

From Boccaccio to Shakespeare: the Connections of Literature & Theater

Natasha Lardera (December 08, 2014)



During the past weeks, led by Three Time Obie Award actor Rocco Sisto, Kairos Italy Theater (Casa Italiana's Company in Residence) has been working on scenes from *Measure for Measure* while learning about the relationship between Shakespeare and Italy. Tonight, the actors will share the result of the workshop by presenting scenes from *Measure for Measure* together with scenes from *The Mandrake Root* and *Decameron*, introduced by Sisto himself.

Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimo' (NYU) is presenting tonight *From Boccaccio to Shakespeare*, an evening of theater, by Kairos Italy Theater (Casa Italiana's Company in Residence) and Rocco Sisto, to uncover similarities and differences between Boccaccio, Machiavelli and Shakespeare.

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We interviewed Laura Caparrotti, founder and director of KIT, who will also be performing in some of the scenes.

How did tonight's event come to be?

I have been doing theater for 30 years (maybe even more) and through this time I have become more and more interested in how the world of theater is connected. Let me explain better, since I've been in the States, I have been noticing how much the non-English speaking theater is not considered part of the culture. It's like theater from another part of the world is something else, something completely detached and not to be connected with the American one. In these 30 years, I have seen many theater productions, of all kinds and times, experimental, traditional, in translation and in their original language. The more I have seen, the more I have been comparing theaters and theater traditions. A book I love is called *The Development of the Theatre: A Study of Theatrical Art from the Beginnings to the Present Day* by Allardyce Nicoll. In the book Nicoll illustrates how theater has changed, since Ancient Greece, to serve society and how each form of theater has taken from the most ancient ones and/or has gone in the opposite direction. This premise is necessary to introduce the kind of work we have been doing, as a company, in these past weeks. We have worked first on the *Mandragola* (the mandrake root) by Machiavelli, a play written in 1518 to comment the political situation in Florence. Then we moved to the *Decameron* by Boccaccio, exactly on the three novels that Machiavelli referred to to write the *Mandrake Root*. Now, six months after the production of the *Decameron*, I have invited Rocco Sisto, a great stage and screen actor and a Shakespearean expert, to work with the company on Shakespeare, focusing on the similarities and differences with Boccaccio and Machiavelli writing.

What play have you been focusing on?

Rocco chose *Measure for Measure* to dig into the Bard and in about 5 weeks, 9 of us (members of Young KIT and I) have been dealing with characters, dialogues, monologues and emotions as written by the great playwright. What has been really amazing to me is to discover how an artist born and living in England was writing about the same subject of two artists who lived in different times in Tuscany.

What's the connection between Shakespeare and Italy?

In his first class, Rocco Sisto explained to us how much Shakespeare was close to Italy. Italy was the place to be at the time. It was the fashionable land, it was synonymous of culture, art and elegant life. It was the place to look at and to take example from. Of course, I am saying Italy even if at that time there were many little countries, kingdoms and a few of so called republics. Yet, these places were the cradle of civilization and progress. In fact, Shakespeare located more than half of his stories in Italian territories. Even Shakespeare's language was not pure British: it was very close to Latin pronunciation. Finally, Shakespeare knew about our writers, our artists, our stories, through his studies, mostly, of Latin texts.

How did things go?

Starting from these notions, we went on studying and analyzing the play. Some of the situations are very similar to what we have found in Boccaccio and Machiavelli, yet the result is different. Shakespeare, living in Elizabethan England, is harsh and doesn't give space to forgiveness or to breaking the law. If you make a mistake, you pay for it. In Boccaccio and Machiavelli, when you make a mistake or do something not so legal, you find the way to get away with it (which by the way



says a lot about a certain Italian lifestyle). In all of the writers there are human beings, with passion, with love, with emotions and with duties. The outcome is different, the point of view changes and having explored the three of them, the result is for me that I can go deeper in Boccaccio and Machiavelli thanks to Shakespeare. And I can better understand Shakespeare by reading Boccaccio and Machiavelli.

How is tonight's presentation going to be?

After many years of doing Italian theater in the States, I feel that an important duty of Kairos Italy Theater is to work to widen the perception and the understanding of our culture in relation of other cultures, especially the American one as we are mostly operating in this country. This is why we are showing the result of the workshop in an evening that will start with an introduction by Rocco Sisto on Shakespeare and his connection with Boccaccio, Machiavelli and Italian stories and that will continue with the scenes from Measure for Measure we have prepared together with some scenes from Boccaccio's Decameron and from Machiavelli Mandragola.

What's coming up after this?

There is a lot to do, both as an Italian theater company and as someone who deeply cares about spreading her culture and making understand that each culture is both similar and different from the other. With KIT, I will continue working on the past and the present of our theater, digging next into ancient theater (Latin and Greek) and then into Goldoni and the plays of the 1900s. There is a line that connects all kind of theaters, I am interested in finding such line and learning how much other cultures did give to mine and vice versa.

Ours is not a political program to prove that we live in a global society and that we all have to love each other (which is very fine anyway), what brings me to focus on such aspects of theater and therefore culture is the need of looking not just at my courtyard, as we say in Italian, but to learn by looking beyond and embracing what could seem far and different from me.

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