



"I Believe It": Nella Tempesta (dir. Daniela Nicolo and Enrico Casagrande) by Motus Theatre Company at La MaMa Theater

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LAMPEDUSA, ITALY'S SOUTHERNMOST ISLAND, IS NEARLY EQUIDISTANT FROM SICILY AND TUNIS. It's a playground for some: Rabbit Beach was named the best beach in the world in 2013. The same year, a boat carrying Somali and Eritrean migrants capsized off its coast. Hundreds died, adding to a growing humanitarian, legal, and political crisis. This is the island of *Nella Tempesta*. It is a prison island, an island of indefinite detention, misery, and the smallest grains of hope. The Motus Theatre Company would like to make it plain that this island is ours.

Nella Tempesta is the third and last of La MaMa Theater's "Tempest: 3" series. If the first (dir. Karin Coonrod) gave us a staid and standard Shakespearean version, and the second (dir. Tae-Suk Oh) translated *The Tempest* and transported it to fifth-century Korean chronicle history, then this version, directed by Daniela Nicolo and Enrico Casagrande, is overtly political, and powerfully introspective. It abandons any pretense of performing Shakespeare's play. The players instead perform themselves as they go through a fascinating process of engagement: with Shakespeare, yes, but not primarily. Instead, Shakespeare's *Tempest* is their way into a set of related concerns. These concerns include contemporary Italian political activism, specifically with migrant populations. In addition, the Motus players engage with the long shadow of colonial rule, and with the connections between activism and theater. This production asks its audience very pointedly not just to believe, but to act. At the same time, it expresses a deep despair about whether human action can effect change. It is thus an extraordinarily tragic *Tempest*, a guilt-inducing *Tempest*, and an anxiety-provoking *Tempest*. It does not for one minute allow the audience simply to relax and watch.

Equally pointedly, this *Tempest* completely ignores La MaMa Earth's mandate to consider the tag-line "The Tide is Rising," an ominous reference to global warming, sea-level rise, and Hurricane Sandy's devastations. None of the three productions engages in global warming at

all, and so in this way the “Tempest: 3” series is a failure, at least by the measure of its organizer’s intentions. I’m not sure where this process broke down, but in this case, I’m happy that it did. Maybe *The Tempest* is not pliable enough that global warming can simply be injected into it. If Motus’s directors realized this, and ignored La MaMa’s directive, then so much the better for us.

Yet La MaMa has performed an admirable service just by collecting together productions by American, Korean, and Italian theater troupes, and placing them into conversation with one another. Other international Shakespeare festivals, like the World Shakespeare Festival (Globe Theatre, 2012), have been somewhat more ambitious in scope. But if the three plays in La MaMa’s mini-festival are any indication, the most interesting work is being done from the outside, in translation, and through the transporting, adapting, and appropriating of Shakespearean characters and dramatic situations into new and different contexts. Nicolo and Casagrande’s play is a challenge not only to its audience, but to any director and company who just wish to present “the play itself.” Their play declares that this is no longer enough; the play must connect the fictional world of the play to the real world.

From the outset, we are confronted in multiple ways by the outside world’s entrance into the theater. As the play begins, actors are folding blankets, which are strewn about the stage, into bundles. Simultaneously, we also see and hear images and recorded voices. At first, these seem simply thematically connected to *The Tempest*: images of ships on the sea, and voices answering questions like “What is your personal storm?” But the images of ships are also punctuated by a shot of the entrance to the theater: we see people having their tickets taken, and getting programs. These people enter the theater, so that projected onto the back of the stage is an image of the exact moment of transition between the outside world of reality and the inside world of theatrical illusion. This, it turns out, is a key focus of Motus’s production, of their larger set of values and concerns, and of the directors’ vision of what it means to perform *The Tempest*.

The process of creating this play extends far beyond the regular purview of casting and costumes, blocking and lighting, script and music. Motus members began developing this by traveling to Tunis, one of the locations mentioned in Shakespeare’s text (“Methinks our garments are now as fresh as when we put them on first in Afric, at the marriage of the king’s fair daughter Claribel to the King of Tunis,” says Gonzalo at 2.1). Prospero’s island in Shakespeare’s play is famously unnamed, and unplaceable. Though many have conjectures, Shakespeare’s island can stand in for many different islands, whether Mediterranean, Caribbean, or elsewhere. For Motus, a key moment early in the creative process was their actual travel from Tunis to Lampedusa, the site of a processing center for migrants and one focal point

of controversy over the immigration policies of Italy and the E.U.. Footage that we see projected in this play includes images of the migration reception center at Lampedusa, which has been overwhelmed by refugees, some as a result of actual shipwrecks. We are confronted by images of these and other refugees, and by members of Motus, particularly Silvia Calderoni (Ariel), on location at Lampedusa. But later, we see Ariel at other recent, more local political protests, including those in New York surrounding the deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and other civilians killed by police.

In other words, although Motus's stated goal is "to give migrants voice for La MaMa Earth," they are also interested in engaging the immediate political actions and concerns of their audiences. This goal is encapsulated symbolically in Motus's statement that blankets are the main component of *Nella Tempesta's* set. Blankets are collected in each city they perform (sometimes audience members who know of the project donate blankets at performances), then, at the end of the tour, donated to local centers for migrant populations. On stage, they serve as a powerful visual signifier of migration and destitution, and also as all-purpose props. Blankets are collected and bundled, they drape over and are huddled under, they spell out words, they serve as platforms and beds, they cover over and are pulled away in revelation. In some of the most powerful theatrical images, blankets also dehumanize: Caliban (Fortunato Leccese) has blankets piled first into his arms, and then finally onto and over his head, until he becomes an inhuman figure: a walking pile of blankets, without head, eyes, or voice. This image is a masterful reappropriation of Shakespeare's comic scene, in which Trinculo takes shelter from a storm by huddling under Caliban's "gaberdine," making a creature with four legs. Ariel and others also dance behind blankets which they hold up in front of their bodies, creating a spooky, jerking, inhuman figure. And Ariel also prowls around the stage, cat-like, with a leopard-print blanket draped behind him and banded to his head. Most importantly, in a key moment in the performance, audience members are invited to the stage to fold blankets and arrange them on the stage. Each blanket becomes part of a letter; gradually the message, written in blankets, begins to take shape: "This island is mine." The message covers the stage, is written in blankets collected on site, and is created only through the combined work of Motus and their audience, fulfilling, for a moment, their stated goal "with the audience members ... to build a temporary heterotopia" (program notes). In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, the line "This island's mine" belongs to an enslaved and embittered Caliban. Here, Motus reimagine the line as a challenge: who are the masters of the island, and who will bear responsibility for all its suffering?

Although the program notes to *Nella Tempesta* mention all of these elements, the scope of Motus's dramatic process only became clear during an audience talk-back held after the

performance I attended. There, we found out just how deeply, personally, and passionately they have been engaging political action. Casagrande forthrightly declared that he likes to dwell in illegality because Italy's laws, and those of the E.U., are deeply wrong with respect to migrant populations; at another point, he said that he is glad to see Europe's edifices crumbling. These comments, and the attempts at the end of the play to connect this political cause to other recent protests, also helped to demonstrate that any references to Shakespeare's play, any representation of Prospero, Miranda, Ariel, and the rest, are a distantly secondary goal. *The Tempest* is a vehicle for engagement, and Motus's engagement has no duties whatsoever to Shakespeare, to his text, or to the play's sensibilities or concerns, if they get in the way of the primary political project.

This uncompromising position has precursors, most notably Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969), which rewrites Shakespeare's play as a revolutionary, colonialist conflict pitting Prospero against Ariel and Caliban. Césaire's island is unquestionably his native Martinique, and his Prospero and Caliban never transcend their positions as master and slave; they grow old together on the island, and as the play ends, each is entrenched: Prospero in his struggle to hold on to power, and Caliban in his struggle for freedom. Nicolo and Casagrande's play is not merely cognizant of this dramatic heritage; they insert whole sections of Césaire's text directly into various scenes. These scenes move fluidly, then, from Shakespeare's text to Césaire's, and back again, all the while retaining an arch-text that is the actors' own naturalistic speech, discussing their own experiences with storms, with acting, and with protest. Early in the play, for example, Gleni Caci narrates a scene from his childhood, from his native Albania, with hazy recollections of Enver Hoxha, its socialist dictator. At other points, the actors interact directly with the texts: they decide to play one or another scene from Shakespeare or Césaire, they abandon scenes that aren't going well, and they get carried away with scenes that overwhelm them in anxiety or hopelessness.

The play reminds us constantly that there is much to be overwhelmed by, much to feel anxious or hopeless about. Prospero in this production is largely replaced by a spotlight, which sits on the ground at the far downstage left corner. It is a malevolent presence, throwing a searchlight onto Ariel, who dances to avoid its sweep early in the play. It also creates strobing effects that throw the actors' shadows onto the scrim in rapid-fire, contorted postures, accompanied by deafening electronic pops of static. Its main effect is to render a visible and audible figure of panoptic power, which sits on the stage, mutely intelligent of the movements of all the figures moving about there. The characters themselves also discuss their own anxieties: how they should act, whether they should act, and especially, their fear that outside the protected space of the theater, no one feels anything. This means that there is a heavy dose of Pirandellian

metatheatricality in this production: actors talking about acting. Unlike in Pirandello's play, however, these aren't characters in search of an author. If anything, they are themselves, people in search of a way to feel and act both in the fictive world of the theater and in the real world.

Does all this make for effective theater? On the whole, yes. But the play performs so many experiments that some of them are bound to fail. The sound design and lighting design (by Andrea Gallo and Alessio Spirli) are spare; the Prospero-spotlight and its auditory effects are the only stage magic attempted, other than the intermittent projected images and recorded sounds. The spooky spotlighted blanket dances are ominous and claustrophobic: they create the sense that Ariel is a protestor about to be arrested, or a prisoner avoiding the spotlight's sweep. Costume design is purposely simple: most characters wear jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies; they wear what any young person on any street might wear. But there are moments that didn't work at all. Some of the only bits of music in the production are recorded bits of Michael Jackson's "Remember the Time" and The Doors's "Riders on the Storm." These have only the most eye-rollingingly sophomoric connections to the action. "Do you remember the time," one character sings as he sinks into a reverie, while "Riders on the Storm" deserves no further comment. More crucially, there is a very strange sequence in which a figure (played by Ilenya Caleo) in a sequined jacket declares that she is POWER, as the spotlight throws disco-lighting onto the whole theater. She then tries to get the audience to do the wave, egging us on by saying that it was much better when they tried this in Paris.

The scene fell flat. Yet we New Yorkers willingly engaged when more meaningful participation was offered. When called upon to do the stage-work of folding and placing blankets, there were more than enough volunteers. This sequence began the beautiful, tragic, and touching end of *Nella Tempesta*. As audience members worked, we also saw Ariel leaving the stage, carrying a small sapling. She was then projected on the screen, first leaving the theater, then getting on the subway, and then emerging into a different New York: protests, crowds, chanting, signs, and Ariel carrying her tree. Then she appeared at Lampedusa, outside of the building that houses its immigrant reception center, with another crowd and protest. And finally, she staggered back into the theater, and took her place on the stage, huddling beneath a blanket, a faceless, nearly inhuman lump, still holding the tree. By this point, the letters of "This Island Is Mine" had been subtly rearranged. The message now read "Is this Land Mine?" And with that, the tree fell over onto the stage.

"Outside, no one feels anything." The Ariel who comes back to us, who has tried to make a political change in the real world, comes back to us, in the theater, a failure. She becomes distraught describing her experiences outside. She collapses; perhaps she even dies. This is the moment of greatest tragedy, and it was truly affecting. But Motus did not end the production

there. Instead, Ariel re-emerges, and walks over to the Prospero spotlight. Declaring that it is simply a piece of theater hardware (she even gives the brand name, Robe, and the model name and number), she then says “It is not my master. All you have to do is press ‘Off.’” Which she then does, leaving us momentarily in complete darkness.

That darkness is shattered by a new light, shining from the balcony and directly onto us, the audience. It’s held by Miranda (Paolo Stella Minni), who then gives us the lines she’s most famous for: “How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, / That has such people in it!” And from almost completely off-stage, halfway between theater and real world, we hear Ariel’s reply: “Fuck, I believe it.”

This I take to be the crux of this play, especially as it fits into Motus’s larger 2011>2068 *Animale Politico* project. Throughout the production, we are confronted with the porous exchange-zone between theater and activism, emblemized in images and actions:

Shakespeare’s *Tempest* island as a prison for refugees; blankets donated, used in the theater, and then re-distributed; actors playing themselves struggling with their own memories and with their difficulties performing Shakespeare and Césaire; and most importantly, the journey of Ariel / Silvia Calderoni from real-world locations into the theater, back out into the world, and back into the theater. How do they continue to create, amidst all this pain? Why should they continue? This moment is a crux because desperation has been piled on throughout this play, creating a mountain very much like the mountain of blankets that pins Caliban to the ground. We despair of the plight of migrant populations. We despair that political activism can never triumph over corrupted power. And we despair, with the actors, that political theater can never achieve any beauty that isn’t escapist, dreaming, inconsequential. Calderoni’s final declaration, “Fuck, I believe it,” is, I think, meant to be a moment of personal, political, and theatrical magic. She says it despite herself, and if we too believe it, it is despite all the suffering and ugliness and fear with which this production has confronted us. Along with ample evidence of how terrible the world is, *Nella Tempesta* also allows us this final, magical moment, in which people are beauteous and full of wonders. Against our better judgment, it reserves a grain of hope that possibly, we can achieve not only beauty, but justice.