

Romeo onstage at the Teatro Puntozero Beccaria

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Abstract

The following is a review of the show *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?* performed at the Teatro Puntozero Beccaria on 1 December 2018.

There are no metal detectors or security to go through to access the Teatro Puntozero Beccaria, situated inside the Cesare Beccaria Youth Detention Centre. You just need to sign up online and you can get in, as you can access any other theatre in Milan. Once you climb the stairs, which are decorated with drawings and props, you are welcomed into a large theatre. The place is packed with young people: some of them are in the audience, others onstage, and among them are a lot of students from Milan University. For more than two months, this theatre was their school. Under the supervision of British theatre teachers Mariacristina Cavecchi and Margaret Rose, they had a chance to work and interact with minors in prison and actors of the Puntozero company. Giuseppe Scutellà and Lisa Mazoni have worked together for thirty years to rehabilitate the boys at the Beccaria through theatre, thus carrying out a programme of social inclusion involving professional actors.

Using an original script written by the group, the Puntozero company put on a show, *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?* in which they built a court case against Romeo, following the procedures of juvenile criminal law. As a result of a clash between the two rival groups of Capulets and Montagues, Tybalt Capulet kills Mercutio, Romeo Montague's best friend. The young Montague then decides to avenge his friend by stabbing Tybalt to death.

In this retelling, after Tybalt's murder, Romeo is tried for murder: in Shakespeare's play, at the time of the events, the boy is underage, like the

boys who work with the Puntozero company and who often know what it means to lose control and engage in gang fighting. The show starts with the Capulets, dressed in blue, and the Montagues, in red, facing each other in two lines in the changing room of a gym: the boys and girls in the two groups are fighting and cursing each other; a state of affairs that unfortunately still happens in schools, clubs, or on the streets often as a result of bullying.

However, the core element of the show is the trial. It is set on a slightly tilted platform stage, which helps the audience feel part of the debate, as they are called on to judge what unfolds before their eyes. This mock trial is faithful to a real one, thanks to the talks during the workshop by law teachers who helped make the trial realistic and accurate.

It's quite a unique version of *Romeo and Juliet*: there's no balcony, no forbidden love affair, and what is most striking, the two lovers don't die at the end. The focus is, instead, on Romeo's life after Tybalt's murder. Following the procedures and the educational purpose of the Puntozero company, the actors are given different roles: some act as prosecutors, others as defence lawyers, lay judges and witnesses. There is even somebody who plays a psychologist, seeing this is a juvenile trial.

The trial retraces the events that led up to Tybalt's murder to decide whether Romeo is guilty or not. The accused then takes the floor and, in a long monologue, explains how difficult it is to understand the severity and the consequences of one's actions in such a dramatic situation. As he sits alone in his cell, he goes through the events again and blames himself for what he did. He is scared because he doesn't know what is going to happen to him, and he wonders what his beloved Juliet is going to think of him. He goes back to the moment he killed Tybalt and says he will never forget the look in his victim's dying eyes.

One of the most interesting aspects of the trial is the prosecution's psychological report, which provides a detailed analysis of the two gangs' deviant behaviour: Mercutio is aggressive, Benvolio does drugs, Romeo is cynical. At one point, there is also the psychological evaluation of Romeo's behaviour, which the Prosecutor uses to demonstrate that Romeo acted impulsively and out of rage. The defence, on the other hand, wants to prove that Romeo's behaviour was a consequence of the violent environment he

grew up in, and that ultimately affected his actions. Romeo is put on probation at the end of the trial, as Italy's juvenile law allows.

Particularly moving are the videos of the young men who did not have permission to leave the prison but were allowed into the "blue room" where, under the supervision of prison officers, they participate in the workshop and interact with the students. In these videos, they tell their stories and explain why they were convicted in the presence of the students who act as lawyers or social workers. This glimpse of the reality of prison life shows how an irresponsible choice can compromise a person's life. The words they use, and their general interpretations reveal how fragile and disoriented they are, even if they may act tough and confident. Their language reflects the way young people talk, especially when they use slang or cuss. This makes the situation seem more real.

The actors, university students and imprisoned boys seem at ease as they walk on stage. They act, dance and re-enact moments of their lives, thus showing how solidarity and coexistence are possible no matter how different people are.

I would say, then, that this experiment was a success: it is possible to use Shakespeare's works as an excuse and a starting point to talk about the boys and girls who commit serious crimes. *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?* is an original script that seems a sequel to Shakespeare's famous tragedy. It questions what would have happened to Romeo, had he not died and omits all the other elements of the original play. Shakespeare is still our contemporary; his works make us question our behaviour, which has not changed since he wrote his plays.

The performances by the Puntozero company show how people from different backgrounds can work together in a positive environment. None of this would be possible if it weren't for the educators and actors who work with them, for Lisa Mazoni, who takes care of them on stage, and Giuseppe Scutellà, who is strict but also acts as a big brother to them.

The workshop is a positive alternative to traditional university education. It allows young students to experience the harsh life of their peers in prison, while providing them with the educational tools they need. In addition, the participants were all involved in the project in different ways: some wrote the script, others built the set, acted, made videos, or worked in the media office to promote the final event. This was an opportunity for both

students and inmates to live and grow together, but also for the inmates to atone for the crimes committed in the past.

After a standing ovation, the actors flock to the stalls to greet the audience. They hug each other, and you can see that they are really moved because they know that this is the end, although they don't want it to be over.

Logbooks

I wish I could hold the world in my hands
And show it to you, so true
So beautiful
So full of colours and opportunities,
So distant from any crime and the grey hopelessness
Of a life that has already been written.
We are wandering poets,
Writers of our own destiny,
And we won't let these chains choke our hearts,
Our voice will forever roam this earth
If only we try to break the constraints of the unknown.

I wish to give you hope
And the will to fight for it,
Because everyone has the right to slip up
And learn from their mistakes
And start anew,
And be Free.

Michela Segato, 20 November

Shenjat që kam në trup të bera nga demonët kur vdiqa
Unë këtë demon tashmë e kam varrosur, ndjek dritën,
mbrapa nuk kthehem. Ngre kokën lart, falenderoj
qiellin, kam një mundësi, rinis nga zero. Jetoj jetën
me zemrën e qet, nuk dua të vuaj duke mendur për helmin.
E di që engjëllin një ditë e pashë e nga ajo ditë në
fytyrë kam gjithmonë një buzëqeshje
Të jesh i lirë, të jetosh i lirë, prej sa kohe është që e
kam dhëshiruar
Paratë nuk janë gjithcka, e kisha parë në një ënderr,
me paratë nuk mund të blej gjithë dashurinë për të
cilën kam nevoj.

Kristian Sefgjini, 20 November