

ARTICLE

Performing Gender, Gender as Performance: Politics, Aesthetics and Performativity in Dacia Maraini's 'Barricade' Theatre

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Dacia Maraini's 1970s dramaturgical oeuvre, which the author has identified as her most 'barricade' theatre, evidences an undisputable commitment to the cause of second-wave Italian feminism. While the connection between social protest and women's self-representation in Maraini's theatre has amply, and convincingly, been discussed (Sumeli Weinberg 1993; Cavallaro 2000; Mariani: 1998, 2000; Cruciata 2003; Marinelli and Matassa 2008), her use of feminist ideology in disrupting existing aesthetic conventions has received scarce scholarly attention. Current criticism of feminist theatre in general, and of Maraini's in particular, seems to privilege the dramatic text at the expenses of an equally as important analysis of the visual aspects of the theatrical performance per se. This article acknowledges the dramatic work as an embodied form of narration that, as such, is best analysed by taking into account, also, its aesthetic components. It discusses two plays, *Il Manifesto* (1969) and *La donna perfetta* (1974), that are representative of Maraini's gender politics and theatrical aesthetics at the time they were written. Looking not just at the written text, but also at the original video recordings of the performances, the aim of my study is twofold. Firstly, it assesses the use of theatre in rethinking the representation of women's gender roles in 1970s. Secondly, it foregrounds the impact of feminist ideology in rupturing existing dramatic conventions. Continuing the line of mimetic rejection inaugurated in the Italian context by Luigi Pirandello amongst others, whilst also distancing itself from the excess of experimentalism of the coeval neo-avant-garde, Maraini's feminist theatre proves a convincing political tool to restore the voice of women's long silenced body — with the focus on the theatrical (in the sense of both dramatic and deliberately exaggerated) nature of the gendered identity performed on stage. Starting from the premise that our masculine and feminine roles are not rooted in biology or anatomy, but in codes of behaviour that are learned and then re-enacted on a daily basis (Butler 1988, 1999), the plays discussed here exemplify the way in which feminist performance can become a privileged site through which these reiterations emerge, and theatre the space that makes this emergence possible.

It was not until the early 1970s that the first feminist theatre companies began to emerge in the major Italian cities.¹ Scholarship on Italian women's writing has accounted for this relatively late advent of female dramatists in Italy in comparison with other countries such as Britain or the United States as being due to a theatrical tradition whereby (male) directors and leading actors exerted a major influence over playwrights, so much so that female authors were doubly marginalised, as women *and* as dramatists (O'Healy 254). A noticeable shift in this hierarchy occurred in concomitance with the onset of feminist dramaturgy, when women began authoring and directing their own plays – which happened predominantly outside mainstream theatre, in alternative venues or on the streets – so as to reach a wider audience. Playwright, poet, essayist and activist Dacia Maraini (1936) is commonly acknowledged as one of the most prominent figures of this new theatrical wave. While the interconnection between social protest and women's self-representation in Maraini's theatre has been convincingly discussed (Sumeli Weinberg 1993; Cavallaro 2000; Mariani: 1998; Cruciata 2003; Marinelli and Matassa 2008), her use of feminist ideology in disrupting existing aesthetic conventions has largely been neglected by the Italian critical canon.

This article acknowledges the dramatic work as an *embodied* form of narration that, as such, is best analysed by also taking into account the aesthetic components of the performance itself. It discusses two plays, *Il manifesto* (1969) and *La donna perfetta* (1974), which are brought together because they share an underlying notion of *impegno* as well as structural and thematic affinities – either by homology or symmetrical opposition – that are representative of Maraini's gender politics and theatrical aesthetics at the time they were written.² Taking these works as paradigmatic of the social and political activism that informed Italian feminist dramaturgy at its onset and looking at both the *dramatic text* (i.e. the stage dialogue) and the *performance text* (i.e. the actual play), the aim of this article is twofold.³ It evaluates the extent to which theatre served as an ideological vehicle for feminism in representing and denouncing women's gender roles in 1970s Italy, and it also assesses how, in turn, feminist ideology impacted on theatre in departing from existing dramatic conventions and introducing new aesthetic advances. Judith Butler's theory of gender formation will allow me to establish a connection between (theatrical) performance and (gender) performativity in the plays chosen for discussion, with a focus on the representation of the female body and the theatrical nature – in the sense of not just dramatic but also deliberately exaggerated – of the gender identity it performs on stage. In her 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' (1988), Butler brings theatrical notions to the social rituals that dominate everyday relations and applies them to the performance of gender: 'In what sense, then, is gender an act? As [...] suggest[ed] in studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation' ('Performative Acts' 526; Butler's emphasis). The theatrical terminology here employed brings specific concerns to the foreground. By defining gender as an 'act' or as a 'social performance' that 'wear[s] certain cultural significations' ('Performative Acts' 525), Butler is drawing an explicit connection between theatrical performance and gen-

¹ This study would not have been possible without the generous support of the Venice Biennale, which has proved instrumental in affording me a digital copy of the original video recording of *La donna perfetta* – until recently available only in Super 8 format. My thanks also go to Eugenio Murrari for circumventing the lack of the original recording of *Il manifesto* by kindly providing the rehearsal video of the play, on which the present analysis is based. The term 'barricade' theatre is Maraini's own coinage. It refers to her 1970s dramaturgical oeuvre, which the author has identified as her most politically engaged ('barricade') theatre (Maraini, "Il teatro delle donne", 63–5).

² Maraini refers to *Il manifesto* and *La donna perfetta* as part of her most 'ideological' theatre (Anderlini and Maraini 159). The plays have previously been studied comparatively by Daniela Cavallaro (2000) from the point of view of their ideological value and their sharing a mix of biblical and fairytale elements.

³ I borrow the terminological distinction between 'performance' and 'dramatic' text from Keir Elam (2).

der identity.⁴ Moving along Butlerian lines, my analysis of Maraini's plays focuses on the characters' gender *performances* (specifically, the enactment of their femininity); performances that are *performative* insofar as they reveal the facticity of the gender identities constituted in and through the performance itself ('gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be'; *Gender Trouble* 33). Functional to the didacticism implicit in Maraini's theatre is the recuperation of the dialogic dimension at a time when the tendency, on the national as well on the European stage, was to place great emphasis on gesture, body and improvisation at the expense of the literary text.⁵ Maraini's feminist dramaturgy impacted greatly on the Italian theatrical landscape of the day, bringing about corresponding new approaches to theatre writing and making. Continuing the line of mimetic rejection inaugurated in the Italian context by Luigi Pirandello among others, while also distancing itself from the excess of experimentalism of the coeval neo-avant-garde – especially as far as the use, indeed re-evaluation, of language is concerned – Maraini developed her own *teatro di parola*, a convincing political tool to restore the voice of women's long silenced body.⁶

1. Maraini's theatre: Towards a Feminist *Impegno*

Dacia Maraini is a remarkable figure in the Italian cultural and artistic panorama and one of the most prolific national playwrights to date.⁷ It is acknowledged that the late 1960s 'marked the beginning of Maraini's feminist activities and activism: she conducted sociological inquiries (e.g., on conditions in women's prisons), published articles, wrote and produced plays' (Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 4), concurrently reflecting in her texts the major concerns of the women's movement, such as abortion, conjugal abuse, gender violence and maternity. In 1967, together with intellectuals such as Alberto Moravia and Enzo Siciliano, with actors Carlotta Barilli, Carlo Montagna and Paolo Bonacelli and with director Roberto Guicciardini, she founded Il Porcospino, a Roman theatre company with strong links with the literary world. To this phase belong *La famiglia normale* (1966), inspired by the 'theatre of the absurd' and the Pirandellian-inflected *Il ricatto a teatro* (1967), directed by Living Theatre director Peter Hartman.⁸

⁴ Since 'performance' and 'performativity' are often (and mistakenly) conflated in critical studies adopting a Butlerian frame, it is worth noting that Butler does make a clear distinction between theatrical and gender acts: whereas a theatrical performance presupposes a script taken up by the actor and recited at will, in the performance of gender actors 'are always already on the stage' ('Performative Acts' 526). In other words, gender 'is what is put on' ('Performative Acts' 531), but the choice of one's role already *pre-exists* the subjects.

⁵ Franca Angelini notes the impact of American so-called 'underground' theatre in Italy in those years, whose influences she recognises, for instance, in the dramaturgy of Carmelo Bene: 'è un teatro che abolisce il testo e lo dissacra, lo contamina con tecniche specialmente di nuova visualizzazione, derivate dalla pittura, limita la parola e la usa in modo illogico, sviluppa la gestualità' [it is a theatre that abolishes the written text and discredits it; it contaminates it especially with new visual techniques deriving from painting; it reduces the use of the word and makes it illogical; it enhances gesture] (149). This and all subsequent translations from the Italian original are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁶ The shattering of the bourgeois pretence of mimetic illusion through recourse to the metatheatrical expedient dates back to Shakespeare (particularly to the device of the 'play within a play' that we find in the likes of *Hamlet*). Specifically within the Italian context, this was reappropriated by Goldoni and later by the Futurists and the exponents of the neo-avant-garde. However, Pirandello was able to take this notion of a theatre-in-the-theatre to an even higher level of seriousness, as is evident in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921). This is a play built entirely around a tension between 'illusion' and 'reality' and, thus, between 'art' and 'life' – to the point that the actors play not just other actors but also themselves. For more on Pirandello's (meta)theatre vis-à-vis European and Italian traditions, see Vicentini (1993).

⁷ In 2000, the publishing house Rizzoli gathered a selection of forty plays by Maraini written from 1966 until then, and published them in chronological order in the two-volume collection *Fare Teatro 1966–2000* (*Fare Teatro* 2000). The original project was to include all of Maraini's dramaturgical oeuvre, which would have resulted in over 2,500 pages (Messina 2 n. 2).

⁸ In an interview with Murralli, Maraini admits Ionesco to have been a major source of inspiration in the writing of *La famiglia normale* (Maraini and Murralli 32), a play that, through one-way, concentric conversations, questions

Shortly thereafter, in 1968, it was the turn of theatre companies La compagnia Blu and Teatroggi, set up in a space owned by the cultural section of the Italian Communist Party in the working-class Roman suburb of Centocelle. The intention was to expand theatre's boundaries outside of or beyond its official (elitist) places, the bourgeois playhouses that is, and hand it back to the people – a democratic artistic strategy referred to as *decentramento* [decentralisation] that Maraini summarises as “dare una voce a chi non ce l’ha” [giving a voice to those who do not have it] (*Fare Teatro* 4). On this occasion, Maraini and her fellow actors converted a former garage into a makeshift theatre room, building the stage themselves. *Il manifesto*, the first play to be discussed here, was performed in this context. On the social intent behind her dramaturgy of those years, Maraini recalls: ‘Volevamo mettere le nostre voci, i nostri talenti al servizio di chi non aveva diritto di parola: i disoccupati, i senza casa, i pazzi, i carcerati, le prostitute’ [We wanted to put our voices and our talents to the service of those who did not have the right to speak: the unemployed, homeless, lunatics, inmates, prostitutes] (Marinelli and Matassa 18). One can detect in these lines an echo of a fundamental category in postwar Italy used to refer to the connection between artistic production and politics, that of *impegno* (Burns 2001; Antonello and Mussgnug 2009). Envisaging ‘an ethical or political position channelled through specific cultural and artistic activities, against any restrictive ideological brace’ (Antonello and Mussgnug 11), *impegno* foregrounds the need to rethink the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Maraini was addressing these concerns at the time: ‘Sono gli anni della passione politica. Facendo teatro si può cambiare il mondo? [Those were the years of political passion. Is it possible to change the world by doing theatre?] (*Fare Teatro* 4), she asked herself, reaching the conclusion that ‘forse no, ma si può aiutare qualche testa a riflettere, si può risvegliare qualche coscienza, si può suscitare qualche nuovo pensiero, qualche sospetto, qualche moto di sdegno o di protesta’ [maybe not, but you can help people think, you can raise their consciousness, you can stimulate thoughts, doubts, surges of disdain or protest] (*Fare Teatro* 4).

In 1973, combining her passion for the theatrical with her feminist activism, Maraini founded, together with Adele Cambria, Maricla Boggio, Edith Bruck and Annabelli Cerliani among others, her own women-only theatre, La Maddalena, the first of its kind in Italy and a clear example of her dedication to the cause of women.⁹ The collective employed women, allowing them to be involved in all aspects of the theatrical production as directors, actors, stage managers and even technicians, but aimed at reaching a wider audience. As recalled by Maraini: ‘Noi volevamo dare spazio alle donne perché si esprimessero in prima persona. Ma era rivolto a tutti’ [We wanted to give women space, so that they could express themselves first-hand. But it was addressed to anyone] (Maraini and Murralli 37). In addition to staging plays, Maraini’s theatre group offered workshops in writing for the stage as well as public forums on issues of concern to the feminist movement, such as rape, abortion and prostitution, and would often invite prominent feminist thinkers of the calibre of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Kate Millett as speakers. La Maddalena opened its doors with the play *Mara, Maria, Marianna*, written by Maraini (playing Maria, Mafalda and Silvana) and Edith Bruck (playing Mara and Anna) and directed by Maricla Boggio (playing Marianna, and Marisa della Magliana). In it, a number of women tell their stories in an autobiographical and monologic manner that can be read as an *ante litteram* enactment of the feminist practice

the commonplaces of ‘normal’ language. The virtually contemporaneous *Il ricatto a teatro*, on the other hand, exploits the metatheatrical device and, following the footsteps of Pirandello, reveals itself as fiction, with the actors playing themselves on stage.

⁹ The name La Maddalena refers to the religious character of Mary Magdalene, after whom the former church (later converted into a printing shop) that hosted Maraini’s collective was named (Mitchell 1990: 337).

of *autocoscienza* in the Italian context.¹⁰ To this first theatrical phase also belongs one of the most controversial works by Maraini, *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente* (1973), arguably one of her best-known and most internationally acclaimed plays to date.¹¹ Framed within a Marxist-feminist lens, it equates marriage to prostitution on account of both being premised upon the objectification of the woman's body in exchange for money. The play is purposely provocative, with the main protagonist (Michela Caruso in the original production) stepping out of character several times during the performance to confront the audience on the topic of sexual commerce. The La Maddalena collective, which during the 1970s was producing up to five plays each season, finally closed in 1990 due to the paucity of public funding and increasing taxation. Maraini laments the lack of institutional support back then, which she links to a conspiratorial economic policy: 'È stata una politica suicida per la cultura di innovazione. Evidentemente la consideravano inutile, o fastidiosa. Insomma volevano farci chiudere. La censura non funzionava più, allora hanno provato con l'economia e ci sono riusciti' [It was a suicidal politics for the culture of innovation. Clearly, they deemed it unnecessary, annoying even. In short, they wanted us to shut down. Censorship no longer worked, so they tried hitting us economically, and they succeeded] (Farrell and Maraini 154).¹² Neither the shortage of financial aid nor the lack of support from her intellectual milieu, however, was sufficient to exhaust Maraini's dramaturgical vein. She has continued to do theatre in both conventional and unconventional spaces, constantly updating her repertoire to include topics of national and international concern as she did, for instance, with the more recent *Passi affrettati* (2007). This play was based on real testimonies from the humanitarian organisation Amnesty International and documents women's sufferings around the world.

There are many sources that, to a greater or lesser extent, inform Maraini's theatre. The most obvious ones seem to be: Pirandello (metatheatrical device); Brecht (predilection for the didactic form); Beckett and Ionesco (the void and idiosyncrasies of social interactions); the Living Theatre company (a 'democratic', non-hierarchical approach to theatre-making); Noh (use of typified masks).¹³ Going beyond the national neo-avant-garde and looking mainly – albeit not exclusively – at foreign theatre for inspiration, Maraini was able to craft a theatre that was sociologically and historically *impegnato*. Its didacticism, however, was not an

¹⁰ The practice was born in the United States at the end of the 1960s, where it was known as 'consciousness-raising', and was adopted by Italian feminists a decade later, translating its name into *autocoscienza* – a term coined by Carla Lonzi that further emphasises 'the self-determined and self-directed quality of the process of achieving a new consciousness/awareness' (Bono and Kemp 9). It consisted in women gathering to share their personal experiences, in a fashion that has been seen as not too dissimilar from that of psychoanalytical sessions, except that it replaced mediation by the analyst with that of 'the mirror that was [one's] fellow woman' (De Lauretis and Cicogna 45). In the economy of the movement, this practice aimed at making women aware that they shared their marginalisation from men, besides leading them to a better understanding of their bodies.

¹¹ *Dialogo* has since been performed in Paris, London, Brussels, Munich, Utrecht, Lisbon, Vienna, Sydney and Melbourne (Mitchell 339).

¹² In addition to setting up and running the theatre companies discussed above, all throughout the 1970s Maraini continued to do *teatro di strada* (street theatre), whose importance she summarises in these terms: 'Il teatro di strada trattava in maniera semplice, con tamburi, canti e scene improvvisate, i grandi temi sociali: la mancanza di case per i senzatetto, la povertà, la delinquenza dei quartieri di periferia, l'aborto clandestino, l'emigrazione forzata, la violenza in famiglia, il degrado dei manicomi, delle prigioni' [Street theatre dealt with pressing social concerns: the lack of housing for homeless people, poverty, crime in the suburbs, clandestine abortion, forced emigration, domestic violence, the decay of the mental institutions and the prisons – and it did so in a simple way, using drums, songs and improvisation] (Farrell and Maraini 152).

¹³ Maraini admits having been inspired by Brecht in her political and ideological dramaturgy (first, 'barricade' theatre) and by Pirandello (during a second phase characterised by a more psychological, introspective turn) (Cattaruzza 23). Living Theatre was an American experimental theatre group created by Judith Malina and Julian Beck in 1947 as a form of politically committed, Brechtian art. In the late 1960s this company lived and worked in Italy, and their approach to theatre-making had a profound impact among their contemporaries including Maraini herself.

end in itself, for it was coupled with linguistic and aesthetic investigation. In what scholarship refers to as *il sessantotto teatrale*, namely a time of general dissatisfaction with existing theatrical conventions concomitant with the social and political turmoil that overtook the country in the late 1960s, this type of theatre questioned established models such as the *teatro della chiacchiera* (theatre of chatter) or the avant-garde *teatro del Gesto o dell'Urlo* (theatre of the gesture or howl) (De Marinis 243). In this climate of artistic contestation and reformation, Maraini pursued her own dramaturgy, finding her place between the aesthetic research of the neo-avant-garde and the tradition, while at the same time distancing herself from them both. Her 'experimentalism' had less to do with the form than the content, an approach 'guided by the need to challenge dominant cultural discourses whose tools of signification [were] closely linked to patriarchal ideology' (O' Healy 259). Developing a scathing criticism of the artistic experimentations of her contemporaries, and particularly the tendency to demonise language on stage, Maraini was adamant about restoring the supremacy of the word (as opposed to aphasia or *chiacchiera*) in theatre.¹⁴ In line with Italian (second-wave) feminist thought and in open contrast with the disembodied humanist subject of Western tradition, her dramaturgy placed the materiality of the self at the centre of its aesthetic and epistemological investigation.¹⁵ Though explicitly gendered, it was not a *teatro di genere* but rather a form of artistic expression that, inevitably, bore the marks of the female perspective that informed it, for 'le donne che scrivono hanno in comune un passato storico da cui attingono sentimenti e vocazioni che hanno introiettato' [women writers share a historical past from which they draw the feelings and vocations they have introjected] (Maraini and Murrall 23).

2. Gender and Conformance; 'Discipline and Punish': *Il Manifesto*

Il manifesto (originally, *Manifesto dal carcere*) was premiered in 1971 at the Centocelle theatre on a symbolic date: 8 March, International Women's Day. The play is the result of a survey on the plight of female inmates that Maraini conducted throughout Italy for the newspaper *Paese Sera*, which the author defines as 'un vero e proprio testo politico-femminista' [a true political-feminist text] (*Fare Teatro* 5) on account of its challenging of dominant cultural and sexual stereotypes, besides broaching thorny issues such as prostitution, illegal abortion and banned contraceptives.¹⁶

The influence of Noh theatre, with which Maraini familiarised herself during her childhood years in Japan, is in evidence in plays such as this one.¹⁷ Some constitutive features of the

¹⁴ On her fellow playwright and friend Carmelo Bene and his dramaturgy at the time, Maraini concedes: 'Non ero d'accordo con Carmelo Bene quando diceva che ogni drammaturgia è un pretesto per la vera scrittura, che è quella scenica costruita dal regista' [I did not agree with Carmelo Bene when he said that all dramaturgy was but a pretext for 'true' writing, i.e. the *mise-en-scène* controlled by the director] (Murrall and Maraini 22). Bene was, alongside Carlo Quartucci and Mario Ricci, among the main figures of the Italian neo-avant-garde. For more on these authors, see De Marinis (1987).

¹⁵ The pre-eminence of the bodily element is a constant in Maraini's dramaturgy: 'I think that my theatre is a physical one. It's a feeling that I have. The feeling of the female subjectivity that starts off with the body. So I can't do without this feeling' (Anderlini and Maraini 153).

¹⁶ The premiere staged famous actors such as Rosabianca Scerrino, Lucia Vasilicò, Carla Tatò and Viviana Toniolo. Resulting from the same journalistic enquiry that inspired *Il manifesto* there is also Maraini's picaresque novel *Teresa la ladra* (1972), which was turned into a film of the same name directed by Carlo di Palma (Monica Vitti played the leading role) (1973). The title of this section contains a clear reference to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), which is connected to Maraini's play as will be explained in what follows.

¹⁷ Maraini's father, Fosco Maraini, a famous ethnologist, moved the family to Japan in 1938. After being interned in a concentration camp due to the parents' anti-fascist stance, however, they returned to Bagheria. Reminiscing on seeing a live Noh performance for the first time, Maraini recalls: 'C'era qualcosa di arcano e di misterioso in tutta la rappresentazione che mi attirava nel momento stesso in cui mi sfuggiva. Anche il fatto che fossero sempre dei morti che parlavano coi vivi era una cosa che mi inquietava. Ma, ecco, questa è una cosa che ho imparato e mi è servita anche dopo: i morti non sono figure temibili da cui sfuggire, ma persone poetiche a cui chiedere

performance are derived from the Noh tradition, such as the interaction between the dead and the living, the slowness of the gestures of the performers and the use of masks. Furthermore, Anna Micolla, the protagonist, is already dead at the beginning of the play.¹⁸ She is killed by the negligence of a nurse at the criminal asylum where she is interned after organising a revolt in jail and setting it on fire. The mental hospital, together with the school and the family, epitomise in Maraini's play the network of disciplining institutions that, in a Foucauldian vein, try to mould (or 'normalise') the individual into what is deemed proper – which, in the case of Anna, means suppressing her sexuality and making it abide by patriarchal norms:

PADRE: Hai capito, Anna mia? La donna ha una cosa nel grembo che deve tenere sempre nascosta. Più nascosta possibile. Se no, guai! Devi fare conto che è come un morticino sepolto sotto la terra e si sveglierà solo quando è estate, cioè quando avrai vent'anni e andrai sposa a un bravo ragazzo.

FATHER: Did you understand, Anna my dear? Women have something in their womb that they must always keep hidden. As hidden as possible. Or else, they'll be in trouble! Think of it as a little corpse buried in the ground that will awaken only when the summer comes, that is, when you're twenty and marry a good lad. (*Il manifesto* 158)

SUORA: Lo vedi che facevi dei sogni pericolosi. E le mani dove le tenevi le mani, eh?

ANNA: Non lo so.

SUORA: Scommetto che ti sei tirata su la camicia da notte. Ce le avevi le mutandine?

ANNA: Io con le mutande non ci posso dormire. Mi dà fastidio l'elastico.

SUORA: Lo vedi che sei una svergognata.

NUN: You see, you were having dangerous dreams. And your hands, where did you keep your hands, tell me?

ANNA: I don't know.

NUN: I bet you pulled your nightgown up. Did you wear knickers?

ANNA: I can't sleep with my pants on. The elastic band annoys me.

NUN: You see, you're shameless. (*Il manifesto* 171)

Anna's rebellion starts with her body – a body that, contrary to her father or the nuns' expectations, cannot be contained in the straitjacket of appearances and social conventions. This last point resonates with Maraini's ideas on the hindrances to sexual freedom in a Catholic country such as Italy, where 'the most terrible sin is sex, especially for women (maybe men have other sins). For a woman the most serious, terrible sin, which always condemns her to hell, is sex. [...] Revolution starts off from sex; it's the most obvious thing' (Anderlini and Maraini 156). In stark contrast to the sexophobic education she has received, Anna seduces a friend of her father's while still a young girl (*Il manifesto* 164–5), loses her virginity to a client in her brief spell as a prostitute (*Il manifesto* 175–6), pays women for sex during her detention (*Il manifesto* 217) and is ostensibly promiscuous (*Il manifesto* 204). Her unruly sexuality can be framed through Butler's notion of 'gender insubordination' by which the philosopher refers to non-compliance with the normative definition of one's gender – that is, with

pareri e compagnia' [There was something arcane and mysterious about the play that attracted me while at the same time eluding me. The fact that the dead were speaking with the living was disturbing for me. But this is something I learnt and treasured later on: that the dead are not fearsome figures from whom to escape, but rather poetic beings whom you can ask for advice or to keep you company] (Maraini and Murrari 21).

¹⁸ As noted by Sieffert, the vast majority of Noh performances start with the protagonist already dead (Sieffert 4).

what is demanded of it in a heteronormative society.¹⁹ Anna's behaviour, sexual or otherwise, contrasts sharply not just with the teachings of her alleged role models – her father or her educators – but also with the beliefs of the women surrounding her.

GINA: La donna, cara Anna, si deve contentare, perché è debole e non ha fortuna. Che può fare una donna da sola? Tutti le vanno contro e si approfittano di lei. La cosa meglio che può fare è trovarsi un marito non tanto malamente e poi fare dei figli.

GINA: A woman, my dear Anna, has to be satisfied, for she's weak and has no luck. What can a woman accomplish by herself? Everyone will go up to her and take advantage of her. The best thing she can do is to find a decent husband and then have kids. (*Il manifesto*, 184)

These words are uttered by Anna's lover's wife after she has stoically admitted to putting up with an adulterous husband out of conjugal duty. For the reader who is familiar with Maraini's work, the resonance with the distorted notion of wifedom put forward in *Donna in guerra* (1975) through the memorable character of Giacinto cannot go unnoticed. In Maraini's novel, Giacinto is the protagonist's hideous husband, for whom a woman can only find self-realisation through marriage and dedication to her man: 'una donna sposata senza figli è come una gatta senza gattini, che piange, si dimena, si mangia la coda che fa pena' [a married woman without children is just like a cat without kittens, she moans and flings herself about and bites her own tail in despair. It's sad to see the way she bites her own tail] (*Donna in guerra*, 246; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood 259). What makes the allegations above even more appalling, in *Il manifesto*, is the fact that they come from a woman, who thus becomes complicit with the very same patriarchal system that subjugates her because of her sex.

According to the Butlerian theory of performativity, the individual is coerced into adopting a pre-established gender in response to the masculine/feminine divide, a subject positioning that, if performed dutifully, comes to be (mis)taken as constitutive of one's identity ('what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts'; *Gender Trouble* xv). Following on from Butler's formulations, then, we could say that Anna does not perform her gender properly. She is expected to be weak, compliant and to find a good husband. Instead, she is assertive, strong-willed and independent. Her gender 'insubordination' (Butler's term) is perhaps most evident in the brothel scene where, in a characteristic stroke of irony on Maraini's part, her client reprimands her for her audacity and carefree attitude despite the fact that she is about to lose her virginity:

ANNA: Ma sai che sei proprio bello? (*Si spoglia anche lei in fretta*)

Adesso che facciamo?

GIOVANOTTO: Non parlare tanto che mi spoetizzi. Ma non hai paura?

ANNA: E di che?

GIOVANOTTO: Adesso io ti svergino.

ANNA: Cioè?

GIOVANOTTO: Ti rompo.

¹⁹ Although in the article in question, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', Butler refers specifically to sexual minorities and the homophobic oppression to which they are too often subjected, her thesis is relevant to our discourse here, as it foregrounds once more the performative nature of gender. If, as Butler implies, what defines heterosexuality is its repetition over time, this means that (any) gender identity is imitative from the start, and that there is no original to start with, but only idealisations (of what heterosexuality means, for both men and women) to which one strives to conform ('Imitation' 13–31).

ANNA: Ma non facciamo l'amore?

GIOVANOTTO: Ma sì che lo facciamo. Tu però non sei una vergine normale. Mi spoetizzi.

ANNA: E com'è una vergine normale?

GIOVANOTTO: Una vergine normale ha paura, è timida, si difende, trema, chiede aiuto e alla fine si lascia vincere dalla forza e piange.

ANNA: Do you know that you really are handsome? (*She also hastily takes off her clothes*) What do we do now?

YOUNG MAN: Don't talk so much; you're killing the romance. Aren't you scared?

ANNA: About what?

YOUNG MAN: I'm about to pop your cherry.

ANNA: What do you mean?

YOUNG MAN: I'm going to open you.

ANNA: Aren't we going to make love?

YOUNG MAN: Yes, we are. But you aren't like a normal virgin. You're killing it.

ANNA: And what is a normal virgin like?

YOUNG MAN: A normal virgin is scared, shy, she defends herself, trembles, asks for help and, in the end, she surrenders and cries.²⁰ (*Il manifesto* 175–6)

The client's stance on women's sexuality here resonates with that of Anna's father on female virginity, which he compares to a 'fiorellino delicato' [delicate little flower] (*Il manifesto* 158). Defeating the misconceptions that would have women vulnerable and in thrall to men's (sexual) supremacy, Anna is, to borrow from Butler's theatrical metaphor, out of character, for she behaves in a way that is not socially acceptable for her gender. The fundamental attention here to the corporeal dimension represents one of the distinctive traits of Italian advocates of *pensiero della differenza*, for whom being 'engendered in a different sex is something not negotiable' inasmuch as, for each woman, 'the difference is rooted in her being [...] as that which she necessarily is: female' (Cavarero qtd. in Bono and Kemp 16). Albeit also relying heavily on the corporeal sphere, Maraini does so less as a validation of the specificity of the individual experience than to expose the mechanisms of power played upon it and, as evident in the passage above, to investigate 'the possibility of reworking normative gender categories' against the patriarchal grain (Butler, *The Psychic Life* 3). Not only does Anna subvert gender norms but also linguistic ones, leading critic Grazia Sumeli Weinberg to consider this stratagem as a form of 'violenza verbale' [verbal violence], or again 'un linguaggio volgare, dissacrante' [a vulgar, sacrilegious language] (143). Maraini's strategy here is deliberate. Anna, who in the play acts as a representative of the historical silencing of women, is now given a voice, but since language has traditionally been a male province, she has to use it differently and shout, so to speak, in order to be heard – hence the vehemence and occasional lewdness that colours her prose:

ANNA: Così ho fatto l'amore sui cuscini
a righe verdi e mi piaceva il suo
odore di sigaretta e nocciola, sul

²⁰ We find an analogous exchange in Maraini's *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente* between the philosopher/prostitute Manila and her client: 'I patti sono che io prendo e tu ti fai prendere./No, tu compri e io vendo, niente di più./Ma che cosa?/La mia fica./E tu non pronunciare quella parola, per favore! [...] se tu non fai la tua parte, scusa, ma io mi smoscio, mi smollo, perdo la voglia' [The pact is that I take and you surrender./No. You buy and I sell, nothing more./You sell what?/My cunt./Please would you not say that word! [...] if you don't play by the rules I lose it, I go limp' (10).

finire ho capito che era solo uno
 stupido cazzo ma mi dava calore e
 il piacere delle braccia attorno alle
 braccia mi riempiva la gola di allegria.

ANNA: And so we had sex on the striped
 green pillows and I liked his
 smell of cigarette and hazelnut, in the
 end I figured out that it was just a
 stupid prick, but it gave me warmth and
 the pleasure of his arms around
 mine filled my throat with joy. (*Il manifesto* 177)

Butler provides us with the theoretical underpinnings of the ideology behind the characterisation of Maraini's protagonist. The philosopher suggests that one way out of the patriarchal, essentialising definition of woman that reduces her to her 'natural' maternal qualities is to perform one's 'gender acts' – the way ones behaves, talks and so forth – in a manner that disrupts the correlation between one's gender and what is expected of it, thereby thwarting the performance of femininity itself. Similarly, in troubling the traditional view that would have women 'dolci, sensibili, timide, affettuose' [sweet, sensitive, meek, affectionate] (*Il manifesto* 163), Anna proves femininity to be an excess that cannot be contained in the image of the 'delicate flower' with which her father would want to identify her.

Anna's story is told in prose. It alternates with brief sections in verse where a Greek-style chorus made by the ghosts of four women belonging to different periods in history recalls their own experiences of oppression at the hands of men. Their tales are an eclectic mix of symbolism and sacrilegious language and reveal a baffling 'coesistenza tra la pregiudiziale morale e l'aggressione sessuale' [coexistence of prejudicial morals and sexual aggression] (Sumeli Weinberg 143) that betrays adherence to, rather than emancipation from, patriarchy:

IV MORTA: La donna fa male al sangue, al cervello,
 ai denti, la donna è l'olio santo che
 Dio perde dal culo e si allaga la terra
 di azioni maligne e odore cattivo

4th DEAD WOMAN: Woman poisons the blood, the brain.
 the teeth; woman is the Holy Oil that
 God leaks from his ass, inundating the earth
 with vicious actions and unpleasant smell. (*Il manifesto* 201)

Through their grotesque exchanges we are confronted with 'la radice arcaica della divisione tra i sessi e la violenza' [the ancient roots of the division between the sexes and violence] (Sumeli Weinberg 143), with parody here producing a Brechtian 'distancing' effect on spectators which makes them question the sedimentation and subsequent naturalisation of certain gender (ed) codes of behaviour.

The masks used in this as well as in other plays by Maraini recall those of Pirandello's *Sei personaggi*, which also have 'an eternally fixed expression selected from the continuing changing expressions of the human face' (Sogliuzzo 228). But whereas for Pirandello masks are a means to dramatise the duplicity inherent within the human condition, for Maraini, who has always insisted on the prominence of language in theatre, they rather represent a

precise stylistic choice that works towards restoring the primacy of the verbal dimension.²¹ Their 'unique non-committal "neutral" expression' (Malik 234) is particularly relevant here, for the actors can no longer use their faces to convey emotions and inject them into their performance, thereby inevitably redirecting the audience's attention more fully to what is being said.²² This interpretation would find justification in the author's own ideas on the hierarchy of dramatic elements: 'Il teatro è fatto di parole e le parole, a volte, proprio quando sembrano più povere e nude, esprimono una energia che tutte le gigantesche macchine scenografiche, usate per ingigantire e drammatizzare la storia, non hanno' [theatre is made of words, and sometimes words, even those that seem the most bare, can express an energy to which no gigantic scenic machinery – of the kind they use to dramatise the plot – can possibly compare] (Maraini and Murrari 58). Subverting Aristotelian stage dynamics whereby language (*lexis*) is subjugated to action, Maraini's theatre relegates the latter to a subordinate position, for what is being dramatised (in this case, the erasure of women in patriarchy, here metaphorised as death) is sufficient in itself to obtain specific responses from the spectators.

In *Il manifesto* the scenography is reduced to a handful of panels, which can be either generic (e.g. with doors painted on them so as to signify a room) or more specific (e.g. showing bars so as to suggest a prison setting). Most semiotic units, such as food (the fish Anna is eating with her father in a rather unusual domestic scene, *Il manifesto* 159), physical places (the shop in Naples where she applies for work, *Il manifesto* 173), pieces of furniture (the washbasins at the boarding school, *Il manifesto* 167) are not physically present on stage, but only evoked through the actors' gestures and inferred from the context in which the action takes place. The performers are thus required to exploit their physicality and their often accentuated, yet never unrealistic, movements so as to visually convey the story and circumvent the paucity of stage objects. An illustration of this process of semiotisation is evinced by the shoe factory scene, where the assembly line is conjured up by the rhythm marked by the feet of the actors impersonating Anna's co-workers tapping the floor in unison (*Il manifesto* 202–3). The 'denotation-connotation dialectic' (Elam 7) here leaves no space for semantic ambiguity, for the sign-vehicle (a group of women sitting on aligned stools and reiterating faultlessly synchronised hand and foot movements) and what it stands for (a production line) immediately suggest the scenario that is being gesturally conveyed. In this sense, Maraini's *mise-en-scène* marks a point of departure with the aesthetic research of the coeval neo-avant-garde, the so-called *Nuovo Teatro Italiano*, for the author is not interested in establishing a new relation with the object (or the body) on stage, but rather in maintaining the unities of action and place – her scenic economy being dictated less by the willingness to experiment with the theatrical means than by the programmatic intent to give prominence to the spoken word, besides the more practical, obvious necessity to keep costs down.²³ On this last point, particularly on the economic difficulties of running the Centocelle Theatre, Maraini recalls: 'Era un piccolo teatro povero di quartiere, ma per modo di dire: non avevamo una lira [...]. Con la vendita dei biglietti non arrivavamo a coprire la totalità delle spese' [It was a small,

²¹ The masks worn by the dead women appear to be the Onna-men (Onna masks), which, incidentally, are the most popular type of Noh mask.

²² Noh masks are believed to have developed during the Muromachi period (1392–1573). Originally, there were only sixty basic kinds, whereas today they number over 200.

²³ Maraini calls her dramaturgy at the time 'sperimentall[e]' (experimentalist) but only in the sense that it resulted in a new theatre, made in unconventional locations (such as canteens, public spaces, garages and so forth), broaching new topics (those brought forward by the coeval women's movement), adopting a democratic stance (in the sense that no one, not even the director, prevailed above the others) and new practices (since theatre was made mostly on a voluntary basis) (Farrell and Maraini 150). For more on *Nuovo Teatro Italiano*, see De Marinis (esp. pp. 151–80).

neighborhood theatre, so to speak: in reality, we didn't have a penny [...]. The ticket revenue was hardly enough to cover the costs] (Cattaruzza 21).

From the moment Anna is jailed for theft for the second time, the play follows a crescendo movement that culminates in her penning the manifesto of the title, for which Maraini borrowed from actual slogans and writings of postwar Italian feminism, all foregrounding, despite their different programmatic intent, the need for collective action and the creation of a new signifier for 'woman'. Maraini reveals once more the ideological nature of her theatre drawing from real-life documents (the feminist manifestos but also, as previously noted, the results of the author's own enquires into women's prisons). In the play's manifesto one can detect, for example, a clear reference to the ubiquitous feminist motto *donna è bello* ('Non c'è niente di vergognoso ad essere donna. Anzi è bello' [There is nothing shameful about being a woman. In fact, it's beautiful]; *Il manifesto* 226) or to the struggle for women's access to the labour force ('Tutte le donne devono lavorare' [All women should work]; *Il manifesto* 226).²⁴ As such, Anna's is a *metamanifesto* or, as Virginia Picchiotti puts it, a manifesto within a manifesto (Maraini's play) and at once a manifesto of the potential for feminist theatre to raise audience awareness on the condition of women in society (Picchiotti 113–15). Anna and her fellow inmates drafting their own feminist programme stands as a symbolic "elsewhere".²⁵ Borrowing one of the preferred political tools of the feminist movement and bringing it on stage, Maraini makes the audience 'participant – albeit a passive one – to the *autocoscienza* sessions represented through the female protagonists' conversations' (Picchiotti 113).

A recurring theme in *Il manifesto*, and in Maraini's theatrical production as a whole, is that of reclusion, for which the author draws on her first-hand experience of the concentration camp in Japan but also from the institution run by nuns in Florence that she attended as a teenage girl.²⁶ The prison in her play is linked to familial authority, a connection that is made explicit by its own director when, in a most hypocritical speech, he compares the penitentiary to a big family and himself to a loving father presiding over the prisoners'/daughters' conduct: 'Noi siamo una grande famiglia. Voi siete le mie dilette figliole, le guardiane sono le vostre sorelle maggiori e io sono il padre che osserva, medita e premia secondo i meriti di ciascuna' [We are like a big family here. You are my beloved daughters, the guards are your elder sisters and I am your father who observes, ponders and rewards based on everyone's merits] (*Il manifesto* 220). The pervasiveness of the prison, understood as a place either physical or metaphorical, brings Maraini's play close to Foucault's theorisations on the insidious forms of control operated by society at large that are exemplified in the indoctrination of the individual carried out through a set of institutions (prisons, schools, asylums, hospitals, the workplace or the family) that regulate every aspect of modern life. This form of ubiquitous regulatory mechanisms can be accounted for in the seclusion of Anna in a normalising institution, the asylum – a 'place of tolerance' in Foucault's formulation – her punishment for defying the social norms by which

²⁴ At the time of Maraini's writing, a Marxist-feminist strand in Italy was starting to look at the figure of the housewife (referred to as *the houseworker* in Anglophone contexts) as providing both labour force through reproduction and a surplus value through her domestic chores – hence feminists' demand of wages for housework. In the early 1970s, the international group *Wages for Housework Groups and Committees* was created to connect the discussion of such matters among feminists from different parts of Europe and the United States. For more on this, see Edmond and Fleming (1975).

²⁵ I borrow the notion of "elsewhere" from de Lauretis as formulated in her *Technologies of Gender* (1987), where she uses it to designate a 'space-off' outside dominant masculine discourses.

²⁶ Anna herself also refers to her home as 'prison': 'nella prigione di casa mia che è Palermo' [in the prison that is my home in Palermo] (*Il manifesto* 184–5). On the recurrence of the theme of incarceration/reclusion in her oeuvre, Maraini comments: 'Il tema della reclusione in particolare mi sta a cuore – probabilmente per i due anni di campo di concentramento che mi hanno segnata in quel senso – e torno a scriverne appena posso' [The issue of reclusion is very close to my heart – probably due to the two years I spent in a concentration camp that have left a mark in that sense – and so I go back to it in my writing whenever I can] (Farrell and Maraini 141).

she is controlled and defined as a social subject. The image of Anna tied up in bandages, just moments before a nurse suffocates her with a wet towel, is a powerful one for the spectator, for it confronts us with a femininity trapped in its own body, that which represents ‘the most obvious sign of a woman’s presence in social discourse’ (Picchietti 57). But it also illustrates the punishment awaiting ‘those who fail to do their gender right’ (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 178). Anna’s unruly femininity constitutes a potential menace to the social order and, as such, ought to be disciplined into submission – death (metaphorically transposed into women’s silencing) being the price exacted for subverting the patriarchal norms.

3. Silent Objects of Desire: *La donna perfetta*

La donna perfetta, a production of La Maddalena Theatre, was performed for the first time on 15 October 1974 at the *Teatro del dopolavoro* on occasion of the Venice Biennale.²⁷ It follows a simple plot, the romance between the sixteen-year-old shop-assistant Nina and a fickle twenty-year-old university student, Elvio, who gets her pregnant. Breaking his promise to pay for her abortion, the young man disappears into thin air. With the help of the sexually liberated and self-assertive Christa, who acts as her inverted double in the play, Nina entrusts herself to the hands of a reckless doctor, Prof. Macelloni, who, as foretold by his name, proves to be a ‘butcher’ who sends her to her death.²⁸

At the beginning of the play, one of the two *dicitrici* (female storytellers) addresses the audience in language dense with symbolism, demanding that they empathise with Nina before taking her by the hand and bringing her centre stage:

DICITRICE: Buonasera amici, amanti, compari,
la serata vi sia bella e gioviale.
Sono qui, con tutti i piedi e la testa infuocata
a raccontarvi la storia di Nina inchiodata
dal suo grande amore di donna ad un letto di piombo
che ha squartato il suo ventre di rose e
ha trasformato il suo sangue in veleno.

STORYTELLER: Good evening, friends, lovers, comrades,
may you have a wonderful and enjoyable night.
I am here, with my feet and head in flames
to tell you the story of Nina, nailed
to a leaden bed by her deep womanly love
that has dismembered her belly of roses and
turned her blood into venom. (*La donna perfetta* 5)²⁹

By breaking the fourth wall, the aesthetic illusion that generally accompanies the theatrical experience is discarded altogether, and our attention is immediately drawn to the facticity of the representation. What is more, the *dicitrici* remain in view during the whole performance, intervening to rearrange the scenography at the beginning of each scene – a further reminder of their fictional status as performers. As in *Il manifesto*, the connection with Noh theatre is

²⁷ The play was co-directed by Maraini and Cerliani and interpreted by Michela Caruso, Luca Del Fabbro, Claudia Ricatti, Ornella Grassi, Claudio De Angelis, Gianni Elsner, Silvia Poggioli. The music was written by Maraini’s sister, Yuki Maraini, also acting, alongside Claudia Ricatti, as one of the two *dicitrici*.

²⁸ With respect to the death scene, Cavallaro has drawn a fitting parallel between the image of a butchered Nina and the Biblical reference to the slaughtered lamb in Isaiah 53 (142).

²⁹ Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *La donna*.

evident in the use of masks that, interestingly, this time are worn by the storytellers on the back of their heads.³⁰ This specific stylistic choice contributes to the estrangement effect that is consistently conveyed throughout the play by means of an anti-naturalistic *mise-en-scène*, and that is further heightened when, several times during the performance, the *dicitrici* turn to the spectators, showing them their faces – thereby, literally, stepping out of their parts. The author's intent of going beyond a true-to-life approach is already evident in the stage directions, where Maraini recommends: 'sarà bene eliminare ogni forma di verismo' [any form of realism ought to be eliminated].³¹ As a result, the audience is intentionally kept out of fiction and, as noted by Daniela Cavallaro, 'explicitly invited to participate emotionally in and reflect on the development of the play', which the scholar evinces from the *dicitrice's* initial exhortation to establish whether Nina's tragic fate was 'finally dictated by "coraggio leonino" ("a lion's courage") or "supina viltà" (6; "passive cowardice")' (Cavallaro 139). It is in this rejection of mimesis that Maraini's theatre most resonates with a Brecht's 'alienated' dramaturgy. The so-called alienation effect (or 'A-effect'), arguably one of the German dramaturg's most well-known theatrical notions, can be summarised as a form of anti-realist theatre-making aimed at preventing the spectator from losing themselves in the play and identifying with the characters, instead demanding their active participation (Brecht 5).³² In Maraini's play, this disidentification is accomplished through recourse to a range of dramatic devices, of which the most obvious are anti-mimetic acting – which I will discuss in more detail later – and direct audience address, from both seeming characters (Nina) and alleged performers (the storytellers).

One example of this latter expedient is the fact that each scene is introduced by one *dicitrice* announcing the characters involved and describing the setting.³³ In evoking the (virtually non-existent) scenography, these prologues perform a specific semiotic function, working as they do as scenic objects themselves, albeit imaginary ones. At other times, as we have seen in *Il manifesto*, it is the actors' codified gestures that function as sign-vehicles, as in the case of a loom visually conveyed by Elvio's and Nina's mother's hands simulating the action of weaving (*La donna* 46) – with movement becoming a metonymic substitution of the given object.³⁴ The mobility of the sign in theatre is not, of course, Maraini's invention. The experimentalist expressions in the twentieth-century European scene provide emblematic instances of the use of stage props that reverse the subject/object, animate/inanimate relationship, a tendency that is epitomised, for example, in Samuel Beckett's *Breath* (1969), a thirty-second long, one-act play featuring the set as sole protagonist. In the Italian context we find analogous experimentations in the works of Carlo Quartucci who, similar to Beckett, also experimented with 'uno stile recitativo astratto, geometrizzante e freddamente formalizzato, sia nelle emissioni foniche che nella gestualità' [an acting that was abstract, mechanical and highly formalised, both in its phonic emissions and in its gestures] (De Marinis 156). Despite

³⁰ The abortionist also wears a mask, which, in this case, is no longer the neutral one of the *dicitrici* (the same Onna mask we find in *Il manifesto*) but would rather resemble a Kishin mask (demon), used in Noh theatre to signify an antagonistic figure.

³¹ The stage directions published as an introduction to the play in *Fare Teatro* have no page number.

³² Brecht's ideological theatre is an acknowledged source of inspiration for Maraini: 'Fra i moderni, Brecht per me è stato un maestro, è stato colui che mi ha dato il senso di che cosa poteva essere un teatro politico ma anche poetico, lirico e allo stesso tempo estremamente combattivo' [Among modern authors, Brecht has been a model for me. He was the one who taught me that theatre could be both political and lyrical; poetical and militant at once] (Cattaruzza 22). For more on Brecht's theatrical ideology, see Brecht (2015).

³³ As in *Il manifesto*, the scenes in *La donna perfetta* are not numbered. However, taking the interventions of the *dicitrici* concomitant to their rearranging of the scenography as framing the scenes, the total number would be thirteen. An analogous division has been suggested for *Il manifesto* by Cavallaro, where the number of scenes would also be thirteen – unless we consider the interruptions of darkness, in which case they would amount to seventeen (144, n. 4).

³⁴ They do so while discussing Nina's death, resorting to cyclic and almost obsessive dialogic patterns that generate genuine pathos (*La donna* 46–7).

partaking (with the Italian neo-avant-garde) in the rejection of realism in theatre, however, Maraini departed significantly from its formal solutions as well as in terms of primarily aesthetic concerns. Less interested in exploring the potentialities of theatrical means than she was in using theatre as a political tool, her 'barricade' dramaturgy worked as a bridge between theory and practice. It was a vehicle for feminist ideology and ultimately, given the general discussions with the public that would often follow her performances, a public forum of denunciation of the plight of women in society.

The acting style adopted in *La donna perfetta* is highly anti-mimetic. This is especially evident during the exchanges between Nina and Elvio, when both actors perform artificial movements that are incongruous with the content of the dialogues – at times even bordering on gymnastic. This relates not only to acting technique but also to the gender roles performed on stage, which appear just as artificial. In the case of Nina in particular, her performative repetition of the script of 'the perfect woman' is purposely hyperbolic, inviting an examination of the ideology behind her exaggerated characterisation:

DICITRICE: Come deve essere la donna perfetta Nina Bella?

NINA: Sottomessa, gentile, comprensiva, armoniosa, silenziosa, ubbidiente.

DICITRICE: E cosa riceverà in cambio dall'uomo suo idolatrato?

NINA: Sarà venerata, rispettata, carezzata e adulata.

STORYTELLER: What should the perfect woman be like, my sweet Nina?

NINA: Submissive, kind, understanding, sweet, quiet, obedient.

STORYTELLER: And what will she receive in return from her worshipped man?

NINA: She will be venerated, respected, caressed and adored. (*La donna* 5)

NINA: La donna perfetta non è per niente una donna.

È una lumaca, un fiore, un'erba pungente,
un'acqua dolce e mesta, una corona di spine,
una perla odorosa, un catino di neve,
secondo i desideri regali e faziosi del suo uomo padrone.

NINA: The perfect woman is nothing like a woman.

She is a snail, a flower, prickly weed,
tranquil water, a crown of thorns,
a scented pearl, a bucket of snow,
in conformance to the regal and extravagant wishes of her master. (*La donna* 6)

In scenes such as this, Maraini shows us the gender script women have traditionally been called to perform in patriarchal society, premised upon compliance and submission.³⁵ The subservience of the character of Nina bears a striking resemblance to her homonymous Pirandellian counterpart in *Il berretto a sonagli* (1916), who is also caught in the performance of the script of the acceptable woman (and wife, in her case). However, the parody (in Maraini's as well as in Pirandello's play), is not attributed to the character, but rather, 'alla sua formazione culturale, ai condizionamenti e ai pregiudizi sociali' [to her cultural formation, the conditionings and the social prejudices] (Sumeli Weinberg 146). The repetition of enforced gender norms is a powerful tool against patriarchy, for it mimics the alleged facticity of 'man' and 'woman': 'The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender

³⁵ Another analogy with *Donna in guerra* can be drawn here. Similar to Nina, the protagonist of Maraini's 1975 novel, too, mechanically performs her role (as house/wife) in a way that suggests interiorisation of the norm.

identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an “act”, as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187). Thus, through her exaggerated womanly behaviour, Nina exposes the roots of the sedimentation of gender (ed) roles, showing that the myth of femininity is fabricated upon the false assumption of a feminine quality emanating from a biologically female body. Butler makes this very same point when expounding the process of gender identity formation: ‘the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way [...]. Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in’ (Butler and Kotz 84). It is this reiteration of ‘oppressive and painful gender norms’ that surfaces through the character of Nina in her blind adherence to the cultural and societal dictates that produce gender in the first instance – dictates that become interiorised by the individual and acted out, so to speak, through daily acts and codified patterns of behaviour.

The concern about men’s unrealistic expectations of women’s pleasures and bodies will remain a cornerstone throughout Maraini’s oeuvre. We find its resonance, among many other occurrences, in the pages of *Un clandestino a bordo* (1996), a slim volume published some twenty years after *La donna perfetta*, where the author foregrounds the historical paradox of the different interpretations of the female and the male body: the former being seen as passive and receptive (‘corpo desiderabile’ [desirable body]) and the latter as active and desiring (‘corpo desiderante’ [desiring body]) (40). Read in the light of these remarks, the characterisation of the female protagonist in Maraini’s play provides some ways for thinking about the insidious controlling mechanisms that, while objectifying women, are so culturally pervasive as to act at an unconscious level, thereby becoming normalised by virtue of the same performative process that Butler sees at the core of gender identity formation. Maraini’s stance on the objectification of women by their masters can also explain her decision to bring a mannequin on stage as a signifier of ‘woman’. In the scene in question, Christa is conversing with her lover Gigi. Using an artificial language that stands as a parody of abstruse and highly codified psychoanalytic readings, the latter insinuates that the woman’s alleged sexual promiscuity is imputable to some sort of childhood trauma (‘La tua disponibilità nasce dalla tua disperazione rifiutata a livello conscio che suppara come una cancrena a livello inconscio e ti travolge e ti costringe a degradarti’ [Your availability arises from your desperation that, censured at a conscious level, overflows like a tumour at an unconscious level, engulfing you and forcing you to degrade yourself] (*La donna* 22)). Gigi utters these words while holding a mannequin and turning his back to Christa, thereby addressing the stage prop rather than the woman herself. An aesthetically pleasing object, the mannequin-woman cannot, by definition, think or speak but only *be*, thereby becoming coterminous with a larger system of representation – a powerful metaphor for women when these are viewed as signifiers of (men’s) desire, that is, as a socially constructed category. The mannequin is a substitute for what Nina is and Christa is not: a *donna perfetta*. In Lacanian terms, the mannequin scene foregrounds the disavowal of women as subjects and their social construction as Lack, or Other, for ‘the discourse within which the subject finds its identity is always the discourse of the Other – of a symbolic order which transcends the subject and orchestrates its entire history’ (Silverman 197).³⁶

³⁶ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, women exist only as castrated others, the bearers of the phallus (that which they do not have). Because the phallus is the signifier of male desire, then, women are said to exist only to reflect male desire itself. For more on the Lacanian ‘phallus’, see Lacan (2006).

In semiotics, the 'interstitial aspects of the performance', that is to say, 'the spaces between stage vehicles' are deemed just 'as important semantically as the vehicles themselves' (Elam 40). This is even more true in the case of a theatre such as Maraini's where, admittedly, nothing is left to chance: 'Le prove duravano anche due mesi, tutto era più pensato e curato' [Rehearsals lasted up to two months, everything was more thought through] (Cattaruzza 20). With this in mind, the arrangement of the female and the male body on stage in *La donna perfetta* demands further consideration. Taking a closer look, it becomes clear that their configuration follows a visual pattern. Man and woman maintain a certain distance to one another, as if imaginary lines demarcated the space surrounding them. Significantly, while Nina keeps within the spatial boundaries thus created, Elvio oftentimes crosses them, as he does, for instance, when whispering something into her ear – a visual metaphor for patriarchal inculcation. The arrangement of the actors' bodies on stage recreates (thereby also *performing*) the relationship between woman and man in society, that is as modelled upon the dialectics of master and slave whereby man assumes the role of subject and woman that of object. This is consonant with Butler's belief that 'bodies are formed by social norms' (*The Psychic Life* 156), by which she means that we acquire social meaning in and through the continuous re-enactment of culturally embedded stylised learned behaviours (acts, modes of speech and so forth) that define us. This is gender performativity at work: these 'stylised acts', as Butler calls them, become constitutive of who/what we are, and we cannot exist outside of our gender. For Butler, identity is inherently theatrical, so much so that she sees it akin to a script or, better said, to a part that is interiorised and constantly acted out. Applying this concept to Maraini's play, we could say that Nina's femininity is performative twice over, for what we have on stage is an actress who is performing (understood in a strictly theatrical sense as reciting) a woman conforming to the role allotted to her gender by society, that is, a woman performing (this time understood in a Butlerian sense as the construction of one's gender taking place through one's constant performance of gender itself) patriarchal femininity.

4. Conclusion

In this article I have discussed aspects of the first, most militant dramaturgy of Dacia Maraini as an illustration of the driving force behind a new approach to theatre-making that is concomitant with, and influenced by, the emergence of active feminism in Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The chosen plays, *Il manifesto* and *La donna perfetta*, have been selected on the basis of their sharing a number of structural and ideological affinities that are exemplary of the dramatic aesthetics and sexual politics of Italian feminist dramaturgy in general, and of Maraini's in particular. Framing the plays through Butler's theatrical model of performativity, I have argued that they exemplify the way in which gender identities are produced within a patriarchal regime. Nina's performance of her role of 'the perfect woman' illustrates the workings of gender norms when these are interiorised by the individual and 'acted out', so to speak, thereby giving the illusion that femininity emanates naturally from a biologically female body. Conversely, Anna's 'non-conformity', that is, her deviating from the societal dictates determining what makes for 'socially viable beings' (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 2), marks her out from the system. As such, she ought to be contained – her hospitalisation is the punishment for subverting the norm. Inherently didactic in form and scope, Maraini's approach to theatre-making places women's lives and experiences at its centre and, through them, questions and problematises deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs on issues of gender and sexuality. This is achieved by exploiting, among other expedients, a scenography void of unnecessary and distracting stage props, frequent direct audience address during and after the performance and, above all, the primacy of the verbal dimension. At a time when theatre tended to demonise the *word*, encouraging instead recourse to a phonic and rhythmic language that was semantically and

psychologically void (De Marinis 156–60), Maraini espoused a more markedly Pirandellian and Pasolinian approach to the dramaturgical which was able to create a new feminist aesthetic firmly anchored in the *parola* and its power to (re)shape the world.³⁷

In the context of 1970s Italy, Maraini's theatre is inherently political, using the dramaturgical with the polemical and deconstructive intent of denouncing the instrumentalisation of women and its consequences. While the two plays discussed here do not seem to open up much scope for emancipation, since the defiance of codified sexual roles they portray (embodied in the character of the sexually liberated Anna, but also in Nina's decision to terminate her pregnancy) invariably ends in death, it is also true that, behind the apparent defeat of the female protagonists, is a deliberate authorial strategy. Maraini is being less idealistic and more realistic about women's immediate possibilities of gaining the desired freedom at the time the plays are written. Yet, she does nevertheless offer a glimpse of hope to exhort her contemporaries not to give up: not only does Anna outlive her *manifesto*, thereby influencing future generations of feminists, Nina's death proves also to have a salvific function, as auspicated by the lyrics of the song that closes the play – promising the revenge of all the women, past and present, who, just like the protagonist, have been abused by men in some way.³⁸ Symbolically speaking, then, Anna and Nina are sacrificial victims whose deaths work towards paving the way for other women's emancipation – and in this sense, Cavallaro's aforementioned reading of the plays as framed through biblical, though not strictly religious, references is particularly apt (Cavallaro 141).

Looking at the authorial intent imbedded in the works analysed, we note that the balance between mimetic pretence (as celebratory of the role of the dramaturg) and the use of theatrical performance as a public forum of ideas (and a manifestation of the primacy of the audience) tilts in favour of the latter. However, it is also true that, through the staging of hyperbolically submissive women (in *La donna perfetta*) or their specular opposites (in *Il manifesto*), Maraini is capable each time of triggering specific responses in the audience (of disdain or approval, respectively) so that, in fact, she hides her presence from the spectators only so as to guide them. This is made possible through the distancing effect resulting from the adoption of an anti-mimetic style that differs greatly from the non-naturalistic solutions adopted by her contemporaries that we find for example emblematised in Carlo Quartucci's overly pompous gesturality, or in Mario Ricci's playful and ritualistic notion of the theatrical experience, or again in Carmelo Bene's repudiation of the written text. As I have argued in this article, Maraini's unique experimentalism has more to do with content than form, and the focus is invariably on the word's political potential to stimulate debates with and ideas among the audience. In her theatre, action in the Aristotelian sense of the term is thus swept away and turned into "azione parlata" [*spoken action*] (Taffon 210), while characters are elevated to the status of vehicles for ideology, the spokespersons of the author's political and ethical commitment.³⁹

³⁷ With Pirandello Maraini shared especially the distaste for codified, bourgeois playwriting and the subversion (or mocking) of codified sexual and social behaviours, as well as the adoption of metatheatrical solutions. Pasolini penned his ideas on theatre on the 1968 *Manifesto*, where, in stark opposition to the paradoxes of the Theatre of the Absurd, he put forward his notion of a *teatro di parola*. Although borrowing from Pasolini as far as the primacy of the word in theatre is concerned, however, Maraini did not share his vision of the theatrical product as designed for a bourgeois audience. In fact, and as noted above, she was an active participant of the 'decentring' of theatre from elitist places.

³⁸ The lyrics of the song 'Ma verrà un giorno' were written by Dacia Maraini and the music by Yuki Maraini and Fortunata Sonnino (author and songwriter from the Rome-based feminist group Movimento Femminista Romano). The song foretells a time when tutte le morte di coltello, di aghi, di cucchiaino, usciranno dalle loro tombe di pietra per vendicarsi del mondo che le ha volute buone per farle morire con bontà [all women who died by knives, needles, spoons, will come out of their stone tombs to take revenge of the world that has kept them quiet in order to make them die gently] (*La donna* 47).

³⁹ Such was the line pursued, also, by the group Living Theatre.

The question of (self) representation is an exigent one for feminism, as it allows for a re-dressing of the gender balance through the 're-signification' (Butler's terminology) of existing cultural codes. Although the systematic destabilisation of current representations of gender will occur later on in Maraini's theatrical opus, her early dramaturgy – of which the plays discussed afford emblematic illustrations – do nonetheless succeed in giving visibility to and raising awareness of the struggles of women in patriarchal society, the first step towards disrupting conventional modes of signification. In the context of 1970s Italy, *Il manifesto* and *La donna perfetta* are groundbreaking in their depiction of the way in which dominant patriarchal ideology has been interiorised and naturalised. This is something that, inevitably, is best achieved in theatre thanks to the obvious possibility of exploiting the body on stage – with the body itself becoming, alongside verbal and gestural signs, co-creator of meaning. To return to Butler's dramaturgical approach premised upon the way in which femininity is (just like masculinity) not rooted in biology or anatomy, but in codes of behaviour that are learned and then re-enacted on a daily basis, Maraini's 'barricade' theatre exemplifies the way in which feminist performance is the privileged site through which these reiterations emerge, and theatre the space that makes this emergence possible.

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