order to internalise the reasons, the emotions and the values of the other" (Dalla Palma 2000:17). Hence, the laboratory becomes a space of education to relationship, in which the 'I' and the 'other' experience a continuous play of symbolic reciprocal exchanges. The stimulus to the development of the project is given by the external reality that was changing and that now was going to include the presence of women with different religious affiliations, and different cultural, linguistic origins<sup>6</sup>. In the eyes of the directors, migrant women experienced a double discrimination – the one of gender identity that gave them less social visibility and the one of migrants – which leads them to be perceived solely as 'people in need'. So the proposal of a theatrical activity, moreover in the context of the Centre, was aimed by the intention of furnishing recognition of their identities and promoting their social relationships. All these elements contribute to, ultimately, social and political participation to city life by the women involved in the experience.

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<sup>5</sup>Interview to Rosanna Rabezzana, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Interview to Rosanna Rabezzana, 1999.

On the side of the future actresses, the reason was likely to be more "the curiosity to understand what could have been a laboratory of this kind"<sup>7</sup>. Flor Vidaurre, Peruvian, recalls that for her was a combination of randomness and curiosity: "I went to the Alma Mater because I had problems with my residence permit, I saw the flyer of the theatre workshop and I went to the first meeting"<sup>8</sup>. For Enza Levaté, native, curiosity was the use of theatre as a tool for an 'anthropological' investigation: in fact, the actress came to the Centre with a desire to meet other women after returning from a long stay abroad and in need of build relationships with other people who had lived (or was living) the migration experience: "The theatre group was a way to explore the identity, the identity change in travel. [...] I want to stay here because I want to know you, because I want to hear your story"<sup>9</sup>.

The need to build relationships is urgent as well for migrants women who are now living in the country, who do not yet know language, services, behaviours, social rules. The theatre workshop is a tool to reach this, but as well a time and process where to relax, to dedicate to themselves, to be in harmony with other people: "The other, in my opinion, fundamental motive was the desire to leave the heavy daily, and have a space for oneself [...] where we could talk not only of troubles, problems, or anything, but where we could play with the theatre"<sup>10</sup>. The theatrical activity as a possibility of relationship is emphasised further by those who add to the group later on: "I was here since two months, and I was not talking a lot. For me it was a discovery because I said myself 'I might do this'. In the sense that when you arrive you have to rebuild a world, no? For me it was that. I said to myself: 'Oh!, how wonderful, these make a kind of theatre that I could do too!'"<sup>11</sup>. Later, when the same migrant women are on stage – i.e. when they become protagonists of the speech that concerns them and communicate their views by the means of performance – this instance becomes the motivation and the main aim of their participation: "We were a kind of spokesperson, so I felt I and, I think, everybody did. We were spokesman for those of our original country"<sup>12</sup>.

After the first few months of its existence, AlmaTeatro becomes a permanent company with ongoing activities and a more structured stability of roles offering a continuity of employment, so that both directors and actresses will get, from now on, a 'refund'/'scholarship' for the entire production process of a show, and AlmaTeatro will become a work.

## **The performances**

As said, AlmaTeatro was born in the fall of 1993 as 'expressive workshop' that brought on stage, in December of the same year, an action on the subject of migration enthusiastically received by the audience. This energy they benefited led this first group to engage into a continuous work, and to bring on stage a full show becoming, in

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<sup>7</sup> Interview to Rosanna Rabezzana, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Interview to Flor Vidaurre, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Interview to Enza Levaté, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Interview to Rosanna Rabezzana, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Interview to Adriana Calero, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Interview to Flor Vidaurre, 1999.

fact, a structured theatre company – although its protagonists alternate in participation, so that this reality has only partly been composed of permanent presences. A specific choice will remain constant, however, throughout the course of the history of the company's activity: the dramaturgy will always be original and processed by starting (although not exclusively in relation to other suggestions) from heterogeneous materials that draw from real lives and memory of the actresses, as well as from content proposals of interest to them.

In order to carry out the analysis of the discourse about cultural identity developed by AlmaTeatro, I will refer to Holledge and Tompkins' suggestion, but I would operate – within the same bodies – a further distinction, that of the somatic features of performer and character, that of the cultural specificities, and that of individual biographies of performer and character. For somatic features of performer and character I mean all those elements of body materialism that characterise the one and the other of the two bodies in question – visual aspects (skin colour, shape of eyes/face/mouth/nose, colour and texture of the hair, height, body structure), paralinguistic aspects (postures, the orientation of the body, movement, gestures) and auditory aspects (the possible joint use of sound and voice). The choice made by AlmaTeatro between the match and the difference in the relationship between the two bodies always goes in the direction of the match. In this way, physical characteristics of actresses (especially skin colour) are useful to develop a character who follows – also culturally and/or biographically – specificities of the actress who plays it, but that choice is always functional as well to dismantle stereotypes and prejudices which affect those somatic characteristics (and hence also on those alleged, in the deeply wrong perspective of a biological-cultural continuum) of the actresses or of the characters they play.

The same match – i.e. the fact the body of the performer and character go in the same 'direction' – characterise also the relationship between cultural specificities and biographical history of the performer and the character although here connections can be less immediate: AlmaTeatro's plays, as said, are "scene-centric" (see Dalla Palma 2001), and the individual experience of the actresses reworked for the stage is once again the opportunity of promoting a speech that plays on the expectations of the public towards these different cultural identities (performer and character).

In AlmaTeatro – in reference to character creation – there are two phases: a first phase in which we cannot talk about real characters on the stage, but rather less distinct and articulated 'individualities' that draw on the performer (both in somatic characteristics as cultural ones) and offer the viewers suggestions and useful contributions to the reflection on the questions forecast by the play. Then, starting from *Storie sommerse*, the shows put on stage real characters, complex and complete.

Here I will consider the first three plays.

### *Righibé* (1994)

The first AlmaTeatro play, *Righibé* (1994), is entirely built from the individual stories of the actresses. In the context of the theatre workshop women share their biographies with the other participants to the work, and

with the Italian directors who then adapt it to the scene by adding some literary pieces. The origin of the play is in this case the need to tell first-hand one's choice of migration. And right in the context of the workshop takes place the expression of the many cultural identities and the fall of mutual stereotypes – issues that in turn become the primary objectives of the play. The entire staging aims to make visible the stereotypes with which we perceive each other as migrants and natives, and the survival strategies of change staged to survive in a new world.

*Play in which we reflect upon ourselves  
and our memories. The bodies, the songs, the voices seek  
the reasons to travel, of our being here today.  
What form have the roots of each one taken  
after going and momentary returns?  
The show is a weave, a texture, filled of stories  
that amplify the presence of each one here now.  
[from the show brochure, 1994]*

Righibé presents the reality of migrant women in Italy by addressing issues relating to the migration experience – the image of the 'other' European, rich and wealthy, as imagined by the inhabitants of the southern hemisphere, the disparate motives at the start, the feelings at that time, the 'alienation' of the new life in the host country, the changes required to stay in the new country, the work that they do – from the biographies of migrant actresses reworked by one of the directors who also adds literary pieces and original texts.

The curtain is still closed when two women – a native and a migrant – get on stage in orange clothes. A Balkan music accompanies them and, when the theme fades, they begin narrating about permanent nomadism of humanity on our planet, nomadism that, over the last century, took precise national and territorial references now listed by the actresses.

Now three chairs on the right side of the scene are first occupied by two, then by three women; the story that these go to interpret is an excerpt from *The great migration* by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in which the author demonstrates – through the metaphor of a train compartment in which the first occupants of seats (although each other mutually unrelated) develop a strong sense of solidarity against a third individual arrived at a later time – what happens when a territory becomes place of immigration.

The closure of this introductory part comes when all actresses, in the following scene, answers about the causes of their departure (tourism, need of freedom, study, work, war) in a crescendo of emotional tension, and then leave the stage to just one of them, migrant, who talks about the shock of realising 'old Europe' was not the one of her imaginary, but – in addition to these past glories – there where negative aspects as well: cities where concrete was widely used, children playing in places without trees, people always in a hurry without any mutual interest.

By inversion, the next staged imagery is the one of the migrants from the southern hemisphere to European countries. Now the women interpreted mechanically, like automatons or dolls, the corresponding action: as nurses, they 'correct' postures of people sitting badly, if they are cleaning ladies, they sweep and scrub frantically; finally, when the stereotypes concerning alleged 'attitudes' of cultural matrix ("Seduce! Those

coming from hot countries can seduce"; "Dance! Foreign women have the rhythm in their blood!"), they perform those actions in a mischievous way.

The clear message is that change and adapt to the new situation is the only way of survival in a world that is 'other'. This imperative is well-known by the main character – that of a woman escaped from her country in war and now working in an Italian family which, for not making the effort to memorise her name, Righibé, has given her an Italian name, Anna, so imposing her a strong and extremely brutal change of identity. Her story is brought on stage by Maria Abebù Viarengo – mediator, teacher and Italo-Ethiopian actress – who shares with the character the national origin, probably part of the somatic characteristics, but not the life story: "Righibé is a woman I had written an article about: she had come to Italy to work as a maid at a family, who decided to even change her name and call her Anna because Righibé was likely to be too difficult for them to memorise"<sup>13</sup>. Her story is punctuated by the comments of the other women around her, who listen and participate to the story reporting similar experiences of which were in turn protagonists or witnesses. Here we are not yet in the territory of the existence of specific characters (except that of Righibé) and the intention behind the strategy is rather to ensure to the performer a clearly recognisable individuality of expression that – although proposing a partial continuity between performer and 'proto-character' – on the basis of a vague cultural axis, does not become a chance for a taxonomy nor provokes easy simplifications in the spectator: the difference between the performer real life brought on stage on the 'proto-character' challenges spectator's imagination, and causes a 'culture shock' that is the same these actresses have suffered in the context of the laboratory, where they had their own, first, when verified information they possessed were far away from reality.

In this way the play – in contrast with the common Italian collective imagination about the migrants as miserable people looking for economic well-being – shows the reality of people who move for many deeply individual reasons (study, desire of freedom, desire to know, love, tourism, war), each one with his own history and with equally different aspirations. The request for confirmation of audience's expectations (in fact stereotypes) is further frustrated when the characters play with, and exploit, them for their own ends: if women from the South are considered 'hot' and 'with the ability to dance in the blood', with not to use this to catch the first available Italian guy and live off him?

Finally, the dramaturgical elaboration of Righibé recalls the work of the 'social theatre', but if it gets out of it immediately when, in directors and actresses, develops a clear intent to continue and repeat the experience. What happens in fact is that the overall structure remains unchanged as well as the articulation of different times, while – inside these – some speeches and actions based on actresses who participate from time to time change. Not only that: at some point the same roles become interchangeable and there will be the downfall of mirroring and total identification between actress and proto-character.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview to Maria Abebù Viarengo, 1999.

*Luna nera* (1995)

In the production of the second play, *Luna Nera* (1995), whose theme is being woman as a condition of otherness that always remains tied – even in cultural diversity – to inferiority and submission, people involved relive the experience of the previous theatre workshop. Here they now inquire on a number of issues related to gender identity to explain how each of them has gone through her apprenticeship to become a woman.

*We start from us, our memories, we inquire the private life, stories regarding the origins, childhood, our mother, our body, thoughts, dreams that remain within us.  
[...] In our research we reflect on the female body and its constraints: its biological one as reproduction of the species and its historical one as a pleasure of men.  
This body takes on meanings and different importance depending on the socio-cultural structure in which it lives.  
[from the show brochure, 1995]*

The curtain opens and the figures of seven women, dressed in the same clothes – this time in shades of brown, beige and blue – emerge from the darkness and occupy the space. The only scenic element is represented, behind them, by an open staircase, whose top is crossed by horizontal poles holding up different-colored drapes to cover the entire background. A first actress progresses in the foreground, and tells the metaphor that will mark the entire reading of the show: "At the beginning of creation the Sun and the Moon were of the same magnitude. But then, for an action judged guilty, Moon became smaller and the Sun became the dominant star of the world"<sup>14</sup>. The following scene presents the reflection of the woman who asks herself how can people's mind change when she, as well, regrets of having given birth to a daughter, but suddenly the awareness of the same contradiction causes her equally abrupt refusal to accept the inferiority, and the claim of being a woman as a value: "earth-mother", "the first atom of the universe", "women of today and tomorrow [...] that is not content to be descended from a masculine rib"<sup>15</sup>.

Who are these women then? What do they share and how do they differ from the women who came before them? The next scene unveils the parentage: here each actress retraces the characteristics of their mother, their grandmother, and the other women in the family: the similar or different physicality, the behaviour, the obsessions, the values, the teachings, the reasons for happiness. And in the next scene the actresses narrate the relationship with their mothers: there the one who looks at forms and elements of the face, another to the posture or the way of walking. The woman's body (its fragrance, its softness, the protection that guarantees) is the central node of the relationship and a subsequent choreography involves a game of hugs and caresses in an allegory of the physicality of the relationship between infant and mother. From here the show develops staging the growth of the girls and their becoming women.

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<sup>14</sup> From the drama *Luna Nera* (1995), unpublished.

<sup>15</sup> From the drama *Luna Nera* (1995), unpublished.

The education they receive aims to structure their identity: girls are subjected to requirements, obligations and prohibitions whose intent is to create women fitting the potential roles of wives and mothers. An actress gives orders from the top of the ladder ("Shut up!, don't make noise when you eat!, keep straight!, don't walk without shoes!, don't go out at night alone!, don't dress in male clothes!, don't gossip!, don't be lazy!, don't speak!, don't think!, sit down!, don't approach men!, don't give men confidence!"<sup>16</sup>) and the other hasten to perform in chorus repeated postures interpreting these orders with the effect of a deep redundancy.

Next autobiographical tales of natives or migrants express their joining or opposing to the values and behaviours of their mothers – and narratives are reinforced from time to time by the combination of these personal moments with the interpretation of poetic or literary passages by authors who have addressed these kinds of relationships in their writings.

The performance ends with a collective reflection on the meaning of being a woman – meaning found in the contemporary cultural heritage, but also in the ability to deal with a life that is different from that experienced by their mothers.

The production of this performance is partially different from the previous one. Here the people relives the experience of the theatre workshop (memories sharing, listening, mutual comparison, etc.), but straight in order to use it for the construction of the dramaturgy and therefore exploring their lives on a number of issues related to gender identity. Nevertheless, the production of *Luna Nera* is the one actresses and directors feel more collaborative and communitarian, where all brought something, both in terms of personal memories and materials, for a collective construction of the performance"<sup>17</sup>. Similarly to *Righibé*, in *Luna Nera* there's the alternating of choral and individual moments, and individualities other-than-selves (as the figures of mothers) are brought on stage to open with a single voice to unresolved questions about being a woman in different cultural contexts. Autobiographical moments emerge when the identification of the performer and the character is absolute, and it is impossible to separate the character's experience to that of the performer: memoirs, improvisations and the tale of the relationship with their mother are sometimes extremely strong source of crisis (see Levaté 1995). Transposed onto the scene in their physicality, that makes them similar to the women of their family they describe, the characters briefly number the characteristics of their mother, grandmother, other women of the family: similar or different body shape, behaviour, obsessions, values, teachings, jobs. But, as said, next to this intense actress-character identification, the topic is also treated with narrative and poetic passages recited individually and drawn from literary works (Isabel Allende, Sylvia Plath) which have addressed these issues.

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<sup>16</sup> From the drama *Luna Nera* (1995), unpublished.

<sup>17</sup> Interview to Gabriella Bordin, 1999.

*Storie sommerse* (1998)

*Storie sommerse* involves seven actresses on stage and tells the life stories of some women of the past who have travelled, from time to time, and changed their identity to adapt to countries they reached (and settled). The show is again divided into scenes in which the actresses perform mostly singly or in pairs linked by group choreographies.

*Storie sommerse: stories of changes,  
hidden stories in the folds of the great history,  
stories of restless women who are located in different historical periods,  
destinies change, socially assigned roles change.  
[...] Live as mestizos means experiencing instability,  
always having an empty space in our midst  
to accommodate "other – the other"  
empty not as a deficiency, but as freedom.  
[from the show brochure, 1998]*

Accompanied by the sound of drums and djembés, the actresses go up on stage and occupy the space. This time the colours of materials and costumes are white, black and gold. A native actress introduces – as a storyteller – the theme of the show: the tale of stories of today and yesterday, of transformations, of mixed identities ("We are all are the result of an ancient mix, even those that believe they have well-defined borders and nature"; from the drama of the performance in Balma Tivola, Bordin, and Rabezzana 1998). Then she shows the actresses and calls them into question as 'helpers', and presents the first scene entitled "Story of a girl of today and of her ancestor Mary, who lost no time!".

An immigrant actress tells her own story now – set in contemporaneity – common to many girls who leave Africa to come to Europe. She has a goal in mind, and has already developed strategies to implement it as well as the determination needed to reach it: she wants to establish herself as an actress and singer, and become rich and famous. However, she will notice soon, her resources are not inexhaustible, and destroyed from fatigue and memory of those who didn't make it, collapses exhausted. In a condition halfway between dream and reality, she then embodies the character of Mary, woman lived in the mid 1700's, which tells her own story as an Angolan slave who worked to bring food to the miners before, then free-woman, after she purchased, with her savings, her same freedom and became slaver of young Angolans in turn.

Furthermore explicit in denouncing the imperative need of "appearing to be" is the next story, played by another migrant woman this time from South America, where the actress performs Catalina, character who at the end of Sixteen century escapes from the convent where she had been confined, dresses as a boy and becomes Francisco Loyola – servant of the officers of the Spanish army and, with these, adventurer in the Indies. Her story is intertwined here – as in a reverse shot – with that of the 'other' look from the Indies: the new scene, in fact, set in Peru, is played by another South American actress telling of the population (living in those places before the arrival of the Spaniards) in which women had an important role to play and they fought

until the end to resist the invasion. The identity which results in this population after the conquest will be a mixed one, where she will learn, as if wearing many clothes on top of one another, "to add, to superimpose, to achieve the purity in the confusion, in the redundancy" (from the drama of the performance in Balma Tivola, Bordin, and Rabezzana 1998).

The last story is that of woman "with many names". Played by a native actress, is the story of Esther, fled from Granada in flames because Jewish. In a kaleidoscope of loneliness and movement, Esther becomes Zeida, then Luna, Maria, Menica, Aquilina, inventing a different herself in every place where she goes ("I celebrate the Purím Festival and the fast of Yom Kippur and Christmas and the Ramadan"; from the drama of the performance in Balma Tivola, Bordin, and Rabezzana 1998). Without absolute certainties and the memory of many identities, but with the awareness – through such assumptions and transformations – of having escaped the illusion of 'purity' as a pre-condition of one's identity and having become light, "nomadic in her mind" (from the drama of the performance in Balma Tivola, Bordin, and Rabezzana 1998).

For *Storie Sommerse* the work is completely different from the previous two: the show comes from a research the directors and some of the actresses published in 1997 (see Bordin and Rabezzana 1997). The main theme of the research is the hybridisation in different eras – since 1492, date of the discovery of America as of the edict of expulsion of the Jews from Spain – and places in the world, with special attention to identifying, through historical and literary sources in the various native languages of actresses, the history of women. The construction of the resulting character, then, not only draws upon individual biography of the actresses, this time, but also upon that of historical figures really existed – although in the past and in other cultural contexts: for the first time, we might affirm, the need for absolute coincidence between performer biography and fictional character biography fall down.

After further thought, however, this gap between the two bodies is only found in the times of existence and in the specific events of their lives, but between performer and character there is still continuity: the interpretation of specific roles – assigned this time directly from the directors – is in fact based on the correspondence of somatic characteristics, cultural origin, and/or existential goal between the performer and the character. In this way, Sonia Aimiumu proposes two African characters consisting one in herself (of which we are told the story of her migration braided with the memory of her travelling companion who was killed when became a prostitute to survive in Italy), the other in Maria (Angola slave become slaver in turn in 1700), where in both cases stereotypes such as laziness commonly associated to people somatically recognisable as African are removed by three subjects – performer, the first and second character – that are shown as not wanting to waste time, and who run working hard behind the income with which to buy redemption, emancipation and freedom.

The same somatic correspondence between performer and character is staged by Flor Vidaurre in her interpretation of 'the woman with many clothes': here her 'daughter of multiple mixtures' included in the features of the character ("No longer I'm India, not even Spaniard, I have African blood in my veins"; from the drama of the performance in Balma Tivola, Bordin, and Rabezzana 1998) is also the real 'biography' of her own genetic performer. This basis and the same cultural origin of performer and character (both Peruvian) makes

the speeches of the two potentially interchangeable: absolute synthesis both of the native American people, settlers and African slaves (conflictual) encounter, performer and character live out the same condition of somatic and cultural stratifications that are inevitably witness of the mixture of pre-colonial (however largely lost as a result of the actions of destruction by the colonisers) and post-colonial knowledge.

Ileana Monaterio Argentinian performer, interprets Catalina, young nun who at the end of the Sixteen century escapes from the convent and goes for a boy assuming the identity of an elusive Francisco Loyola, servant of the officers of the Spanish army that fate will bring up in the Indies, with a spatial traversal of migration from the old Europe to Latin America that is opposite to the movement of the performer who migrated from Argentina to Italy). Performer-character continuity is here moreover located in existential goal that they share: "Catalina sought the same I seek: being free"<sup>18</sup>.

Finally, the woman "with many names" is played by a native professional actress, Teresa Cannavò, who joined the company for a few years: in this case we are in the complete lack of correspondence between performer and character but... couldn't by inversion the same character be considered an actress 'sui generis' because of her choices of life, and therefore be perfectly identifiable and coincident with the performer who plays her?

### **The issue of the language.**

Before addressing the question of cultural identity it's crucial to introduce the choices related to the language in which communication takes place between the protagonists of such activities in the context of laboratory and tests, as well as in relation to the dramaturgy of the performance (i.e. the communication between the company and the public).

In the case of AlmaTeatro, the lingua franca between the actresses, and between these and the directors, is Italian – this not for cultural imposition of directors and/or native actresses, but because all migrant participants voluntarily use the context of theatre work as a tool to improve their expressive skills in the country they live in. Spanish is also frequently used in communicative exchanges within subgroups (among actresses from Argentina, Peru, Colombia and one of the directors) and sometimes English. The effectiveness of theatre as a tool for the practice of the language is also the basis for the design of specific laboratories to support the teaching of the Italian language to migrant people, representing this a further chance of income the company will put in place besides the shows.

At the performative level, on the other hand, if on one hand it is necessary – since the audience is mostly (but not exclusively) made up of Italian citizens – that communication be in Italian, on the other hand other languages and sonorities are used: in this sense it frequently happens that same piece is first played in the original language of the performer, then in Italian, and when the communication is in a dialect of Southern Italy, it may not even be translated. These choices have specific intents such as to emphasise the musical dimension of the language beyond the meaning of the text ("otherwise, we would give conferences and not do

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<sup>18</sup> Interview to Ileana Monaterio, 1999.

theatre"<sup>19</sup>), or to provoke an emotion of aesthetic order in the spectator in which he will feel, in the happiest scenario, a sort of fascination and 'affiliation' to the character not due solely to the verbal message but also because of the visual and audio elements of the body-in-scene, or – on the contrary – provoke him a sense of 'alienation' (with the frustration this entails) similar to the one migrants live in their everyday life, due to an incomplete mastery of a new language.

A final reason for this multilingualism in the performances is the intention to bring on stage the now multi-and intercultural dimension of Italian society. This latter intention is also the reason at the basis of the use of dialects, in order to recall the consciousness of the cultural diversity already existing within Italian identity – often perceived as mono-cultural, but in fact synthesis of disparate regional and local influences.

### **Cultural diversity, multicultural coexistence, and intercultural practice.**

"The more I go on, the less I want to talk about this famous interculturality because for me interculturality is there when you do things together. We do theatre together, ok: we do theatre. The issue of the diversity, and of the other, and of being together in diversity, we do not talk about these. It's probably better not to talk about it, it's better to it"<sup>20</sup>.

However, all those who participate in AlmaTeatro activities emphasise the fact that cultural pluralism experienced by the company makes it a practical example of intercultural practice (see Yenque and Rabezzana 1998), a micro-community in which the issues of cultural identity and diversity are not only theoretical problems to be addressed in relation to the objectives of the theatrical work, but also important and actual variables that affect the life of the reality considered – both in relation to the theatrical process, and as a relatively autonomous and self-organized group.

Cultural diversity is a factor that enters the process as the content of workshops aimed at developing the performance. At first – the one of the birth of the laboratory and the first performances of AlmaTeatro – one can speak of cultural diversity as a centripetal force according to which the participants talk and listen to each other. Then the focus moves smoothly from the comparison of these personal tales to a more theoretical level. Then, over time, the intercultural comparison tends to lead more and more frequently in conflicts: "Learn to stay together" becomes therefore the imperative to use productively the space and time of the work<sup>21</sup>.

In fact conflicts, which may have a cultural basis, engage on frictions generated by non cultural factors: the emergence of problems and urgent needs from daily life (work, home, children, etc.), the fluctuation (especially in early years, characterised by a deep instability) in the members of the group that also mean different quality in the actoral level, and finally different motives at the basis of actresses and directors participation to AlmaTeatro.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview to Rosanna Rabezzana, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Interview to Gabriella Bordin, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Interview to Giovanna Piacquaddio, 1999.

Self management and the management of the relationship with the others within this context is, therefore, the main problem that the group is likely to face. In a world like that of AlmaTeatro, in which the multicultural composition of unprofessional intertwines the concomitant presence of the indicated problematic factors, it's fundamental to learn to "mediate" between one's needs and those of the others, especially when the company begins to be conceived as a real "work environment"<sup>22</sup>. Behaviours, attitudes, values; ideas, motivations and objectives of participation; needs, priorities, desires: mediate between all this is tiring and engaging, but imperative: to accomplish this one must be both flexible and resistant, and extremely light, "in the sense of not being scared by conflicts"<sup>23</sup>.

For this reason, those participating in the group consider this as a constructive and positive (although never pacified) intercultural reality: the pleasure of being part of a reality that makes visible and tangible products emerges at the time of building up the performance, where the difficulties in the relationships fall, as "the fact that you have to go on stage, do the shows in front of an audience, look inside yourself and say what you found to others, this projection forced many problems to pass"<sup>24</sup>.

### **The issue of 'cultural identity'.**

To discuss now more specifically the issue of cultural identity, the first step may be to reflect on the concept of 'culture' embraced by the company. In undertaking any review the concept, then, what comes out surprisingly is the complete absence – in the speeches of actresses and directors, in the texts of the plays, in diaries and AlmaTeatro documentation – of the term 'culture'. Delving into the subject through interviews and group conversations, this lack lies in a motivation shared by the entire company: the rejection of the use of that term is actually the refusal of a reified concept of culture (still often promoted by the Italian media and political discourse on immigration) that would categorise and include in a collective entity – no matter personal biographies, choices, attitudes, values – with no chance of escape all those who come from the same country. Culture, according to the conception of AlmaTeatro, is rather perceived as a tool – received from parents and community of origin – useful in order to secure some survival, to find some way to be in the world and to roughly orient oneself according to some reference points: an abstract theoretical background on which to articulate one's own individual identity and one's own personal biography, result of the uniqueness of his experiences.

In fact, actresses and directors prefer to address the issue from the personal point of view, and propose to rather refer to the concept of 'cultural identity' – a choice which, in their view, returns that fluidity that each would like to bind to her definition. In this action echoes a discomfort that even an anthropologist as Arjun Appadurai shares when he writes about not being able to talk of culture/cultures but to be "fond of the adjectival form of the noun, i.e. cultural. If I think the reason for this, I realize that much of the discomfort due

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<sup>22</sup> Interview to Giovanna Piacquadio, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Interview to Rosanna Rabezzana, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Interview to Rosanna Rabezzana, 1999.

to noun has to do with the preconception that culture is some object, a thing or a substance" (Appadurai 2001:27).

Cultural identity – as conceived by AlmaTeatro – has many nuances that are closed to anthropological theory on the matter: first, it builds up in relation to cultural otherness (as it is discovered/built in relationship to someone other-than-me), and this awareness emerges by direct experience in the protagonists of AlmaTeatro who, in their daily life in- and outside the theatre compare and verify similarities and differences with the people with whom come in contact. Secondly, cultural identity is marked by continuous change of human subjects during their lives – change due to the infinite number of choices that are continuously carried out by them in the course of existence. In this way, the individual variation is a variation of the broader system (culture, society) where the identity of the individual is located. Individual and put into effect as a result of the choices of the individual in the course of his existence, it is also hybrid – because synthesis of selected cultural elements adopted by individuals from other cultures they come into contact with. For all these reasons, then, its boundaries are not clear and stable, but permeable, in a continuous process of exchange and negotiation. On both levels – that of biological and that of the cultural – that is stated clearly, e.g. in *Storie Sommerse* where is said that the individual is the result of "mixed, multiple, impure identities" and that "everyone is the result of a mixture, even those that believe they have well-defined borders. We are everything and the opposite of everything".

The discourse on cultural identity, because of the close relationship between this and the otherness that is necessary to determine its existence, inevitably leads AlmaTeatro to the duty of reflection on migration – as the different identities into relation through the intercultural encounter are generated from that. AlmaTeatro's invitation is to individualise and put into social and historical perspective the cultural issue. This won't lead to definitive knowledge and certainties, but will at least lead people into a mutual dialogue and maybe to understand each other in the dimension of interpersonal relationship in reference to the urgent instances of everyday life. AlmaTeatro proposal lies on the need to 'creolise' the society (and/or recognize the already occurred creolisation) through a peculiar discourse of individual identity plurality contrasts the "rhetoric of the blood, property and borders" with "the contingency of all definitions of self and other self and need to walk with a light step" (Carter 1992:7-8).

### **Conclusions: AlmaTeatro and intercultural theatre proposal to contemporary Italian society cultural flow.**

If the history of mankind has always experienced migration and encounters between people, information, goods of different origins, what changes in the contemporary world is the frequency of these exchanges (see Hannerz 1998; Breidenbach and Zukrigl 2000; Appadurai 2001), and this provokes a consequent fragility and erosion of existing configurations that previously responded to the needs of the individual to give meaning to existence and belong to a group that would protect and support him in case of need. Such securities loss can now however be solved with the search for new relationships, now chosen by social actors in relation to other

criteria. The goal of multi- and intercultural theatre in Italy, in final analysis, is not just to stimulate a reflection on cultural difference, nor only to promote social change in the direction of a multi- and intercultural dialogue, but to nourish audience's empathy and willingness to listen to others 'perspectives' that is the preconditions to interpersonal dialogue, relationship and reconciliation.

Of the different modes of cultural content expression developed within AlmaTeatro, the performance is considered by actresses and directors – as well as by critics and by operators of intercultural theatre more in general – the essential moment of theatrical activity. In the performative act, the dramatic reinterpretation of the social problem, the reworking through the synthesis of different perspectives, the proposed solutions and information (see Turner 1986), the experience of the protagonists – representatives of a new neighbourhood now crossed by the cultural difference – becomes the basis for the construction of a potentially universal discourse: what is brought to the scene by the individual and unique personal biographies is precisely the uniqueness and character of otherness that they embody in a sociocultural context in which all personal stories – even those of the spectator – are now unique and distinct from those of others.

"Think global, act local" is a slogan that, in the context of AlmaTeatro – but also that of other reality of intercultural theatre active in Italy – takes on the deep meaning of promoting the 'locality'/neighbourhood production while promoting a creole identity production/recognition, and solving everything by sharing it during the performance. Community theatre speaks, in fact, of a 'reconciling power' of the performance (see Innocenti Malini 2002). This dimension distinguishes the theatrical work of marginal groups, peripheral-openings as "many small pitfalls in the very centre of our society" (Barba 1996:187), whose poetic and political intent is to 'respond', with their visions of the world and according to their political and social goals, to those who until now have imposed everybody their own conception of society (national majorities, concentrations of capital, etc.). In this sense, these realities which promote intercultural theatre propose themselves as new collective identities that can be seen as islands that increasing numerically become archipelagos (see Barba 2005), and plays and performances become endless bridges that connect them with others which have not achieved that awareness yet.

What intercultural theatre tends to create, ultimately, is a 'culture of relation' that represents "the possibility of being together, exist together, build together, live together" (Innocenti Malini 2002) – in contrast to the contradictory media discourse on cultural diversity, the blindness of a political system that still does not want to recognise migration as a structural phenomenon in need of solutions that go beyond the refrain of the emergency, and finally the absence of ongoing policies that includes cultural diversity and multi- and intercultural dimension of Italian society as a fact so to undertake the needed measures to ensure all citizens – old and new – equal dignity of existence, recognition and expression.

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