



Contemporary Italian Dance : the 2000s

In Italian contemporary dance of the first decade of the 21st century, various generations of artists coexist together: from those who contributed thirty years ago to the birth of the so-called "new dance" - as was the case in France and other European countries, to twenty-year-olds, grappling with their first creative experiences.

Italy has never established real political and cultural policies for contemporary dance and, except in a few rare cases, choreographers have never been given the run of institutional theatres.

This aside, the current outlook is lively and diversified, not only in generational terms, but also from the point of view of the variety of formats, practices, and creative processes.

These ever-so heterogeneous artists are intrinsically linked by the concept of authorship: contemporary choreographers are authors communicating their own personal vision of the world; they do not make reference to any single style or the exclusive use of a movement technique, but apply a wide variety of body languages, which they make communicate with other forms of artistic expression.

The intent of this Thema is to provide some examples of this highly-dynamic scenario.

1. Precursors

The first signs of an as-yet-unknown method of portraying the body in movement appeared in Italy in the early 1980s, when young theatre groups of the Post-Avant-Garde scene began questioning the dictatorship of the text, horizontally expressing the elements of performance - body, sound, images - and breathing new life into a theatre in which gestures take on an even more central role. As such, the relationship established between theatre and dance led to the development of inspired reciprocal influences.

La Gaia Scienza (The Gay Science, with Giorgio Barberio Corsetti), Falso Movimento (False Movement, with Mario Martone), Magazzini Criminali - (Criminal Emporiums, with Federico Tiezzi), were just a few of the theatre troupes active at this time; a period that saw choreographers such as Enzo Cosimi, Virgilio Sieni, the Sosta Palmizi Group, comprising Michele Abbondanza, Francesca Bertolli, Roberto Castello, Roberto Cocconi, Raffaella Giordano and Giorgio Rossi, who shared an instrumental formative experience with Carolyn Carlson, make their debut.

Choreographers and directors shared the same enthusiasm for American Post-Modern Dance, took an interest in martial arts from Asia, followed performances by Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham, which began to be showcased in Italy, and devoured cinema



d'auteur and the radical theatre experiences of masters such as Peter Brook, Bob Wilson, and Eugenio Barba.

Virgilio Sieni – *In ascolto e La natura delle cose*

Some of these pioneers are now at the peak of their creative journey. In 2007, **Virgilio Sieni** (Florence, 1958) founded the Accademia sull'Arte del gesto (Academy for the Art of Gesture), which engaged people of various ages and backgrounds (the elderly, artisans, blind people, mothers and children, etc.) in research that focused on gesture art related to each individual's memory and experiences. He placed paramount importance on transmitting the contemporary repertory, as shown by ***In ascolto (2012)***, choreography created as part of the "**Cerbiatti del nostro futuro**" project intended for very young dancers between the ages of 10 and 13.

This experience also led to unprecedented perspectives in Sieni's work with his professional dance company. In ***La natura delle cose (2008)***, inspired by *De rerum natura* by Lucrezio, Venus passes through three periods of life: first that of an eleven-year-old, then she becomes a two-year-old child, and lastly, an old lady. In the first scene, the lightness-of-being and divine enchantment that the philosopher talks about are expressed through the dance of four male performers who, forming a single body, support the goddess so that she never touches the ground.

Sosta Palmizi / Raffaella Giordano – *Quore. Per un lavoro in divenire*

After an initial period of collective creation, the former members of the Sosta Palmizi Group pursued their quest individually.

In 1999, **Raffaella Giordano** (Turin, 1961) presented a work that broke away from the creative processes of the previous decade. Already, in the title – ***Quore. Per un lavoro in divenire*** – this performance proposes to share an ongoing human experience ("in progress"), offered to the audience with an almost childlike purity ("quore" is a misspelt "heart", written with a "Q"). Pop music, the musical score for our daily existence, amplifies emotions; the traditional concepts of "choreography", "virtuosity", "beauty", and "performance" are shattered; the performers' living bodies, harshly lit by fixed lights, reject technical and formal grace and expose their imperfections, as if they had been stripped totally bare.

This performative dimension foreshadows a practice that would become very widespread during the 2000s, when dance became a sort of laboratory that brought together all the other performing arts: theatre, performance, music, and productions.



2. Individually-designed creativity

Groups that developed during the 1990s no longer expressed themselves on behalf of their generation, a trend that had been highly-characteristic of a myriad of previous Italian danced theatre experiences. There was a preference for the process over result, and individually-designed creativity prevailed, starting from an idea and then redefining the method for implementing it each time. The body was also reinvented with each new creation and the stage was the setting where these transformations could take place.

Kinkaleri - <otto>

Kinkaleri began in Florence in 1995 defining itself as a "set of models and resources on hold in an endeavour". As such, it is not a company, not a "family", a community approach that was very dear to artists of the 1980s, but an experience that incorporates a wide range of elements. Their works are theatrical performances as well as installations, urban and site-specific forays; they use improvisation, ballet codes, 1970s disco, and hip-hop at will. Basically, they are unclassifiable. **<otto> (2003)** is a scenic set-up based on the repetition of a few simple actions, like a body falling to the ground and remaining there for a given time: a corpse that becomes an object among others scattered around the stage. The initially-empty performance space becomes awash with rubbish, which appears there, out of the blue, in almost total silence. The audience only hears the distant echo of a song from a Walkman that a female dancer wears while performing a few series of brief movements.

Michele Di Stefano - *Robinson*

Michele Di Stefano (Milan, 1963), the 2014 Silver Lion winner at the Biennale della Danza di Venezia (Venice Biennial Dance Festival) also studied outside the established system. In 1997, he founded the group Mk, which brought together a variety of personalities. A vocalist for a new wave band in the 1980s, Di Stefano became interested in bodies in motion whilst researching the qualitative impact of a concert. His work, designed for theatre and other spaces, explores the intersections between choreography, research on sound and performance. He works hand-in-hand with visual artists and composers, as well as with other Italian choreographers (Alessandro Sciarroni, Cristina Rizzo) and dancers from realms far-removed from his own (William Forsythe Company). ***Robinson (2014)*** uses mechanisms from ballet to breathe life into a sequence created by amassing together and showcasing bodies that are aesthetically and technically ever-so different. The resulting tension is generated by these differences, which common language does not standardize but highlights.



Alessandro Sciarroni - *Folk-s*

Alessandro Sciarroni (San Benedetto del Tronto, 1976) comes from a visual art and theatre background. His performances address specific questions, as can be seen in his ***Folk-s (2012)***. "How long will the Schuhplattler, the famous folk dance of the South Tyrol manage to survive?" asks the artist. The reply, expressed by one of the performers at the beginning of the show: "We will continue even if only one spectator remains on the benches or only one dancer on stage; anyone who leaves these benches or this stage cannot come back". Away from its original setting, stripped of typical costumes and the traditional Bavarian musical accompaniment, the popular dance becomes a performing art gallantly taken on by six male dancers: a test of individual physical strength, as well as a dazzling and rigorous choreographic structure.

3. From Italy to Europe

Italy has never established real political and cultural policies for contemporary dance and, except in a few rare cases, choreographers have never been given the run of institutional theatres. Some benefit from government grants, produce shows in a few theatres that are dance-aware, perform abroad and make use of the visibility of sector-specific festivals and other platforms.

Partially, to make up for the lack of institutional training projects, the majority of choreographers from the 1980s and 90s have always taught and have taken on a crucial role of transmitting languages. Some of them have also supported new creations, by promoting the development and visibility of promising young talent, within their own companies.

Ambra Senatore - *John*

For example, Roberto Castello's (formerly of Sosta Palmizi) Aldes Company witnessed the first solos of **Ambra Senatore** (Turin, 1976), a shrewd observer of human relations, upon which she places her light yet ironic perspective. In her group performances, performers develop dramaturgy that blends together words, everyday gestures and the choreographic partition. At the same time, they experience a state where they continually slip away from the reality of being "people who dance" and move towards the fiction of the performance. In ***John (2012)***, the rhythm and roles of the performance are dictated by the movement of several objects: small mechanical birds, spinning tops, toy cars and robots, while the audience, called upon to respond to simple questions or to operate the machinery, partially decide, through their replies, what is going to take place on stage.

Marina Giovannini - *Meditation on Beauty*



For a long time, **Marina Giovannini** (Florence, 1971) was part of Virgilio Sieni's company. With ***Meditation on Beauty (2013)***, she examines the concept of beauty through the intelligence of the female body. A body that reveals its fragility and, at the same time, its strength, through relationships with an extremely simple stage set: three wooden parallelepipeds upon which Giovannini explores her body's ability to adapt, its precariousness and balance. The second scene is a circular dance where three performers, mutually supporting each other, seem to want to bear the whole burden of the world on their heads.

"Agile" compositional forms, such as solos or duos, are frequently produced for Italian stages. This is often a choice dictated by the creative urgency that artists experience when coming to grips with their first attempts at composition. In this case, working on oneself is the most direct way to put oneself to the test. Dance monologue, however, may become a survival strategy: creation of low-cost performances - in terms of "human capital" and from the point of view of the simplicity of staging - means they can be transported easily and adapted to any space, thus limiting technical expenses.

In the climate of heavy cuts to culture that has characterized the recent history of Italy, younger artists often self-produce and perform in independent cultural spaces, community centres for example, which offer them a unique opportunity to assess themselves in public without having to pay rent, regulatory standards compliance or copyright costs.

Compared with their predecessors however, young Italian choreographers are now much less isolated and have more opportunities to compare themselves to colleagues from other European countries. Networking developed in performing arts production centres, for example Centrale Fies in Dro (in Trentino, Alto Adige) or the CSC (Centre for Contemporary Performing Art) in Bassano del Grappa (in the Veneto), enables Italian choreographers to take part in international training and production projects.

Dewey Dell - *à elle vide*

The Fies Factory project, for example, includes **Dewey Dell**, a company founded in 2007 by four twenty-year-olds: Teodora Castellucci, with her siblings Agata and Demetrio (directly from an affiliation with a "historic" theatre group, the Societas Raffaello Sanzio), and Eugenio Resta. In their first work, ***à elle vide (2007)***, two characters emerge from the absolute darkness of the stage: a rooster and a scorpion that seem to have come straight out of a comic strip. The red rooster performs jerky movements, while the white scorpion has an elegant, arrogant attitude. In its more recent works, the company has continued to draw inspiration from the imaginary world of comic strips. It went as far as designing "inflatable" bodies in *Marzo* (March, 2013), produced offhand-in-hand with Japanese visual artist Yuichi Yokoyama.



4. Contemporary dance and repertoire

Today, the concept of contemporaneity is no longer limited to terms like "new", "young", or "original". Artists can decide to use (or not) the most virtuoso techniques, from ballet to circus juggling. They can choose to choreographically structure their performance or present fragments of a process in progress to the audience. They can collaborate with musicians, architects, sound engineers, and lighting designers, or simply place themselves in an empty space.

Michela Lucenti - *Il sacro della primavera*

Many choreographers return to the roots of modernity in a totally liberal and revolutionary manner. This is what **Michela Lucenti** (La Spezia, 1971) did, by proposing total theatre that focuses on strong ethical trends. It is hardly a coincidence that her company is called Balletto civile (Evolved Ballet). In ***Il sacro della primavera (2011)***, a 20th century "classic", such as Nijinsky's performance (1913) becomes modern-day political reflection. The original rite of sacrifice of a young virgin is seen here as a metaphor of the condition of young artists from the Italian dance scene: a generation tired of waiting, overwhelmed by the demands of a market that constantly requires something new, and aware that everything has already been done by their predecessors. The mix of frustration and repressed energy is illustrated through repeatedly falling bodies, literally thrown onto the stage, in the frenetic wardrobe changes, in the aggression of the Stravinsky partition, continually violated by the audible incursions of a DJ, and from shouts and snippets of conversation from the performers.

Enzo Cosimi - *Calore*

Even a term like "repertoire", which in the 1980s was synonymous with "old" and "behind-the-times", has now taken on meaning for contemporary dance. Just like in other countries, Italy is implementing initiatives to recover and promote auteur choreography: a means to make younger generations of dancers and spectators familiar with productions of the recent past. **The RIC.CI project** (Reconstruction Italian Contemporary Choreography – Eighties and Nineties) created and directed by critic Marinella Guatterini has shed new light on important works such as *La boule de neige* by Fabrizio Monteverde (1985/2013), *Terramara* (1991/2013) by Michele Abbondanza and Antonella Bertoni, and ***Calore***, a cult piece that catapulted a very young **Enzo Cosimi** (Rome, 1958), who had just returned from New York, into the Post-Avant Garde Roman theatre world, in 1982. *Calore* showed the euphoria of discovering sex, an irreverent taste for excess, and the ingenuity, play, and irony of a language that moved freely inside and outside codes, blending high and low-level language citations. In 2012, the reinterpretation of the show by four young performers offered the occasion to rediscover the totally intact atmosphere of rage and fury of the original.



This was not, as such, an "archaeological" experience, but an opportunity to reflect with hindsight on the more or less conscious debt that many ongoing performative experiences in Italy owe to their predecessors.

To go further :

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Credits :

Ada d'Adamo is an independent Italian researcher. She has written and edited volumes on dance and theater of the twentieth century, including the monographs *Danzare il rito* (Bulzoni, 1999) and *Mats Ek* (L'Epos, 2002) and the interview *Emio Greco |* (The Epos, 2004).

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Ada d'Adamo

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Ada d'Adamo

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