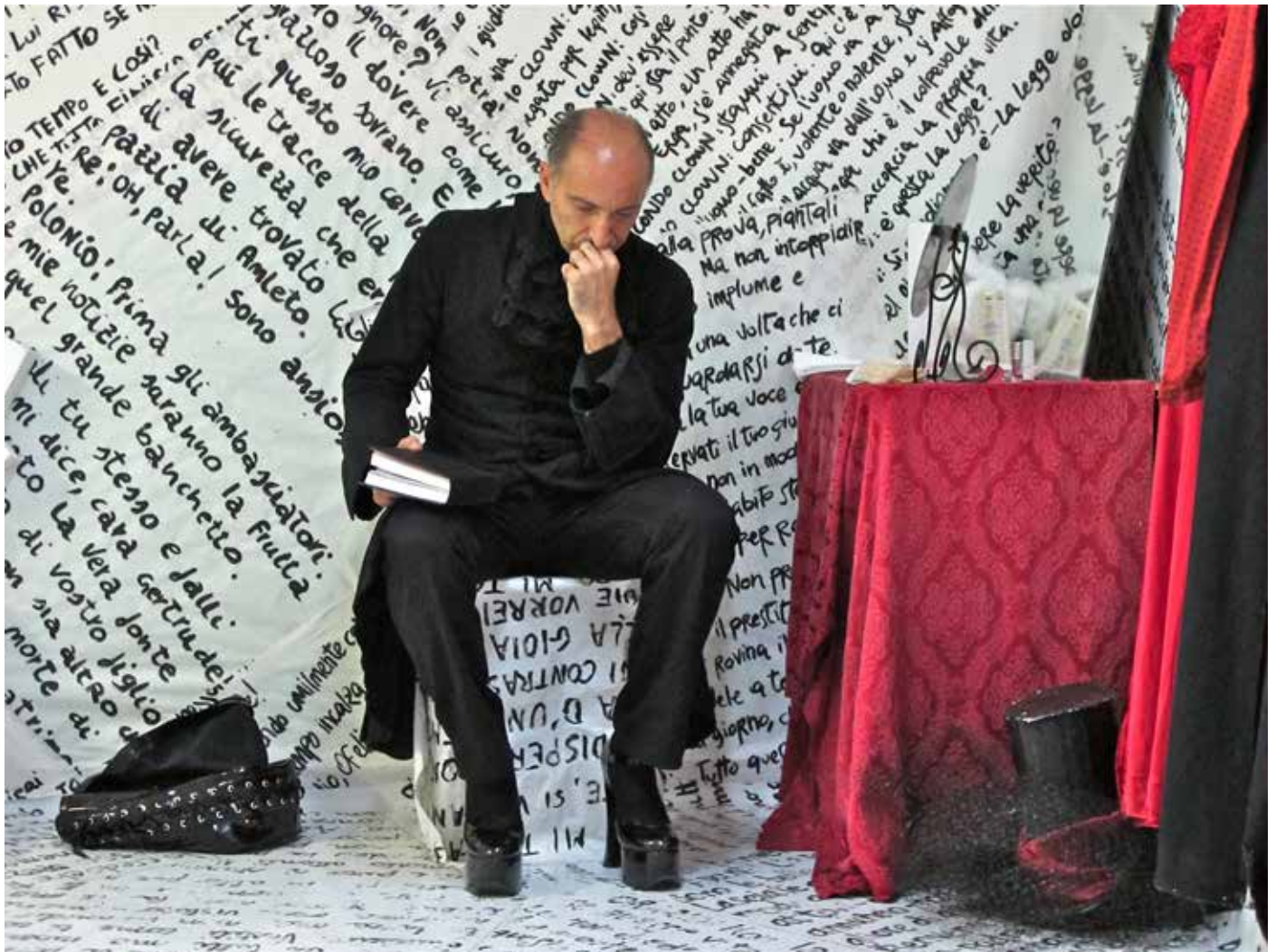


Compagnia della Fortezza, a concrete Utopia

Armando Punzo and his theatre inside a prison

Armando's hands are long and thin, moving gently while he leafs through the millions pages of books he has read, again and again, through his endless days inside Volterra Prison. Armando's eyes are blue and smiling, sweet and teasing when he looks at one of his actors complaining he is ashamed to play in front of other people.

Armando's hands move in the air, shaping the bodies, the smiles, the expressions, the looks of his actors, without touching them, just caressing them, with his gaze. Armando's theatricality coincides with the very first definition of it, given in the early 20's by the Russian director Nikolai Nikolayevich, whose idea of theatricality is an instinct to transform the reality that surrounds him (that's why, in Evreinov's words, you can just seat down at a table of a very crowded square in Marrakesh, to make a wonderful theatre for your own). Armando paints his actors in his mind and he gives them the dignity of being, of existence, perceiving human souls and secrets, without saying it, without realizing it out loud.



It is exactly what Jean Luc Nancy describes in his extraordinary intense short essay *Corps-théâtre*: what human beings in their bodies have in common is to be called to existence by the gaze of the others. It is no more a question of representing the real, but a question of intensifying the existence. Being in the world is not being present yet: the only condition to this ontological presence is the exposition to others. Existence is not just being in the world, but being-with and being-declared

to the world by the gaze of the others. Nancy thinks about theatricality as a way to express the existential condition of the world. This is exactly what happens with Armando Punzo's theatre inside a prison, which he considers a metaphor for a wider constraint. Every time he has the chance to do it, Armando states that the prison is a metaphor for the lack of freedom of human being, not just a physical marginalized space. For him, there is no difference between a prisoner and a free man. He is interested in what human beings could be beyond these historical, incidental categories.



Compagnia della Fortezza, since the beginning

Armando entered Volterra Prison in the August of 1988 and founded the Compagnia della Fortezza, composed by the prisoners participating the theatre workshop, run by Armando himself. He has never left since. He has never gone back to Naples, where he originally comes from and from where he escaped because of a huge and unchangeable theatre tradition and avant-garde he wasn't interested in anymore. There were just three or four hours a day of workshop, in the beginning. Now the theatre workshop is a professional course during all the year long and Carte Blanche, the not for profit arts organization founded by Armando in 1987, is the first Italian National Theatre and Prison Centre, whose protocol agreement was signed by the Italian Ministry of Justice, the Tuscany Region, the Pisa Region, the Volterra Municipality and the ETI (Ente Teatrale Italiano).

Armando enters the prison everyday, except for some winter and summer bank holidays, which he spends with his family. He has conceived and directed more than 30 shows with the Compagnia della Fortezza and with other artists, based on different texts and dramaturgies, staging them inside the prison and outside, touring all around Italy. This is possible because the company is a professional one: the actors are hired and can go out on tour thanks to the 21 Article of the Penitentiary Order, which plans a job activity for the inmates, to be done outside the prison. Cinzia de Felice, managing director of the company, usually organizes the tour dates with the theatres that contact Carte Blanche to invite the company for their theatre seasons or, together with Armando, they create site specific versions of the performances and special projects, when they are invited to perform in contemporary

art venues, historical places or spaces different from the Italian traditional theatres. Unfortunately the Company couldn't respond to the calls from abroad, because the 21 Article makes no provision for the inmates to travel abroad, but Carte Blanche and the Prison Administration are working on that.

The concrete Utopia: a continuous artistic process inside a high security prison



Armando is very tall, but he seems even taller because of his thin and athletic body and because he always dresses in black. A black pair of trousers, a black t-shirt or a black shirt, a black jacket, black socks and a black pair of shoes. No matter what the weather is, he always asks for the windows of the cell dedicated to theatre workshop to be closed, because he can't expose himself to draughts or fresh air. No matter what the time of the year, the day of the week, the month, the season is, he comes inside the prison with his computer and books and he seats at his table, surrounded by the prisoners that participate the theatre workshop. No matter if a guy who comes down from his cell at the first floor to the theatre, for days, months, years and suddenly, he doesn't come anymore, because he is going out or he has been transferred to another prison. No matter if his 30-years work to transform a place of punishment in a place of culture, art and experimentation, where guards, prisoners, artists and collaborators of the company work together to make it happen, where everybody is treated like a person and never like a number or a label (guard, prisoner, good, bad) could instantly disappear, for a mistake, for a lack of trust, a change in the prison administration, a political action from the people who are afraid of this place and this work. No matter if the flow coming and leaving the theatre cell is extremely unstable and people keep on changing, making Armando and the guards the only living memories of this everyday intense experience, at risk to be lost in space and time, everyday.

Armando calls it an auto-detention, a sentence he has inflicted by himself, to find a place where he could work everyday, with people who have time to do that and who are not professional actors.

This is what Armando uses to say, when he is asked by one of the many interviewers why he chose the prison for his theatre and if he wants to rehabilitate these people. He smiles politely and

answer, one more time, that he is not interested in prisoners and the prison, in making a social work inside the prison, but in human being. He questions himself and the people around him, through the theatrical language. He looks through the evil part of human being, embodied by the figure of the prisoner for the common sense. He faces it and he finds something else, beyond it. He knows that the evil is potentially inside everybody.

The recognition of the fact that Good and Evil are not two separated entities, but they coexist inside everyone, is where Armando's artistic work and research begins. He chose the prison because is an artificial Institution, created by humankind. The walls of the prison are just the materialization of a wider imprisonment, experimented by every man in our society. Denying the idea of prison with theatre and poetry, Armando transforms it, changing the relationships and the perception of the Institution from inside, making of one of the most severe Italian prisons, a Cultural Institution and a place to overcome human limits, to be free.

He has transformed the prison in a place where every year, since 1989, a massive audience (an average of 300 hundreds people a day, but could be more, if the Prison Administration would allow it) enters the High Security Prison of Volterra to see Armando Punzo and his Compagnia della Fortezza performing all over the prison spaces, for an average of four/ five days a year, but it could be more days, all year long, if the Prison Administration would allow it. He has transformed it in a place where a group of around 30 collaborators (performers, musicians, poets, set and costumes designers, dancers, photographers, video makers) leave their everyday life to spend their summer in the little town of Volterra and to enter his prison everyday, to work with Armando and the Company to build together the final show. He has changed it in a place where other companies and artists are invited to perform, where critics, intellectuals, politicians, poets, musicians, researchers are gathered to discuss about the role of art and artists in contemporary society.

Ultimately, Armando is transforming it in the actually existing, even if not institutionally recognized, National Theatre inside a prison in the world.