



MISERICORDIA

INTERVIEW WITH EMMA DANTE

Can you tell us about how this show came about?

Emma Dante: It was four years ago, which was an important moment for me, as I had just adopted a child. It was a particularly intimate and new moment for me: motherhood, non-biological motherhood maybe, but just as natural. That event seemed to me a theme I needed to tackle. Then, some time later, I saw something in a hospital that really struck me: a young autistic boy spinning on himself without ever stopping. He was spinning away and laughing. Happy, as if he'd found his centre in this whirlwind. I thought that this dance, which probably had no other cause than happiness, or maybe life, could be a starting point to talk about my experience of motherhood. That very night, I went to see Simone Zambelli dance, and asked him to work with me on this project—he plays Arturo in the show. It's there, with that dance, with that always-moving child, that it all began. We then created the family around him, these three mothers portrayed by actresses from my company. I wanted to explore the theme of motherhood through an underprivileged family, made up of people in dire straits who join forces to survive. To make it work, we improvised a lot. Before we even started working on the story, I wanted the actors to be keenly aware of their own bodies on stage, in relationship to objects, to gazes. And the more we worked, the more I realised that the show was giving birth to itself. As if those women were really giving birth to Arturo. When he dresses up on his own for the first time, he suddenly goes through a transformation from a Pinocchio—a stiff, disjointed body—to an actual child. The show ends with that moment, when Arturo frees himself from the rigidity of his defective body and is about to leave, having finally acquired an identity of his own. And that's when he says his first word, to all three women at the same time: *mamma*.

Why this title and theme: *Misericordia*?

Misericordia, to me, is a love machine. A terrible, wretched, tight place; yet a place where love is born. That's why we chose that title, because that word in Italian is made up of two elements: "poverty" and "heart." But also because that value—as a human, non-religious value—is essential to me at this moment in our history. Mercy is the parent of pity, of compassion, and a somewhat more distant relative of solidarity; it's a way to soften our hearts, to find in us the strength to accept and welcome the more vulnerable. We're going through a time of great intolerance between people, especially towards those who most need help. That's why I think it's important for the audience to look at the story of *Misericordia* with mercy, for them to accept this family that has been reduced to living in shameful and unacceptable conditions. In a way, the question of mercy is directed more at the audience than at the characters. Because for those three women, it's natural, obvious. They don't ask themselves if they agree to love Arturo; they love him, that's it. In spite of their hardships, they accept this situation and are able to find compassion for him within themselves. They welcome him, care for him, look after him so he doesn't fall down... then they let him go into a better world. In this case, a centre for special needs children—but to them, compared with the house they live in, it can only be better.

***Misericordia* mixes several languages: the language of words, with two Italian dialects—of Sicily and Apulia—but also the language of the body, through dance.**

Everything arises at the same time. Words at the same time as noises, voices, or movements; none is more important than the others, they all come together to create a single score. Like language, the bodies in my shows also have their own imperfect diction and grammar, like something savage driving them. In a way, their movements could be seen as a dialect. It's a recurring theme in my theatre: if the characters are always excessive, it's because they don't speak the language of the educated but an almost animal language, in which gestures always accompany the words. Each word comes from the organs, it's the body that speaks. Although Arturo remains mute through most of the show, he might be the character who speaks the most, thanks to his body, which is his means of expression. For him, noises trigger emotions, as when he hears the clicking of knitting needles and his body reacts to those vibrations. Thanks to his talent as a dancer, Simone Zambelli manages to make us forget about the dance, to the point that all we see on stage is a body telling the story of a happy illness. Movement can create meaning where the words alone aren't always enough. Particularly when, like me, you use dialects—which can be very disorienting for Italian audiences, as there aren't any surtitles and they often have trouble understanding all the dialogue in my shows! But what's important isn't to understand every word my characters say; it's for the audience to enter their story. For them not to face their madness but to be within it, to take part in it. For instance, *Misericordia* opens with two actresses whispering to each other. Even I don't know what they're saying, it's entirely improvised; but what matters is that we understand right away that there's a conspiracy here from which the third woman is excluded. What matters is that we enter the show through conflict, as if in the middle of a slap in the face.

Can you tell us more about this trinity? Who are those three women?

When we started working on *Misericordia*, the three women were very similar. They looked at Arturo with alternatively the same love or the same hatred. But the further we went, the more it became necessary to differentiate them. None of us are mothers or women in the exact same way. Although all three of them care for the child, each does it in a perceptibly different way. And if one of them does it with more distance—if, like Nuzza, she even says that Arturo's mother should have had an abortion—it doesn't mean that she loves him any less. One can be a mother even without softness or tenderness. But those women don't exist only as mothers. They are also beings subjected to a lot of violence and poverty, in a world where they are oppressed by men. And it is after being severely beaten by her boyfriend that Arturo's mother gave birth to this disjointed child. Right now, this terrible question of violence against women, against weak bodies mercilessly massacred, is something that is very important to me and that I feel obligated to always bring up in my theatre. Those lives should not be forgotten. To be a woman, in my shows, unfortunately means being subjected to that violence, to that constant threat of death: those characters are victims, they live in a social context of extreme disadvantage, without anyone to protect them. That's why *Misericordia* is a celebration of women, both to evoke their amazing capabilities, but also to remind us of their condition as inferior which sadly forces them to always struggle and to make great sacrifices. In spite of all that, in the show they manage to make it out. We can only imagine what would have happened if the same situation had happened to men, they probably would have killed each other! I see those women as the Fates, three mythological beings who manage to work miracles through love and resilience. When the orchestra comes at the end and a happy Arturo leaves, there's a ray of hope: hope that this one life could be saved, in spite of the wretchedness of its origins. And all that thanks to those three women.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobricon in February 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach