

The Claws of the Albe's Miser

Massimo Marino, *controcene.corrieredibologna.corriere.it*, 16th April 2010

Ermanna Montanari's Harpagon is little and black. Fiercely attached to her wealth, to the box where she keeps her ten thousand coins buried in the garden. She harpoons and hangs on to everything, grasping. Even her voice, lowered to guttural tones, comes to us only by way of a microphone. As soon as she enters she shows by her glance that she wants to grab, rob. Around her, a boisterous carousel of her children, their lovers, her servants: young, very young, frenetic rather than vivacious, very often fatuous, they too without hope, moved like mechanical marionettes by some kind of greed, some self interest.

Molière's *The Miser* according to the Teatro delle Albe, which had its national première at the Storch Theatre in Modena in Cesare Garboli's splendid translation, is black as black can be. Director Marco Martinelli plays on the grotesque: greed loses the anaesthetised connotations of caricature to become metaphysical sickness and a highly topical social disorder, a shabby and almost spiritual passion, egoism, absolute idolatry of money, blind faith in it as extension of self, as another self. Private and self interest is always to the fore in every situation, generating suspicions, hatreds, envies, betrayals, denunciations, desires for revenge and domination.

The shades are gloomy: a very white light is often concentrated only on the protagonist's face, narrowing almost to the eyes alone, to trace out that immaterial and highly concrete aura of greed. She would shatter the world around her, expropriate it, bury it to defend her box, her little house, her mental refuge, the only foundation of a society that is closed, without dimensions that are not economic ones. Everything is thorny in this comedy, even the laughter, based on a mechanism dear to Martinelli – obsessive repetition – which turns human beings into puppets who, once set in motion, cannot stop, are repetitive and unable to learn from experience. With a touch that is more cutting than usual, merciless: nothing and no-one is saved, and the happy ending is cloyingly artificial, with the house lights up and the director himself playing *deus ex machina* to save this little hell-without-redemption from collapse and total war.

As for the cast, mention must be made of the compressed energy in a devastating vacuity of the young actors in general and Roberto Magnani in particular; the troubled servility of Alessandro Argani; the solid counter-melody of the factotum in technician's clothing, played by Luigi Dadina, one of the "old" members of the company. He too does a marvellous job of transforming himself from an anchor of solid good sense into calumniator and traitor. And then Michela Marangoni's witty characterisation of the maidservant Frosine. Above all Ermanna Montanari, restrained in voice and gestures, sharpened in cruel avarice, a knife that wants to inflict at least a small wound on the cruel, fearful and scared greed that awaits us outside the theatre doors: where parents who pay kindergarten fees are striking because an unknown benefactor has underwritten the debts of the poorest children whom the local administration wanted to expel for insolvency.

The Miser

Maria Grazia Gregori, *delteatro.it*, 21th April 2010

In Molière's great classic, directed by Teatro delle Albe's Marco Martinelli, Harpagon is a woman (the exceptional Ermanna Montanari) and the whole apologue on wealth and poverty (of mind) takes on a new, more modern meaning in which the public feels directly involved.

Yes, the Harpagon in Molière's *The Miser* according to the Teatro delle Albe is unexpected. And not so much because he's played by a woman. Especially when we're talking about Ermanna Montanari, an actress we sooner or later expect to see in the title role of *Hamlet*. It's unexpected because – in Cesare Garboli's magnificent translation – everything plays on the chiaroscuro of modernity. Marco Martinelli and his actors offer us a *Miser* that bears the stigmata of our confused and contradictory present.

So we can't help wondering: what's this money that everybody's talking about, wrangling about, that many envy and for which others are ready to sacrifice happiness? And which increasingly appears to be not only the means towards well-being – certainly one of the most fundamental – but the mark of a social position that is often vulgar, enclosed within the asphyxial walls of one's own home. Money, in the Albe's *Miser*, is rather a sickness, a secret not to be revealed, maybe even a social sin. Which in a time of lean kine such as we are living today concerns all of us, renders us accomplices, even if we're unaware or recalcitrant, to what is happening on stage.

Hence the choice of an almost empty set, the image of a theatre getting ready right in front of our eyes, objects in view, spaces being made and unmade, timeless costumes, models of Harpagon's house, now nearer now farther away, characters that come and go as in black vaudeville, a sort of Hellzapoppin' with pettifoggers like Harpagon and his faithful attendants, but also his children and the people around him. This story of a father ready to sacrifice his children's happiness rather than give them a penny and, heedless of ridicule, to marry a young girl, is fortunately rewritten by a *deus ex machina*, the father of our "hero's" children's lovers. With a great to-do of happy ending, which involves us directly since the father in question, also dressed in black (played by Marco Martinelli himself), steps up from the stalls, from among us so to speak: maybe the good side of the same coin which concerns us and which bears the portrait of Harpagon on one face and Anselm on the other. In a multifaceted company that mixes traditional Albe actors (such as Luigi Dadina who plays Master Jacques, the house factotum) with young ones who have perhaps been trained in workshops held by the tireless Montanari-Martinelli partnership, special mention should go to Ermanna-Harpagon. Enveloped in her black clothes – trousers and jacket – Montanari doesn't give us a one-dimensional miser but a Harpagon built up on various segments of impressions: ingenuous, jeering, cruel, absent-minded, father-master... So many faces for a single character whose epiphany is entrusted to the microphone – symbol of his role, as a stick might have been in the past – to modulations of the voice. A considerably disturbing image that makes us reflect.

Harpagon and the mean power of feelings

Gianni Manzella, *il Manifesto*, 25th April 2010

A child of its times this Teatro delle Albe's *The Miser*. Sad, visionary and final. But then how could it have been otherwise? By now even the least informed spectator knows that Molière is not (any longer) just the author of farcical contrivances in wigs, knows that his comedies have a very black foundation; that we have to come to terms with his *Tartuffe* and *Harpagon*, with those bourgeois gentlemen and those know-it-all women. There's not so much to laugh about and the game doesn't end with the final curtain. But there's something more, if we think about it, in this show devised by Ermanna Montanari and Marco Martinelli. I should say there's an awareness that those characters have come out of their rooms, out of the domestic dimension to take over the public sphere. Indeed that public and private spheres often fit together.

Perhaps not at random *The Miser* begins with the stage being cleared. Away with the period table and the monitor set on a trolley, away with the footlights and the bit of wall with a window that represents an interior. Away with everything that was already there. Leaving only the black velvet surroundings on the stage of the Teatro Storch. As if emptying were necessary in order to do theatre. And in that empty space which is the theatre, reposition props *and* actors. The conjunction is not affectation, since the actors too seem like props, visibly manoeuvred, their faces illuminated with spots handheld by nimble stagehands. All except Harpagon who controls the moves of these pawns, microphone in hand, which is at once sceptre and instrument of domination.

It begins with the house lights on, like when Leo de Berardinis invited actors and public to look one another in the eyes while he in turn drew on Molière's words to denounce the ills of our country. To rediscover the sense of community within the theatre – as we used to say. Everyone can see that those ills have become gangrenous. If anything we are amazed by the indifference or inurement to this state of disintegration. So greed is not only to do with money but has become a metaphor, or better the common denominator, of a social split. It dissolves and degrades into an absence of generosity which affects the feelings no less than the glance we throw on the other. And we are not amazed that power lies in the hands of a Harpagon. Old and probably sick, close to death, but not embarrassed about buying the love of a young girl, here too haggling over the price, a man of affairs understood as speculation, loan-sharking and interest rates.

Here Harpagon wears the black clothes without frills that Molière himself wore on stage, and we have the unmistakable voice of Ermanna Montanari which with amplification explores raucous and low tones, enraged and persuasive, in an economy of gestures that demonstrates *mastery* of her role. If the actress puts herself to the test in a male part, as Sarah Bernhardt was able to do, Martinelli's directing plays on confounding the traces between a cruel light and a plunging into darkness that leaves only one face illuminated, as in the later Beckett pieces.

The multiplication of recognitions and acknowledgements which the director incarnates renders the required happy ending derisory. What can be happy about these marriages for love or for necessity that seal a new social contract, a new alliance? If avarice redeems the miser, in the words of Cesare Garboli (whose translation is now *de rigueur* on our stages), what can redeem his court? They cajole him or fight him, indifferently. They are made of the same clay, have been subject to his fascination for too long. The foppish son, played by Roberto Magnani, would kill for a new suit of clothes, like the servants and lovers (among others Alessandro Argnani, Luigi Dadina, Michela Marangoni and the amusing Loredana Antonelli and Laura Dondoli). The box of coins stolen from the miser easily becomes a little house, as we are led to believe by the big letters set on the table, ready for a parlour game. And there's no way out. Except by challenging the bird of prey gesture with which the protagonist takes her leave, clawing the air.

The Miser in Stiletto Heels

Renato Palazzi, *Il Sole 24 ore*, 25th April 2010

We've known for some time that Molière's world is in no way a smiling one but rather dominated by gloomy and ferocious moods. With *The Miser* that debuted at the Storchi Theatre in Modena Marco Martinelli however has not restricted himself to highlighting the "black" aspects of the text: he freezes it, puts it out of joint, makes it explode in a series of allusive fragments that expand in many different directions – from the relationship between money and power to the invasiveness of mass media – remaining however open questions, suspended suggestions.

The heart of this lashing staging lies in his choice of giving the role of Harpagon to actress Ermanna Montanari who, in a man's suit and high heels, makes for a threatening and slightly monstrous presence, an emblem of all the evils of our times. Martinelli however is not aiming at aspects of sexual ambiguity: with her authoritarianism, her modern businesswoman's ways, accustomed to command, she evokes if anything a masculine toughness which paradoxically only a woman can express without ending up in parody. Montanari – with her rough registers, her search for sinister, spectral vocal effects – succeeds above all in transmitting the idea of wickedness in the pure, almost metaphysical state. We know how much her interpretive attempts can sometimes shake us up – they've already earned her three Ubu prizes – but this time, armed with a microphone which appears in itself as a weapon of domination, she seems to hold back, dry up the intonations: and the more she holds back the more the words cool, the more they accentuate the treachery, the crude interior violence. If this impressive performance is the heart of the show, the keystone is nevertheless in certain small collateral signs: the servant girls dressed like hostesses at a political convention, the TV-style canned laughter and applause, Harpagon's box-cottage that makes us think of the models used in *Porta a Porta**: everything remains implicit, indeterminate, yet everything speaks of today, of a society subjugated by the myths of success and money, where even feelings, relationships and desires are governed by self interest. One certainty is that with this *Miser* the theatre is finished, has been long superseded: all that remain are fragmentary recollections that emerge from the darkness of a degraded culture. The stage is occupied by props laid out any old how, the characters wear costumes made of the same material as the sofa upholstery and they are shifted about like objects by the servants. All these fine actors speak mechanically as if emptied-out: and in fact the epilogue comes from the director himself who concludes the event by arriving from the stalls, from reality, from everyday life.

* *Porta a Porta*, Door to Door, a talk show on Italian TV dealing mainly with political issues.

Molière is a woman in our greedy times

Rodolfo Di Giammarco, *la Repubblica*, 8th May 2010

“The lady had built up her own linguistic system with folds and raptures,” wrote Pasolini in *Oil*. It seems tailor-made for the leaden and bossy growling which, freezing Molière’s *Miser* in a female key, the unprecedented voice of Ermanna Montanari delivers into a microphone, fetish of an amplified exercising of power. The woman’s identity that the Teatro delle Albe instils in Harpagon, on an emptied hand-lit stage, has eyes of steel and talks rubbish about a little box/”little house” amid craving hypocrites. Among stereotypes and stresses Roberto Magnani’s Cléante and Luigi Dadina’s factotum are outstanding, and director Marco Martinelli well deserves acknowledgement. A great wicked Molière for our greedy age.

Domenico Rigotti, *Avvenire*, 18th April 2010

And let's pause here to say that Martinelli chucks out the canons of classical representation, meaning dusty old wigs, paper backdrops and 17th century costumes, taking us into a present where money becomes, for everyone, the mainspring of a fake and superficial way of living. Harpagon's house, transformed here into a sort of easily dismantled TV or film set, accommodates a small court of hypocritical and fatuously conceited creatures for whom the greedy Harpagon is nothing but a small time king who clumsily pulls strings.

Roberta Ferraresi, *iltamburodikattrin.com*, 20th April 2010

[...] *The Miser* lives on a collapsing of the word in the people who bring the show to life, in line with the Albe's research, but also with the creativity of Molière who wrote most of his works for his own actors. And it is animated by a choral interpretation that plays on the twofold and on ambition, many-coloured and charged, which acts as counterpoint to the almost incidental presence of Ermanna Montanari's Harpagon. In the course of the show, side by side with the excellent and disturbing Miser, we once more see acting work that can employ at once various interpretive registers and that plays in post-Brechtian manner with identification, which it indeed uses, since all the action is developed on several levels present on the stage, with visible changes and servants who not only shift the props but also direct the movements of the characters. Harpagon – a blacker than black creature who, conceptually and actually, dominates all the characters and actions in the show with her sceptre-microphone, which everyone hankers after, and with her minimally engraved gestures, as in an expressionist print – seems to have dropped into a 70's American soap-opera, amid love intrigues and superficiality, coups de scène and blackmail, flowered wallpaper and pastel dresses: the only highly theatrical character in everything and for everything, from voice modulation to gesturality and a very efficacious investigation of facial mimicry. And in this too she is the only coherent figure, albeit brutal: always herself, all of a piece, she shows herself for what she is in a story where everyone is very different from what they seem, and numerous elements hint at the most barbarous TV fiction. [...]

Titti Danese, *retididedalus.it*, June 2010

[...] The money god to whom Harpagon dedicates a passionate and touching declaration of love has contaminated people and things, and certainly Martinelli is looking at this contemporaneity of ours that lacks values, looking at the indifference and cynicism of the powerful, at the self-interested servility of the majority. The old miser is actually a model to be imitated, a point of reference for all nefariousness and greed. A cult show – in certain passages it recalls the obscene brutality of *Sterminio* where Montanari gave generously of herself in unforgettable acting – it surprises by infinite modulations of the voice and the expressive ability to embody evil, the sinister and blunt face of power, but also a great boundless solitude. And mention should go to the excellent work of all the actors, winking and easygoing, who move knowledgeably among amorous intrigues and coups de scène, artistes in a grotesque cabaret.