



Antonio Panzuto (left) with Paolo Pollo Rodighiero during a break in the performance of *Who Are You? Gospel of the Patient Donkey*. (Photo by Serena Pea)

FIGURE THEATRE WITH ANTONIO PANZUTO

SIMPLY LIGHT

I have known Antonio for a long time, and I have had the pleasure and fortune of collaborating with him on a good part of the shows he has produced. I have had the opportunity to closely observe the evolutions of his style, the refinement of his research, but in all this time a particularity of his, a distinct mark of his aesthetics, has shaped a consistency in his approach, and in my own in working with him. Alone, in the midst of his marvellous world of cast-offs, scrap metal, pulleys and counterweights, Antonio never acts as an animator, a puppeteer who, by moving objects, infuses them with an apparent life; with his presence, discreet but never hidden, he accompanies characters in their movements on stage whether they be a human-sized puppet (*Haiku*), an anonymous character in the crowd (*Who are you?*), or the walls of the city of Troy (*Iliad*). This accompaniment brings each character, each object, even the wires and pulleys of the stage rig to life; it makes them exist in their own immediacy, in the total uniqueness of each, and makes manifest the absolute necessity of their presence. It has always been clear to me how the inclusion of an element other than the presence of Antonio and his characters, i.e. light, entails the responsibility to maintain the level of truth and necessity present onstage in every detail. There is no room here for decorativism or refined effect, shown for its own sake; there is no room either for service lighting, to simply ‘see’ what is happening onstage. Every projector mounted, every positioning, every state of light must be unique and necessary, interacting at the same level as that with which it is called upon to coexist onstage. Unique and necessary, light even in its movement therefore needs to be accompanied according to the rhythm of what is happening onstage, and this requires me, when conducting the performance, to be in perfect syntony with Antonio, to reach the point where my accompanying and his together work harmoniously, where there is no conductor and someone following, but all the elements live and move in unison, in a single comprehensive sweep. According to director Alessandro Tognon, during pre-production, at a precise moment he and Antonio feel the need for a special light, which is not simply that of the neon service lights. Just as there is a designated time, a space dedicated to rehearsals, so there is a need for a light specifically used for those rehearsals, which will not be the one used in the performance. The time will come in the process when the right light will be plotted for each moment, but even up to that moment the light, like everything else, cannot be incidental, but must be consistent with the world being created.

Paolo Pollo Rodighiero (*Lighting designer*)

SCENOGRAPHY

Di Marzia Maino

The stage sets created by Panzuto for theatre for human performers are the result of research into architectural space on the one hand and a passion for painting on the other. The result is volumetric environments in which strongly pictorial atmospheres with an abstract character come to life, with often overt references to the artists he loves and to cinema. The sets contribute to the composition as visual dramaturgies that do not describe the text but comment on or emphasise the dramaturgical word, accompanying the unfolding of the story. Over time, collaboration with different directors has allowed Panzuto to experiment with various solutions that can be grouped according to the construction criteria adopted or borrowing from other arts. The environments he creates, however, all constantly revolve around the two concepts of volume and abstract figuration, which are the core principles of his poetics of the stage.

The pictorial imagery on stage

A prime example are the solutions that draw inspiration from the spatial layout of sets and at the cinema. The scenes for *Cara professoressa* (2003) perfectly illustrate the case. Produced by the Teatro Due in Parma, the play won the UBU award. The dramaturgy is taken from the play by Ljudmila Razumovskaja, thus providing a locus for a historicized tale rich in citations, where rigour prevails over the word and the narration is articulated through the pace of the actions. The incessant movement of the actors between one room and another of the apartment in which the story is enacted prompts Panzuto and director Valerio Binasco to seek a cinematic solution, favouring angles more suited to the camera than the stage. Based on a visual dramaturgy referencing the films of Aki Kaurismäki, the typical Italian stage is therefore substituted in favour of an environment with a strong realistic feel that offers the spectator several viewing angles, from the right or the left, approximately in the canonical 180° arc within which the filmmaker usually moves the camera. As there are no curtains or ceiling, the lighting system is in view while at the same time assuming a scenic valence the characters by hinting at the mystery of their depth.

The body in its essence has its living space

Mari emphasises how in the drama one enters someone else’s home and becomes a “tenant of a scene”. The simultaneous existence of several vanishing points is a scenographic element that emphasises the theme of confinement so central to the story: it enriches the vision but, in the concept of the vanishing point, it offers the implication of relating interior and exterior, tracing imaginary lines along which it is possible to enter and exit the scene, to approach or retreat from the drama.

A similar concept emerged in 2009 for Ruggero Leoncavallo’s *I Pagliacci* and Francis Poulenc’s *La Voix Humaine* (both directed by Leo Muscato). The sets feature an architectural layout that partly echoes the allusion to the film set, thus exploiting the potential to advance the narrative from multiple angles. The meta-theatrical nature of *Pagliacci* is conveyed by a device that shows the longitudinal section of a housing complex activated by coloured lights used to highlight the different environments. It is left to the spectator to comprehend the narrative fiction that reveals itself during the performance. In contrast, the bleak atmosphere of *La Voix Humaine* is represented by reconstructing a nocturnal urban context with a claustrophobic feel that is close to Edward Hopper-style metropolitan settings. The dark colours help accentuate the solitude in which the protagonist drowns. The panels that constitute the scenery exhibit an impression of instability rendered with flaky, impasto colours. In this staging, the medium moves decisively towards subtraction, rendered for instance in monochrome, which is also the condition of deprivation that permeates the drama.

His reflection on the structuring of space in film continued in 2010 when he designed the sets for *All About My Mother* (Tutto su mia madre), from Pedro Almodóvar's film, directed by Leo Muscato, produced by TeatroDue in Parma and Teatro Stabile del Veneto. The Spanish director's original screenplay, which already has a strong theatrical slant, is adapted for the stage by Samuel Adamson. The dominant element in Adamson's text is meta-theatricality as a tribute to theatre and the skill of actors. In the play, the narrative is dreamlike, filtered through Esteban's musings and the notes he keeps jotting down in his notebook for a play he would like to write that is about his mother. Panzuto works by minutely analysing the stills of the film and the decisions made by Almodóvar and his set designer Antxón Gómez. He captures an acute sense of colour and form, of attention to objects, particularly in the interiors, which perfectly connote the personalities of the characters. He constructs the domestic environments on stage using hinged panels to form walls and corners, evocative, sharply coloured in red, yellow and blue tones somewhat reminiscent of Almodóvar's imagery. During the performance, the backdrop canvas (also used as a projection screen) is raised showing the tiered room of a theatre, which inevitably, by becoming a mirror of the stalls in which the spectators are seated, alludes to the process of self-reflection on which Adamson's text is structured.

A second constructive orientation concerns the specific attention to pictorial references, which in some productions are overt and become allusions to painters that Panzuto appreciates and admires. This process can be clearly seen in the sets he created in 2012 for *Wordstar(s)* from Vitaliano Trevisan's trilogy. The play is produced by the Teatro Stabile del Veneto, directed by Giuseppe Marini, with lighting by Pasquale Mari and video processing by Raffaella Rivi. Trevisan's dramaturgy is articulated through powerful meta-reflective connotations. It does so by placing language and writing at the centre of the narrative. The aspect is reiterated by the title itself (*Word*), which invokes in its meaning the word but also a well-known digital writing software program. Dedicated to the last day of Samuel Beckett's life, the play shows the Irish writer in the grip of his creative torment, but prisoner of an aged and ailing body that forces him into everyday situations poised between the comic and the tragic. The story culminates in a paradoxical conversation with the editor

of a journal of Beckettian studies. The fantastic and the realistic commingle. The flow of the protagonist's monologue is counterpointed by the wearisome chatter of the female figures of his wife and lover, the memory of whom emerges, both treated by Marini in the director's reworking as two characters born of Beckett's own imagination, so as to create a sort of mirror theatre on stage that enriches the semi-theatricality of the work. Trevisan's tale unfolds between two realistic places, the clinic housing the ailing writer and his Parisian apartment. But the realism is ruptured by a logic that recalls Beckettian absurdity: in the concrete objects that adorn the spaces live entrapped, as if they were memories, the figures of his wife locked in a refrigerator and his lover in turn imprisoned in a lamp on the bedside table. The play's subtitle, *Portrait of a Writer as an Old Man*, orients Marini and Panzuto's visual scheme directly towards the imagery of Francis Bacon, an artist Beckett loved very much. Bacon often encloses the distorted bodies in claustrophobic geometrics, condensing the same sense of confinement, finality and failure that haunts the drama. Thus, in the set design, realism is relegated only to the few objects stated in the stage directions, while the two interiors in which the story unfolds have a pictorial matrix, defined solely by colour. Panzuto conceives a sloping platform with a floor painted in broad brushstrokes and a transparent backdrop for projections and backlighting to close off the wall. The result is two enclosed spaces in a liminal part-surreal part-realistic realm. Some solutions closely resemble works by Bacon, such as *Study for the Human Body* (1949, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria). The rarefied human body, which in the painting passes through a curtain into a black and disturbing space, provided inspiration for the passages of drama associated with the passage of time, related to the crossing of a threshold leading to memories of years gone by. On stage, Panzuto recreates the partitioned curtain wall in flimsy fabric, wrinkled and creped, to allow the actor to traverse them, almost disappearing, while on the other side of the curtain images and memories resurface, suggestive and impalpable. The two female characters, artfully concealed in the bedside table or refrigerator, are in turn juxtaposed with sign figures, heard though not seen, capable of dialogue and quarrel, but motionless. Painting enables the visionary aspect of the drama to be rendered. Indeed, the story pivots between the protagonist's present, which corresponds to the clinic for the elderly, and the past,

which is encapsulated in the room of what was once his Parisian apartment. The transition between the two temporal registers is facilitated by the contrast between the real world and painting: the actors are suspended in colour while performing real and true actions to the very end.

Hence the set design created in 2014 for *Le ho mai raccontato del vento del nord*, based on the novel by Daniel Glattauer, a project that hinges on the pictorial rendering of the whole, combining the potential of the film set with theatre. The show is produced by the Naples Festival and the Fondazione Atlantide - Teatro Stabile di Verona, directed by Paolo Valerio with lighting design by Nicola Fasoli and Enrico Berardi. In the story, the contemporaneity of events is the essence of the dramaturgy. The two protagonists, at night, write long and assiduous e-mails to each other from a distance, generating in the reader a situation of perpetual expectation. Panzuto conveys the sense of the drama by creating, as he says, film set configurations. Two rooms emerge from the penumbra, each characterised by a large window that allows light to enter the stage from the wings, shaping the space. The lighting device is completely exposed so that the audience imagines itself on the director's side. The interiors are defined by distinct clean lines, furnished in a minimalist style. The actors converse at a distance, from the rooms of two different but simultaneously visible apartments, isolated by the lights of the windows. The space between the two rooms is effectively occupied by the texts of live e-mails. The overall effect is pictorial. The mood is intimate and rarefied, the atmosphere overall has a photographic rendering and evokes an existential realism that alludes to Hopper paintings.

A third constructional solution involves the use of modular elements that can be combined to create abstract three-dimensional environments. One example is the set design for *Best Friend* by Giuseppe Tantillo staged at the Teatro Vittoria in Rome, a Bam Teatro production. The play received a Special Mention at the *52nd Premio Riccione - Pier Vittorio Tondelli* in 2013. The story is of a friendship spanning three periods of the protagonists' lives. The scenery consists of a platform with a background perpendicular to the stage floor. The space is empty, inhabited by modular elements, like pieces of Lego, which can simulate generic spaces such as stairways,

walls, an amphitheatre or more generally an elevated spot. The central theme of Tantillo's work is an allegory of lightness, represented on stage according to the dictates of the game. For this, Panzuto seeks to free the actors from the space-time continuum and the narrow causal links of the text, granting freedom to actions and words, amalgamating them with colours and their explosive vital force. Once again, the scenic matrix is shifted to the visual register, recounting friendship with abstract pictorial spans and instinctive brushstrokes. In this way, the passage of time has no need for references and captions.

An evolution of this device was used in 2016 for the sets of Dino Buzzati's *The Desert of the Tartars*, directed and adapted by Paolo Valerio, produced by the Teatro Stabile Nazionale del Veneto and which won the Le Maschere del Teatro Italiano Award for Best Set Design. Buzzati's oneiric and mysterious imagery in this work is articulated around the theme of the flight of time generated by the monotony of a routine that pointlessly consumes life. In the novel, the idea is transposed into a fictional military world that regulates the corporeality of existence by immobilising time. There is little room for narration and dialogue, the story takes place mostly in the inner world of the protagonist Giovanni Drogo, consisting of anxieties, suspensions, apparitions, glimpses of elsewhere. In him, time dilates, thoughts overlap. Panzuto elects to reproduce the atmosphere suspended between dream and wakefulness of the Fortezza Bastiani by creating on stage a practicable platform built with a system of modular volumes, similar to some of Luca Ronconi's productions conceived for Elizabethan dramas. The volumes are portions of staircases and walkways that simulate the impassable mountain top where the abandoned outpost is located, in which the protagonist's interminable wait is consumed. The various combinations of architectural elements throughout the performance allude to different points in the narrative, evoking (and not describing, there is no trace of realism) different settings that the audience grasps by convention. The fortress has no ceiling, except for the sky itself, and the stairs that constitute its roof do not actually lead to any destination. Panzuto also drew inspiration for the design of the scenery by watching the film *The Desert of the Tartars* by Valerio Zurlini (1976), set at the ruins of Bam (in Iran), a highly evocative space, which makes the relationship

between the stones and the sky above explicit in a singular way and which reinforced the idea of walking on the roof of the fortress made of staircases. The canvas backdrop, on sliding rings simulating the tents of military camps, acts as a screen for projections. Abstract pictorial imagery flows through it, rendered in broad brushstrokes, laden with atmospheric gloom to emphasise the psychological passages of the drama. Fragments of the novel are also projected, appearing superimposed on the visual material. The visual layout is enriched by the projection of paintings by Buzzati himself, used to mark sequential shifts within the narrative: each picture change indicates to the viewer that time or circumstances are changing. The overall effect is surreal, defined by Panzuto as a “pictorial scenario à la Max Ernst, full of strange figures and signs, perhaps mirages”. From overhead, uniforms, symbols of military life, descend, creating the effect of a kind of closed box that emphasises the condition of separation experienced by the protagonist, chained to a metaphysical obsession poised between hope and disillusionment. Director Valerio opts for a collective interpretation that does not envisage a single actor to play the role of the protagonist. The entire cast personifies him and is affected by his ageing and the emotions that change with the passing of time and experiences. Each of them awaits the arrival of the Tartars. The trick is to involve the audience who by osmosis are made to feel that they too are Drogo.

A fourth structural element can be the relationship with the stage object, both in its presence and in its total absence, which also serves as a reference to the work carried out in parallel in the performance shows. An example of a bare scene are the sets created in 2017 for Carlo Goldoni’s *Le Baruffe Chiozzotte* at the Teatro Romano in Verona, produced by the Teatro Stabile Nazionale del Veneto, directed by Paolo Valerio with Piermario Vescovo as dramaturgical consultant. The stage is bare, evocative and essential, dressed only in elegant shimmery veils in light, bright white and ivory hues that, mixed with the stage lights, appear to transport us to a distant, uncontaminated land. Vaporious and dazzling atmospheres like certain Luciano Damiani stagings. The large backcloth opens halfway, like a second curtain, to show the spectacle of the world beyond theatrical fiction. No props except for a few chairs and slender wooden platforms. The houses here have no

walls. The stage is a light space, ready to accommodate the bodies of the performers in this play with a choral structure that feeds on the spectator’s imagination.

Again, no objects for the sets of *Le Avventure di Numero Primo* by Marco Paolini, a 2017 production by Jolefilm. The monologue is a meditation on possible evolutions in an imminent future, with a timeline of the next 5000 days, where technology and fashion seem to dictate the rules of change. Panzuto accompanies the solitary narrator on an empty stage, populated solely by a large stone on which Paolini sits and clammers, enveloped by virtual images and sketches by Panzuto himself that trace bare silhouettes of his own figure. A large pictorial backdrop, evocative, with dark hues that echo the mood of the monologue, becomes a screen for the projection of crouching, lying, upside-down bodies that gradually lose their human traces to become shadows or human ghosts.

Similarly, the stage is clear in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, a 2018 production directed by Paolo Valerio, at the Shakespeare Festival at the Teatro Romano in Verona. The Vienna depicted in the comedy is a broken world, immersed in the attraction of evil and the fascination of the ambiguous. In a kind of game with a macabre twist, each character follows his own trajectory of superficiality and hypocrisy. The moral baseness of the characters is highlighted by a set design that Panzuto conceives as imposing when compared to the bodies of flesh that move on stage between contortions and self-congratulation. The minimalism of the set, stark and austere, is enlivened by the pictorial elements of the rear wall, conceived as a gigantic canvas anchored to the ceiling of the theatre and lowered to the ground, made up of five independent panels positioned side by side to create a composite that can vary in its overall arrangement. The panels, which Panzuto creates with a totally evocative and abstract painting, are treated as transparent and therefore illuminated from both sides: they are a screen for projections or a support for the creation of shadows.

Conversely, the object takes on dramatic form in the scenes created in 2018 for the show *Jezabel* based on the book by Irène Némirovsky, produced by the Teatro Stabile di Verona and the Teatro Stabile di Napoli. The direction is by Paolo Valerio, the

lighting by Luigi Saccomandi. Here the scenography is a space where some of the cardinal assumptions of Panzuto’s figure theatre come together, such as the use of suspended elements. The novel, written in 1936 by the Russian-Jewish writer who died in Auschwitz, is set in a courtroom where the protagonist is accused of murder. Jezabel is an attractive and mysterious woman, elegant and compassionate, prophetic, haunted by the idea of losing her youth and her seductive beauty. The story hinges on the recollections of her life replayed before the judge. The memory of the character’s past is often melded with the author’s own experience. On the stage, the grim realism that characterises the novel evaporates to leave room for an exploration of the more intimate, sensual and introspective aspects of the story. The protagonists become Jezabel’s memories, a procession of images that flow into the past and act as a glue between the fragments of the present that appear within the story. Panzuto constructs a cube whose wall facing the proscenium is made transparent in voile, while the backcloth acts as a projection screen. The contrivance multiplies the creation of space-time environments available to the set designer. The rich and sophisticated context described in the novel is rendered on stage with indeterminate and hazy elements, recalling the instability of a life mixed with “tragic amusement and devastating inner catastrophe”. In a gloomy atmosphere, achieved with shades of greys and blues, visionary and symbolic sequences alternate, evanescent trees blurred by a double backdrop that redoubles their lines, barely sketched interior architectures, faces and silhouettes. Dissolved and faded atmospheres, like vague memories. The synchronicity of the environments, real and virtual, delineate the stage set, which takes on a metaphysical and symbolic aura by means of the furniture suspended from the grid over the actors’ heads. In keeping with his marionettes, Panzuto hangs concrete objects, lowered onto the floor at appropriate moments to visually accentuate the heroine’s account by reinforcing the verbal aspect of the narration. Completing the ensemble is the lighting set-up orchestrated for a non-naturalistic rendering of light. Slight flashes contrasting with sharp diagonal beams in pictorial style and luminous cones isolating the characters are some of the solutions for modelling the setting on a symbolic layout. Architectural space as container also becomes an object of contemplation in stagings that exploit urban

locations. In this case, outdoor public spaces are explored through the medium of theatre and are transformed into metaphysical environments or scenic installations. One example is the show *Why Don’t You Dance?* inspired by Raymond Carver’s short story, a 2008 production by the Festival dei Teatri delle Mura in Padua and directed by Alessandro Tognon. Panzuto transforms the façade of the Museum of Applied Arts (Palazzo Zuckermann) into a space for dramatic stories by creating a film set with the audience placed in front of the façade of the building-as-stage. The architectural façade is incorporated into the installation where the window of a pastry shop, the entrance to an emergency room, glimpses of domestic interiors, the remains of a kitchen, a bed, a sofa appear. The overall impression is reminiscent of Carver’s suburban America, populated by transient and angst-ridden tales. Urban space is transformed, as in the works of conceptual artist Jenny Holzer from which Panzuto draws inspiration.

His career as an artist is complemented by intense educational work. He was a teacher of Figure Theatre at the Academy of Fine Arts in Verona from 2016 to 2019 and is a tutor at the school of Scenography at the Liceo Artistico Pietro Selvatico in Padua. Over the years, he has developed a training method centred on research and the unlocking of the individual’s potential. His work with primary school children often begins with an analysis of the text to be performed, which remains a fixed point. This is followed by the examination of a range of supporting sources to be internalised in order to build up in the learners an artistic and cultural reference framework, made up of theatre productions, films, literary material, visual artists. A wealth of images and words to arouse in the pupils the development of original and creative solutions.

To crown an intense and fruitful career, in 2020 he was awarded the National Prize of the National Association of Theatre Critics in Italy.