



The Journal of
The Pirandello
Society of
America

Collaborations,
Translations,
Criticism,
Performances,
Reviews

Collaborations, Translations, Criticism, Performances, Reviews

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S16—*Luna Nera* by Pioneers Go East Collective An Interview with Artistic Director Gian Marco Lo Forte

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On December 2, 2012 I attended the last performance of *S16—Luna Nera*, a “live installation” inspired by Pirandello’s short story *Ciàula Discovers the Moon* (*Ciàula scopre la luna*) at the La MaMa La Galleria space in downtown New York City. The performance struck me as a vibrant rendition of Pirandello’s words through completely different media. Intrigued by the adaptation, one month later I interviewed Gian Marco Lo Forte, artistic director of the Pioneers Go East Collective, at La MaMa.

An Italian-American theatre maker, Lo Forte was born and raised in Italy but moved to the United States twelve years ago when Ellen Stewart invited him to work at La MaMa E.T.C., the historic experimental theatre she founded in downtown Manhattan in 1961. Lo Forte continued in New York City the work he had started at the symposium for directors organized by La MaMa in Umbria, Italy, which proved especially important for introducing him to a collaborative approach to creation. After some years of work as an actor and carpenter with one of the resident companies at La Mama, the eclectic Great Jones Repertory, he decided to create a similarly multi-talented collective “to explore bold, visceral work.” Pioneers Go East’s mission is to research personalities who are unique in their endeavors and important for Italian art, history, and society.

SB: *Why did you choose Pirandello’s short story Ciàula Discovers the Moon?*

GL: I am always interested in stories that provide a lens on society, especially when things may not be functioning well. In this short story Pirandello accuses Sicilian society of exploiting kids, something he had observed in person because of his father’s business. Ciàula is a fascinating character, a child trapped in

an adult body who doesn't know how to relate to people, and practically spends his life underground. When he finally sees the moon, he is truly astonished because he has discovered a completely new world around him.

SB: *In the program you define Ciàula Discovers the Moon as “a children’s short story.” Why?*

GL: I'd say because of the language and the way Pirandello approached the story: it looks like a six to eight year old kid could relate to it. Beautiful and unique stories are those that anyone can understand, and here the author does not go deep in psychological analysis, but rather adopts a very straightforward factual style easy to grasp for anyone.

SB: *What inspired you most of the short story in view of the performance?*

GL: We focused mainly on the character of Ciàula and how to visualize his life as a snapshot, with all his vulnerability, isolation, and inability to communicate with others. What interested us was seeing how those limitations would impact his behavior when he actually needed to reach out and, for example, alert someone of an impending danger. The other characters of the *novella* are still there but more as presences who help understand Ciàula's own situation.

SB: *Can you explain the name of the piece?*

GL: We used “luna nera” (black moon) because we wanted to connect to the visual elements of the piece, which is mainly about the darkness of the mines where most of the action takes place. S16 is the chemical symbol for sulfur: we were interested in how the material would be used in the piece, as a character itself.

SB: *What was the process of adaptation that led from the short story to the performance libretto?*

GL: I like working with poetry, trying to adapt other genres to verse, and I collaborate very well with composers and musicians.

The libretto is the form that allows me to more easily reach an emotional language. The Italian part of the libretto for *S16—Luna nera* is a collection of folk songs about people dying due to the conditions in the mines. After reading a lot of Sicilian poetry of the period, I wrote them in Sicilian but, being from Umbria, I asked an actor friend of mine from Sicily to double-check them as well. The main purpose of these songs was to produce an emotional landscape even for those who don't understand the language. But in addition to the short story, I also read several essays from the end of the nineteenth century that denounced the exploitation of children in the sulfur mines. They provided a lot of evidence on the age and conditions of the miners, clinical details about their sicknesses, or even descriptions of how their bodies were deformed by that kind of work. These factual elements were included in the parts sung in English so that the visual and emotional quality of the performance would be complemented by scientific references while the text simultaneously helped the audience better understand the situation.

SB: *As opposed to the usual emphasis on words when it comes to Pirandello, in your live installation there is a very evident focus on the material aspect of performance. Can you tell me more about it?*

GL: The company is really dedicated to storytelling through visual elements, video, music, movement, and action. Gestures are visceral and clearly depicted without too much acting superimposed; the acting really comes through the physicality of the body. As for the actual materials, I tried to introduce certain elements in order to see how they would trigger our imagination. For instance, the mine wall made of blue foam, normally employed for insulation: if it's attacked with chisels that are not too sharp, it takes a while to dig through it and the actors really need to sweat, so that there is no room for pretense.

SB: *What kind of space did you create for the show?*

GL: In all my pieces, the set is another character, one of the main elements that conveys the story or forces it to be in some way different. In this case the main idea was "claustrophobia," which

meant creating a layered environment, from lower to higher, in which the different levels could give the impression of rising from the depths of a mine, even if the audience is of course on a single level. During a preparatory workshop, I realized I wanted to compress five to seven bodies as much as possible in a space of about four by six feet; the actors would interact in that extremely tight space, but at the same time have just enough room to be able to chisel, mine, fight, or help each other. For the actual production we ended up with three horizontal levels, in turn divided in different areas, from the shower on stage right, to the sleeping area in the middle, to the shaft on stage left that leads outside the mine.

SB: *Why did you have the audience enter the space through a narrow tunnel with the actors standing on the sides?*

GL: I had watched a documentary about sulfur mines [*Surfarara*] by Vittorio De Seta, a Sicilian film maker. In the film we see the camera go through the shaft and show the miners as parts of the mechanical system itself. I tried to recreate the same perception mainly through lighting, although of course without enough funding to materialize a more convoluted journey and an actual physical experience of claustrophobia for the audience. But, at least, the spectators already met the miners, sweaty from their work, on their way to their seats.

SB: *Can you describe in detail the sequence of scenes?*

GL: The first scene in which the artists enter is accompanied by a song in English that sets the mood, asking why fathers and mothers who have given such wonderful eyes to their children will allow them to work like insects in the darkness of the sulfur mines. Then comes the gradual descent into the mine accompanied by a Sicilian song about a mother crying for help for her son stuck in a mine. In the meantime, the mining activity has started, with a crescendo that includes a fight among the miners and an earthquake. An echo from another tunnel seems to predict a collapse of the mine and leaves everyone frozen until a headmaster verifies that the beams holding the tunnel are still together and it is safe to return to work. The materials dug from the earth are slowly brought to

the surface and all this ends in a moment of total exhaustion for the workers. Cìaula then becomes agitated, trying to find a spot to rest besides his master: there are no words, but there is a sense of yearning for affection, or even sexual attention of a young man who does not fully know what to do with his body and mind. After their job is done, the miners scrub their skin trying to avoid the rashes and burns otherwise provoked by the sulfur dust. That is one of the reasons why the miners had to minimize clothing and work practically naked, as the pictures of the period show. While a song speaks about Cìaula's difficulties under his master, the protagonist comes on stage wearing his worn-out vest, trying to activate an impossible communication with the audience. Once he falls asleep, Cìaula has nightmares and seems not to find a position that can let him rest; finally, he dreams of new beautiful and colorful worlds (as opposed to his own, which is mainly in black and white). The miners then try to escape the mine that has in fact collapsed, but everyone dies [*a departure from Pirandello's story*] and Cìaula remains alone, not fully aware of what death is, but still determined to find a way out. That is the moment when he finally emerges from the mine and sees the moon. We changed Pirandello's ending, but in a way this was inspired by the story itself, in which Cìaula's master has in fact lost a son because of an explosion.

SB: *You mentioned a possible sexual tension between Cìaula and his master. In fact, there is a distinct homoerotic vibe in the entire performance. While Pirandello speaks of emaciated, weakened workers in the mines, you chose very healthy-looking athletic actor/dancers whose naked bodies convey quite a different message...*

GL: In fact, their physicality is very real. We worked with the performers so that they could build their movements based on their actual bodies, and even express their sensual quality. I guess, that's part of what we do, as the beauty of the bodies is part of the performers' charisma and attracts the audience.

SB: *There were so many artists involved in the production, from video and projections, to soundscapes, to choreography: how did you all manage to collaborate effectively?*

GL: In general, we come up with a script that is more horizontal

than vertical: a number of slots of a specific duration are assigned to the various collaborators. In this way, at any given time, we know what is happening in music, video, movement, etc. for that particular moment. If during rehearsal we find out that a section needs a shorter or longer contribution, it's easy to ask that it be adjusted to the overall frame. For example, when working with Adam Cuthbert, the sound designer and composer, I ask him to create specific moods; sometimes I go through his files and choose some that we can try out during rehearsal, tweaking things as we go, which is easy because the composer is always present. In addition, before I ask everyone to contribute to a specific portion of the score, I try to define very clearly what each scene is about. With choreographer Maura Donohue I create some scenarios for improvisations that are then converted to the language of movement and integrated into the whole performance. One of the main artists was Mark Tambella: we incorporated some of his existing paintings in our research, for example those with narrow staircases that resonated with the theme of the mines, and used others to add texture to the projections or create surreal, dreamlike scenes. As for video, we already had the visual materials from the initial workshop, but when Kathryn Lieber, the new video designer, joined the team, she added a lot of depth to some of the scenes through her technical skills.

SB: *Do you plan further developments for this project?*

GL: I'd like to be able to tour with this piece, especially in Europe, and possibly modify a few minutes and scenes, but it will take about a year in order to obtain funding.

SB: *Thank you very much and good luck on your future projects.*



Ciàula
Photo: Gian Marco Lo Forte