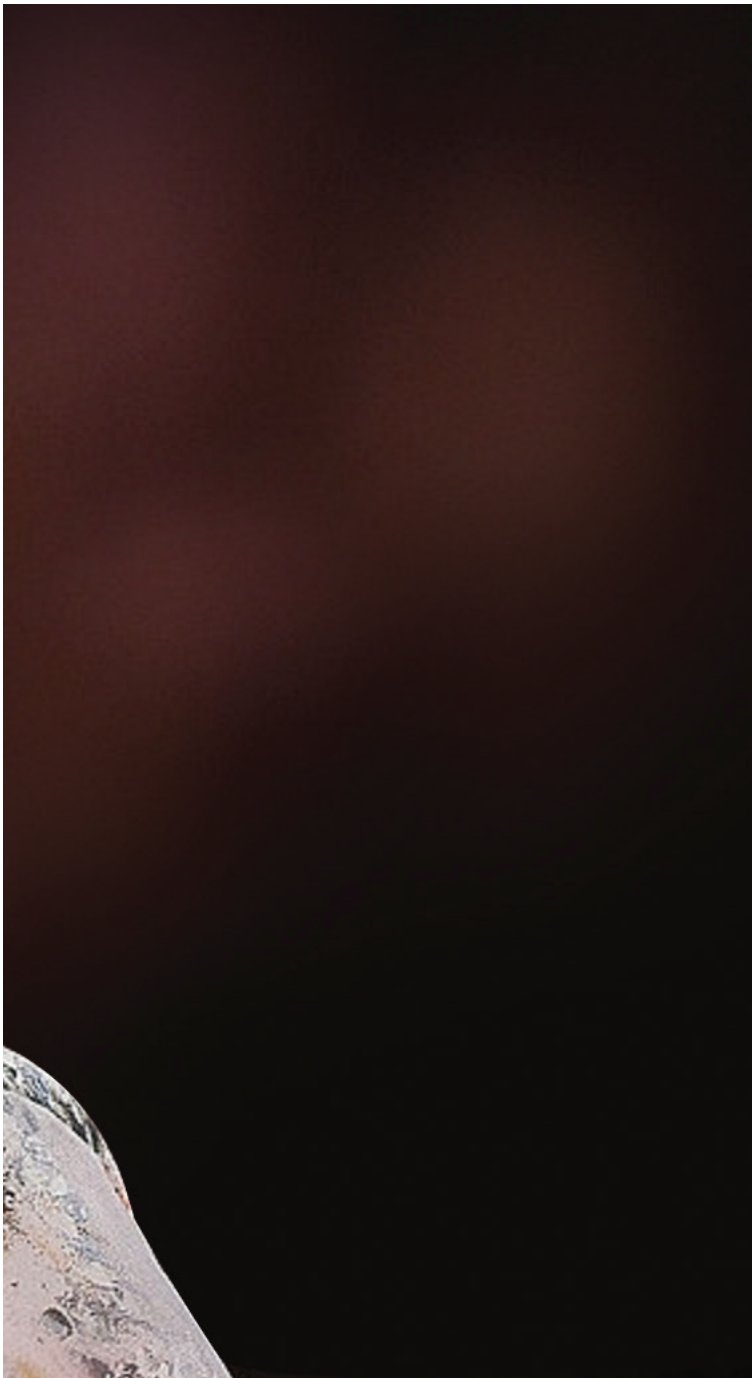




Emma Dante. Photo: Stefania D'Alessandro

EMMA AND



The impalpable partition between light and darkness, the rim of the bed morphing into a trampoline to jump into the void, the invisible edge where the sea meets the sand: Emma Dante's "Le Sorelle Macaluso" ("The Macaluso Sisters," 2014) asks us to see borders, to see how they provoke sparks and then inexorably dissolve. In theater, film, fiction, opera and children's stories, her artistic vision is about discerning and standing over these boundaries, not so much as an act of defiance but as a gesture of creative questioning. Sicily, the (is)land she is from, is a lush source of inspiration for her art: a place between geographies and civilizations, a light-filled space replete with shadows, a baroque corner plagued by paucity.

BY TERESA FIORE

HER SISTERS

Male authors from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa to Leonardo Sciascia have memorialized these contrasts in a remarkable yet familiar language within learned circles. For Emma Dante, Sicily — and in particular its capital, Palermo — is instead the home of a profoundly local humanity, often a vibrant *lumpenproletariat*. She delves in the dark meanders of this quotidian, through plays that explode into excess despite their minimalistic mise-en-scène and plots.

“Le Sorelle” brings to a *summa* her exploration of the blurring of genders, the blending of sorrow and joy, and the dialogue between tragedy and comedy in its intense and refined treatment of family and death. Seven sisters and their close family members, both alive and dead, line up along the edge of the stage to recount their dreams, frustrations and errors. They are as ready to help as to hurt one another in recognizing the struggles and losses of their lives: poverty, sickness, disability, missing or inadequate parents, shattered desires. “We do not even have the eyes to cry,” as a quintessentially Sicilian adage goes (which “Le Sorelle” interpolates fleetingly). Yet the stories of these people, as is the case in all of Dante’s works, are somehow secondary; it’s all about logic-defying flashes in which the present moment, imbued with physical outbursts and psychological knots, is articulated with visceral expressivity.

The vitality of Dante’s art stems from repeated encounters with death, punctuated by tragic rhythms and comic flurries, channeled through hyper-communicative bodies and dense,



“Le Sorelle Macaluso.” Photo: Carmine Maringola

almost impenetrable, Southern dialects. Hers is not a macabre dance with death, but a simultaneously gentle and devastating pas de deux. “Le Sorelle” was inspired by a story Dante heard from a friend. One night his deliriously ill grandmother screamed out to her daughter: “Ultimately, am I alive or dead?”

Emma Dante is an artist who persistently embraces contradictions and illuminates divisions, the better to subvert them.

The daughter replied: “Alive! You are alive, Mom!” And the grandmother sardonically retorted: “Alive, sure . . . I have been dead for a while, and none of you tells me so as not to scare me.” Dante takes the story to another dimension, since being alive is an equally scary prospect for some of the dispossessed characters of her play.

Dante describes her work as a theater of poetry, not of provocation, despite its iconoclastic quality. It has become her signature to place her actors in a row facing the audience, beginning with “mPalermu” (“In Palermo,” 2001), which launched her as a revolutionary voice in Italian theater. This compositional solution literally creates another boundary, giving flesh to the separation between stage and audience, and allowing Dante to give shape and color to her vision with a blend of the sacred and the ordinary: her characters stand along the proscenium as if it were the Day of Judgment or the front of a street parade. A skilled costume designer, she privileges simple yet extremely symbolic attires, which the actors slip into and out of onstage to remind us of yet another threshold, that between the public role and the condition of the soul that is ultimately “ignuda” (naked), as Pirandello would have said. In “Le Sorelle” Dante chooses the black clothes of the funeral and lets them burst into colorful summer dresses and then bathing suits for the sisters, while the father puts on a displacing negligee with masculine prowess; the young nephew Davidù wears Maradona’s soccer uniform (a silent homage to Davide Enia, another spellbinding Sicilian writer), and one of the sisters, Maria, dons the gifts of nature as she frames the entire play through her dances with death. Or is it life? Or is it just love?

Perhaps the answer lies in the lyrics the sisters sing to please their father: “Si tu mori / Vogghiu muriri / ‘Nsieme a tiia!” They come from a classic Sicilian tune, “The Swordfish,” made



famous by Domenico Modugno. In it, a male swordfish decides to be trapped by the fishermen who have killed his beloved: “If you die, I want to die with you.” The ultimate desire may be to die with the dead or, as in the case of “Le Sorelle,” to live with them in a dream pregnant with the South.

Russoniello, my colleague Dr. Marisa Trubiano and myself as we surtitled her work, recognizing the intrinsic inadequacy of our rendition. “Le Sorelle” will make those titles simultaneously necessary and unnecessary; at times Dante’s language transcends concrete meaning and becomes pure sound.

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Dante’s aesthetic and narrative choices are glorified or vilified for being obsessively Sicilian and, by extension, Southern. Yet her references to the South can be ephemeral, almost encoded, like the cassatella in “mPalermu” or, as in “Le Sorelle,” the puppet opera’s duels, which briefly capture the theatricality of the struggle for life before turning into props (a line of cross-marked shields looking like a religious boundary). The quintessential element that explains the autochthonous nature of her work (also imbued in her company’s name, South Western Coast) undoubtedly remains her linguistic palette. Thick accents, ancestral words, local expressions, ritualistic repetitions, quotations from the folk tradition: a dream and nightmare for Montclair State University student Marta

This will be Emma Dante’s first time in the United States (her work traveled here once, without her). Represented for too long as an *enfant terrible* in a country like Italy that considers even 40-year-olds still unripe, she is now demonstrating a coherence of vision across several forms and genres — and combines a profound gender consciousness with the seasoned legacy of male maestri, ranging from Antonin Artaud to Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. Yet when I approached her to discuss the theme of women in theater, she was reluctant to frame her work from this perspective despite some of her statements about women’s exclusion — a typical move from an artist who persistently embraces contradictions and illuminates divisions, the better to subvert them.