

# Shakespeare, a Basketball Court and *Felicità*. Collettivo Teatro Metropopolare in *La Dogaia* Prison, Prato

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## *Abstract*

This paper discusses a singular experience of prison theatre in Italy, a country that has recently seen an increasing number of workshops and performances held behind bars. Between 2011 and 2014, Teatro Metropopolare staged a Shakespearean trilogy in La Dogaia prison in Prato (Tuscany), and ran a video-theatre project in a young offenders' institution in the same region. The group is headed up by Livia Gionfrida and organised as a collective: it is less structured compared to a company, and each member has a considerable impact on the performance process. This wide participation of actors-prisoners in composing productions is the focus of this paper. The productions are never closed and defined, and always have potential for modification. By using different languages and local dialects, along with their musical and sports knowledge, prisoners become active players in the creative process and build their own popular, shared, and innovative Shakespeare.

*Keywords:* William Shakespeare, prison theatre, 21<sup>st</sup> century appropriations of Shakespeare, pop culture.

## **1. Shakespeare Behind Bars in Italy: the Teatro Metropopolare Experience**

In recent years, prison theatre has become highly popular in Italy. In 2012, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani won the Berlinale international film festival with *Cesare deve morire* (*Caesar Must Die*): a production set inside the high security sector of Rebibbia prison during rehearsals for *Julius Caesar*, played by the prisoners themselves. The Compagnia della Fortezza, directed by Armando Punzo, is famous in Europe as one of the most experimental prison-based theatre groups, and its performances are presented annually during the VolterraTeatro

festival<sup>1</sup>. Another sign of the existence of an established “theatre prison movement” in Italy is the Coordinamento Nazionale Teatro e Carcere<sup>2</sup>, a national network of artists, companies and associations engaged in theatre projects within the penitentiary system. It was founded in 2011, with the purposes of connecting experiences, and finding common solutions to problems and difficulties, which primarily concern funding. More than 40 groups and companies have joined the network, while the Minister of Justice website reports the presence of approximately 80 companies that are working (or have worked) in prisons<sup>3</sup>.

Throughout my research I have focused on the following five projects, chosen because of their relation to Shakespeare: Compagnia della Fortezza (Volterra prison), Compagnia dei Liberi Artisti Associati (Rebibbia prison, Rome), Artestudio (Regina Coeli prison, Rome), CETEC (San Vittore prison, Milan), and Teatro Metropopolare (La Dogaia prison, Prato, and various young offenders’ institutions in Tuscany). While it is worth noting that all their Shakespearean productions “profit from the added cultural value enshrined, in Italy, in the name of their originating author” (Tempera 2017: 265), Shakespeare plays a heterogeneous role in these experiences, each of which develop their own way of dealing with his plays and cultural capital. These differences are also due to the specific prison contexts where they are held: from a more text-based representation among the long-term prisoners of Rebibbia, to an innovative approach to drama in performance with Teatro Metropopolare and Artestudio. This variety of approaches reflects both the complexity of contemporary theatre, and the peculiarities of Italian prison theatre. This is far removed from the traditions of “applied theatre”, typical of the Anglo-Saxon context. In Italy, several companies and projects are run by professional directors and actors, whose primary purpose is artistic, not rehabilitative or strictly educational. For example, Compagnia della Fortezza has won several prestigious national theatre prizes in Italy for its productions, and is considered “one

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017, due to financial and organisational issues, Punzo and Compagnia della Fortezza decided to stop organizing it.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.teatrocarcere.it>, last accessed April 28, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.giustizia.it>, last accessed April 28, 2018.

of the most intriguing theatre groups in Europe” (Mancewicz 2014: 30).

Teatro Metropopolare is not one of the most famous or long-running experiences, but its contribution to the recent tradition of Italian prison Shakespeare is remarkable given the prisoners’ personal and cultural involvement in the productions. Running the group is Livia Gionfrida, who was born in Sicily and studied Drama, Art and Music at the University of Bologna. She also trained as an actress and director with Luca Ronconi and Claudio Morganti (among others), and developed her artistic education in physical theatre, dance, and dance-theatre. She founded Teatro Metropopolare outside the prison environment in 2006, and she refers to it as a *collettivo* to highlight the idea of a network of artists who collaborate outside the fixed structure of a company. In 2007, she started working in La Dogaia prison, considering all the inmate actors as part of the Collettivo; Teatro Metropopolare always works with a mixed cast of prisoners and artists. Their productions have included three Shakespeare-based works: *Hamlet’s Dream* (2011), *Macbetto* (2012), and *H2Otello* (2014). Furthermore, between 2013 and 2014 they produced *Un’acerba felicità* (*An unripe happiness*), based on *Romeo and Juliet*, with the young inmates of the Istituto penitenziario minorile of Pontremoli.

In this paper, I will examine Gionfrida’s approach to Shakespeare and the emphasis she places on three features of the actors’ backgrounds: their languages and dialects, popular music, and sport. While the first is significant in many prison theatre projects, the Teatro Metropopolare pieces are unique in their fusion of Shakespeare with a wide range of contemporary pop-culture output. Even though it was not possible to attend their live performances, I have watched video recordings of *Hamlet’s Dream* and *H2Otello* (not available online), while the project channels on Vimeo and YouTube offer a wide range of clips and trailers of the productions. Unfortunately, I am unable to offer much insight about *Macbetto*, because a full version is unavailable. Instead, the director (Livia Gionfrida) and her assistant (Giulia Aiazzi) were interviewed while doing research for this essay.

While describing and analysing the use of pop culture in the productions of Metropopolare, I will outline the active contributions of prisoners to the performances. This approach allows an exploration

of the transformative potential of an ongoing dialogue between Shakespeare and the prison inmates. This process is not necessarily straightforward, whereby “Shakespeare contributes to a presumed salvation of the prison inmates”. It is, instead, bidirectional, because “undeniably, Prison Shakespeare has reinvented and reinvigorated the work of the Elizabethan playwright” (Cavecchi 2017: 4). Maurizio Calbi, while analysing *Caesar Must Die*, quotes Foucault in pointing out the violence underlying the assumption of a “therapeutic Shakespeare”:

to discover the (redeeming) truth about one’s self through this (omnipotent and salvific) “Shakespeare”, the film intimates, is complicit with the reinscription of the disciplinary strategies that produce the convict as a confessant, soul-searching, docile individual, a subject subjected to (voyeuristic) regimes of truth [...] One may thus argue that “therapeutic Shakespeare” is a subtle form of violence (2014: 245).

To avoid this risk, the Teatro Metropopolare productions try to approach Shakespeare without any kind of sanctifying devotion, and to overcome the hierarchical relation between institutional and non-institutional culture, by giving a central role to the prisoners and their experience.

## **2. Weaving a Mythical Web: How Many Shakespeare(s) in Prison**

In Gionfrida’s words, Shakespeare was chosen for the prison project, owing to the central, founding position he holds in western culture. The director states that she would never have selected Shakespeare outside prison because she would never find a strong enough reason to do so. Conversely, in prison where nothing is taken for granted, the rules of external society do not work, and everything needs in some way to be built again from its roots. In this process of “collective education” – *formazione collettiva* – Shakespeare could be useful as a founder, a reference point, but also as a powerful challenge for non-professional actors, especially in a space so dominated by immobility, such as a prison. From the beginning, the idea was to produce three Shakespearean performances; a long-term project that involved the best-known tragedies, spanning three years of work inside the prison. In addition, Gionfrida thought Shakespeare could

work inside a prison, due to his connections with the popular, non-institutional culture of his time. In the director's opinion, his use of a mixture of different sources, the presence of various registers in his plays, and the diversity of the audience in early modern times make it possible for all participants to make connections among their different national, social, and cultural backgrounds.

The Collettivo itself takes its name from a strong interest in contemporary, metropolitan culture, but also from the need for a connection with the widest possible audience, through a mix of different sources, languages, and techniques that make their production "popular" (*popolare*). Due to his key role in recognising the need for an Italian popular theatre and drama – starting from the great Neapolitan tradition – one of Gionfrida's main references in this field is Eduardo De Filippo, but her sources are not only Italian, and not only playwrights. In order to start a dialogue between Shakespeare, the inmates, and the diverse audience of prison theatre shows, Gionfrida started her work on *Hamlet* by drawing on the tragedy's afterlife, before returning to Shakespeare. Thus, Kaurismäki's *Hamlet Goes Business*, Chabrol's *Ophelia*, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, plus Enzo Moscato, Carmelo Bene and Giovanni Testori, among others, provided a starting point for a performance based on the myth of *Hamlet*, rather than on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

I am not undertaking a philological analysis of how these works have been used by Teatro Metropopolare, because direct quotations are not relevant to the director. Gionfrida points out that the whole collective has been "fed" by many "Shakespeares", before "digesting" them in a continuously changing and modifiable performance – a complex web of memories and impressions. In Gionfrida's opinion, awareness of the never-ending developments of Shakespeare's legacy helps to understand what *Hamlet* has become over the centuries, and how it can be performed on the contemporary stage. The focus should not be on the Shakespearean text as a means to develop a plot, but on the way a well-known plot can be told, as is the case in another popular theatrical and narrative experience. Her references here are the *cunti*, stories declaimed by storytellers in the Sicilian oral tradition. Therefore, while the text of *Hamlet* should not be reproduced automatically, it proves meaningful in order to encourage a reflection on theatre, its meanings and internal mechanisms. This

approach is clear from the very first scene, when Hamlet directs the players in the play-within-the-play scene, which is not reduced to just one scene in *Hamlet's Dream*. Old Hamlet's killing is in fact played several times over. The three actors engaged here use mime techniques, in an attempt to reproduce, in a fast, obvious and theatrical way, the infinite repetition of the tragedy. Additionally, they wear blue tracksuits, like steelworkers performing a repetitive job on the assembly line. Furthermore, the players only mime, and incredibly briefly, the final, well-known scene (V.ii), in order to stress how it is taken completely for granted. Therefore, Teatro Metropopolare suggests to the audience that what they expect from *Hamlet* is so obvious it can be condensed into a 5-minute show, and incorporated into *Hamlet's Dream* only to play on its emptiness, paradoxically and ironically, when it is repeated for years and centuries in the same way in theatres around the world.

In *La Dogaia*, the focus is more on what looks real but is fictitious, like a vivid dream, but also like theatre, or prison, both of which can be classified among the places Foucault calls *heterotopia*: a site at the same time apparent and extremely real, a reflection but also a subversion of the outside world (Foucault 1984). The central role of the ambiguity between real and fiction is underlined in various ways throughout the performance. First, one of the players (at the end of the first, mimed scene) refers to it as a dream. Then, the actor playing the dead old Hamlet at his funeral (not in the play-within-the-play) wakes up. He talks about the funeral itself and about his death before appearing to Hamlet, as he (the father) has just had a nightmare. Finally, the most important scene is at the very end, when the actor playing Claudius performs an adapted version of Prospero's final monologue in *The Tempest*, which obviously resonates with prison life as a dreamed and suspended life.

*H2Otello* has the same focus on storytelling: at the very beginning, a black actor introduces the audience to the characters and the first scene, before leading them to the prison basketball court, where most of the play will take place. Furthermore, the idea of a widespread knowledge of Shakespeare's plays is very strong in *Un'acerba felicità*, based on *Romeo and Juliet*. The YouTube video<sup>4</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> Available on Teatro Metropopolare YouTube channel ("Metropopolare"), last accessed April 30, 2018.

which is the result of the workshop held by Metropopolare in an all-female young offenders' institution, opens with the girls (whose faces are never totally visible) answering the question "What is *Romeo e Giulietta* for you?" Therefore, the starting point is the girls' perspective on what they remember about the play, which is obviously filtered by their own experience concerning love, parenthood, and freedom. Afterwards, the clip requires us to listen to the teenagers interviewing local, middle-aged and elderly people, who are also invited to express their opinion about their daughters' choices. They are told, "Juliet is imprisoned in Pontremoli prison".

In the clip, some girls have regional Italian inflections, some have non-Italian accents, others speak in foreign languages. This allows us to introduce the characteristic diversity of languages used in prison theatre. Gionfrida gives great value to one of the most recognisable and appreciated features of these productions – multilingualism –, and usually works with all the raw material she has on hand, in order to enrich performances with innovative and authentic elements of truth. In the other productions, actors use their own languages and Italian dialects, mainly from Southern Italy, to create a unique mix of different voices, each with its rhythm and musicality. Maurizio Calbi suggests that this constitutes an interesting widening of the range of migrating movements for Shakespeare in translation:

The translation of *Julius Caesar* into a number of dialects bears witness to the fact that "Shakespeare" does not *properly* belong, that it is an "entity" – what Jacques Derrida may call a "Thing" (*Specters* 22) – that lends itself to an almost infinite variety of "migrations". The film also suggests that these "migrations" are not synonymous with a linear movement from a "source language" to a "target language". There is more than one "target language", and each one of them is subjected to an "internal" translatability: these dialects continually shift from more formal to less formal registers; they refract and "rewrite" each other in a kind of Bakhtinian heteroglossia (2014: 240-41).

### 3. *Musica leggera*: a Shared Artistic Experience

In the Metropopolare approach, these languages and everything that is told through them come to light, due to a specific kind of training process. "Direction" is a technique of guided improvisation

Gionfrida uses to let the actors devise certain pieces based on their previous experiences, but through a given starting point that can be a theme, an idea, or a feeling. A lot of stage material is taken from this process and then put into the final performance, which is never defined as something fixed and closed. This is why there is no script or prompt-book for the productions. Instead, as Gionfrida recounts, there are many notes, drawings, and unstructured materials that bear witness to a never-ending process of creation. The training process lets pieces of popular culture, belonging to the prisoners' past, or even to their present, emerge from familiar or personal memory, giving them a central role in a Shakespearean production.

To begin with, many popular songs are played in the performance or sung by the actors. Gionfrida believes music to be not merely a soundtrack, but something important in the dramatic development of the theatrical event, as much as words and movements. Here I shall give only a few examples, but in *H2Otello* and *Hamlet's Dream* there is a massive presence of very famous pieces of pop and rock music; we will focus on Italian *musica leggera* (light music), namely Italian pop music (characterised by love lyrics and melodious rhythm) as the best known, both by the actors and the audience. *Felicità* (*Happiness*), which is the soundtrack in the final scene of *Hamlet's Dream*, allows all characters to wake up from the "dream" of death, and start playing a new game: a game as easy as a football match, as light as the song made famous by popular Italian artists Albano Carrisi and Romina Power. *Felicità* won the 1982 Sanremo Festival, the most important Italian pop-music show. It is a love song, a hymn to simplicity, and an invitation to enjoy all the small things that make stereotypically Italian people happy: a glass of wine with a *panino*, a beach at night, a greeting card full of hearts. It is the kind of Italian song everyone knows, from young children to teenagers to grandparents, and its message is as clichéd and obvious as it is dense with meaning, when sung and heard inside a prison. Thus, *Felicità*, at the end of the performance, contributes to a celebration of the collective renovation of the most ancient popular game of the world, theatre. *Insieme a te* (*With You*), by the neo-melodic singer Tony Colombo from Naples, is chosen and sung by the teenagers in *Un'acerba felicità*. It is an example of local and contemporary "musica leggera", which resonates with the Shakespearean love story as appropriated by these girls. The song is about the struggles



of two young lovers trying to stay together despite their families. In the chorus they say: “Come fanno/a non capire/che ci amiamo/e ci vogliamo ormai” (“How can they not understand/that we love each other/and we want each other”). Here, as pointed out by Tempera in her analysis of *Julius Caesar* staged in Rebibbia prison, “the cultural authority embedded in the Shakespearean source text becomes endlessly appropriable, apt for relocation and recontextualisation” (Tempera 2017: 274).

In *H2Othello, Profumo di mare* (*The Smell of the Sea*) by Little Tony, together with *Singin' in the Rain*, plays an important role in defining one of the main themes of the project: the metaphorical representation of womanhood through the natural element of water. *Profumo di mare* (1981), which talks of summer, sunshine, and how the typical seaside atmosphere can positively influence one's attitude towards love and love stories, is part of the canon of Italian *tormentoni*, hit songs that become the soundtrack of the summer season. Its use at the start of the second part of the performance, just after Othello and Desdemona's wedding and the Moor's trial in Venice, introduces what it is going to happen in Cyprus: the exact opposite of a romantic honeymoon refreshed by the smell of the sea air. There is a strong focus on physical elements in all the shows<sup>5</sup>, and in *H2Othello* water represents womanhood as a significant issue, and one which Teatro Metropopolare refers to often, especially in all-male prisons. For Desdemona (Alessia Brodo), water is a means by which she can play with her father and Othello at the start, but then it is literally wasted and spread around by all the male characters, a symbol of how women can be ruined and eliminated in a male-dominated society, as epitomised by Iago. In the final scene, Desdemona's deathbed is made out of the big bottles used for office water dispensers. Ophelia, in *Hamlet's Dream*, drowns by drinking too much water from a simple plastic bottle. This specifically gendered issue, extremely relevant in a country as patriarchal and sexist as Italy, is also approached through another means, strictly connected to the actors' experience of sport.

<sup>5</sup> In *Macbetto*, black paint represents violence and death without resorting to blood, which would be too explicit inside a prison; it gains more and more space on the stage and on actors' bodies throughout the performance.

#### 4. Motionless Bodies in Action

In *Hamlet's dream*, Ophelia wears a football tracksuit, a pro-active choice to build a bridge between herself and the inmates. The character is played by Alessia Brodo, an actor of the company (not an inmate) who actually plays football and whose Ophelia acts like an innocent, independent tomboy. The first time Brodo met the prisoners Gionfrida asked them to play football together as a way of meeting on neutral ground, where the girl is – unexpectedly for the prisoners – as strong as the men. Furthermore, Brodo showed how she considered football as one of the most important symbols in Italian popular and collective culture<sup>6</sup>, a key-point of Metropopolare's theatrical research.

In all the Shakespearean performances presented by the company in prison, there is a strong physical approach. Firstly, this is partially to let the inmates regain awareness of their own body as a means of communication and expression, because everyday life in prison is characterised by few movements and few words, always repeated by the inmates and the staff members. According to some studies, the prisoners' five senses deteriorate, after even a short time in prison. This phenomenon was described by Daniel Gonin in his *La Santé incarcérée; médecine et conditions de vie en détention* (1991), quoted by Laura Baccaro in *Carcere e salute* (2002) with regards to the Italian context<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, many prisoners focus on keeping up their body strength as a way to maintain a connection with themselves as human beings, and with the external world. In prison, a place where life appears suspended, small everyday gestures like combing your hair, or shaving, are highly valued by people who have been forced to sever all contact with their previous life. Erving Goffman, in his famous analysis of total institutions (such as mental hospitals, orphanages, prisons, and concentration camps), explains that detainees usually struggle to regain even a pale shadow of their

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<sup>6</sup> In the interview by InToscana, a regional website specialised in tourism and local news; a clip is available on their YouTube channel, last accessed April 30, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> During my research, I had the opportunity to interview some actor-prisoners, and one of them, Cosimo Rega, who was Cassius in *Cesare deve morire*, feared he had problems with his hearing and speaking while in prison; theatre helped him overcome this.

life outside, or the means to control their external image (Goffman 1961).

Secondly, the desire to give emphasis to the physical side of theatre practice is partly due to the aesthetic and theoretical ideas that form the basis of Teatro Metropopolare's artistic action. As mentioned, Livia Gionfrida was educated extensively in physical theatre, movement, and dance, having trained with some of the top Italian professionals in the field of interaction between dance and theatre: Compagnia Pippo Delbono (with the Argentinian Pepe Robledo), Cristina Rizzo, Giorgio Rossi, and Kinkaleri. She was clearly influenced by these experiences, and Metropopolare's use of techniques (drawn from contact improvisation, mime, and contemporary dance) allows them to build performances where the collective is much more substantial than single characters with their assigned, speaking roles. These choices are obviously also related to the specific actors involved in the project. In a prison such as La Dogaia, which is reserved for pre-trial detainees or for people receiving short sentences, a prisoners' future is never predictable, because their release or relocation to another prison can be decided suddenly by the prison head, and theatre practice always has to adapt to these changes. Therefore, less emphasis is given to speech. In Metropopolare productions, roles are flexible and changeable, while the research is focused on gestures that, Gionfrida believes, need to be stronger in a prison – a space with a specific, utterly negative connotation – than they would be elsewhere.

Finally, the attention paid to sport is also linked to the actors' biography and previous life experiences, and it is used as a common starting point for everyone. Football is by far the most popular sport in Italy and it plays a fundamental role in the production and reproduction of a universally recognisable Italian stereotype, along with pasta, pizza, and good weather. Nonetheless, in traditional Italian culture, the Sunday match is linked to a certain idea of masculinity, and the introduction of a female football player in the cast of *Hamlet's Dream* gave Gionfrida the opportunity to start a complex process of research, reflection, and action regarding gender-related themes with La Dogaia's male prisoners.

Regarding *Othello*, the misogynous military context of the play tends to relegate women to their traditional positions (wife, prostitute, adulteress). Whatever the form of rebellion to these social

roles, it can only lead to tragedy, even when it is totally fabricated by men, as in *Othello*. In the Teatro Metropopolare production, this patriarchal idea of society is not subjected to any change, and muscular masculinity needs to be continuously trained, shown, and confirmed. Set in the prison basketball court, *H2Othello* stages male actors dribbling a ball, shooting, and doing fitness exercises while dressed in gym clothes. Therefore, *H2Othello* can be compared to other Italian contemporary productions drawn from *Othello*, such as *Killing Desdemona* by Balletto Civile (2016), which tends to stress the gender issue more than the racial problem. It can be read as a way of getting involved with an increasing social preoccupation with these themes, inside a place where femininity is completely denied, and where Gionfrida and her collaborators (when female) were obviously initially seen as strangers. The decision to use the prison basketball court as a setting was a last-minute choice, based on the need for a large space and on the extensive use of industrial trolleys and water. Furthermore, in Gionfrida's opinion, the lines of the court recall the lines and "geometry" of Iago's plans, and the setting allows for the movement of the audience, and with it a change of their point of view. Above all, the basketball court can be considered a real battlefield. Here, sport is no longer a game, and *H2Othello* stages a competition, or perhaps more. On the one hand, we are looking at a continuous and internal battle among men, and on the other, another battle is being fought by men against Desdemona, against all women, and the idea of womanhood, with no winners at the end.

## 5. Conclusion

It is worth underlining that in the productions analysed there are only a few translated lines taken from Shakespeare's texts; nonetheless, Gionfrida refers to him as the root of the theatrical and social collective education at the basis of her project.

In the twenty-first century, Shakespeare has to be examined thoroughly if he is to remain credible and serve a purpose, especially when he enters a space as marginal but also as significant for society as a prison. This clearly happens to his plays, his cultural capital, his global recognition, and his being part of an institutional canon, which could not seem further removed from illiterate or poorly educated

prisoners' backgrounds. Rob Pensalfini (2016) has indicated that Shakespeare works so well in prison because his presence among people with limited education (both prisoners and custodial staff) may challenge notions of his exclusiveness and distance. However, in order for this to happen, it is crucial to begin abandoning the deeply rooted concept of a therapeutic Shakespeare, which is always in some way related to disciplinary strategies.

Within this complex force field, Teatro Metropopolare has succeeded in developing a method that gives its inmates the opportunity to deal with Shakespeare without imposing an external and authoritarian reference on them. Rather, it offers them an interlocutor, able to trigger a dialogue with their personal and collective cultural heritage. This includes their language, which has not been erased by standard Italian; their knowledge about popular music and sport, which does not highlight, in a pejorative and elitist way, their belonging to the less educated strata of society, keen on mainstream pastimes. Instead, it becomes a structural part of Metropopolare productions and encourages the development of the key themes of these pieces of work.

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