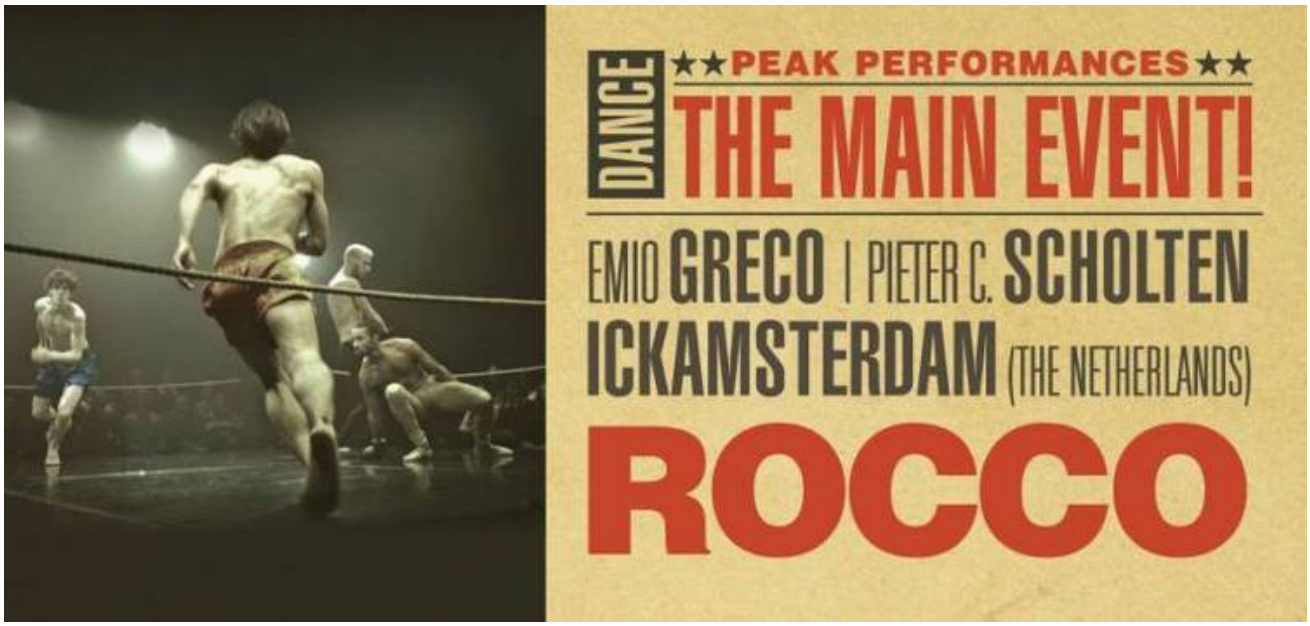
Dancing with Italy: Interview with Dancer and Choreographer Emio Greco

Teresa Fiore (March 17, 2015)



Boxing and dancing as metaphors for life; the sense of displacement produced by migrations; the exploration and control of space through body and interaction; the interconnections between brain, skin, and movement; and mostly the cross-pollination between dance and film – these themes were explored in February 2015 over the course of “Dancing a Film,” a multi-part program collaboratively offered at Montclair State University by the Inserra Chair in Italian and Italian American Studies (Department of Spanish and Italian) and the Kasser Theater/ACP.

The occasion for the program was the presentation of ROCCO, a dance performance choreographed by Italian dancer Emio Greco and Dutch theater director Pieter C. Scholten of ICKamsterdam and loosely inspired by Luchino Visconti’s film Rocco and His Brothers. The performance of ROCCO at the Kasser was followed a few days later by a conversation with the choreographers and dancers, enriched by screening of clips from Visconti’s 1960 classic, and by live demonstrations of scenes from ROCCO

During his stay on campus, Emio Greco carved out some time for a conversation on his personal and artistic trajectory using Italy as a fil rouge. Emio was born to a peasant family in Brindisi in 1965 and received his first training as a dancer in his town. At the age of 21 he moved to the Côte d’Azur and then Paris to receive rigorous training and to be part of a vibrant scene, while also making a living as

a cabaret dancer at night.

After two enriching experiences with Jan Fabre and Saburo Teshigawara in Belgium, Emio met Pieter C. Scholten with whom he forged a joint philosophy and practice of dance in Amsterdam, the city where he still lives (a recent assignment as co-director of the prestigious Marseille Theater may take him back to France). Italy in the course of this interview comes across as a land of origin and inspiration; only relatively recently has it been conceived of as a place of return, after years of distance. Italy is like a dancer interacting with Emio in a complex duet.

You have claimed that "we always migrate." And your life has been characterized by a migratory trajectory that has shaped your artistic path. I understand that the label "exile" which has been used to define you is not an ideal fit in your view. What word would you use instead?

Perhaps the right definition is that of a forced traveler in a journey that I have imposed upon myself in order not to be overwhelmed by my inertia. Migrating has been a response to my fear of laziness, my quest for rigor, my conscious distancing from beauty and comfort in order not to take things for granted. Challenges generate growth. Besides the geographical migration, there is also the migration inside the body: at the risk of forcing the physiological onto the sociological, I constantly see transits inside ourselves, from the feminine to the masculine, for example. I do not say this as a provocation: the body does this without our control, and I am interested in this fluid boundary crossing not as a topic of analysis, but as a humor/hormone-based experience to be conveyed through the dancing body – this is something I have explored in the performance of ROCCO.

What is your relationship with the South, often equated with the inertia and indulgence you mention above? The South is indeed - as much as the North of your migration - an important part of yourself.

It's always difficult to define this because what I see in the South is also what I see in myself. And I dread what I see sometimes… it's comparable to what you recognize inside yourself that comes from your parents, even though for years you claim that you will never become like them. I think the South gave me an ideological vision of right and wrong, quite imbued with pride. Only recently have I discovered the limits of this approach: it inhibits reasoning and the articulation of concepts, especially when they imply a new language. In the South feelings are strongly expressed through a dramatization that precludes an objective and pragmatic formulation and fosters reticence. This is typical of the peasant world, in particular. If pride can be beautiful, it can also foster a limited ability to listen: the "other" can then be easily dismissed rather than invited into an exchange. The conviction of one's justness prevails and aggressiveness ensues. This is what I meant earlier by laziness, intellectual inertia – something I fear within myself.

How much has your body allowed you to articulate what was not possible to verbalize in this Southern context? And in what sense has dance been a form of liberation?

I have definitely used my body as a language, despite the fact that it is much more tiring. It has allowed me to express a certain Southern silence. Dance offers a path of emancipation that is quite unique among all the performing arts: compared to theater or music, it is a proletarian art [arte operaia]. In this sense, it is close to boxing, a sport that opens to the working class an opportunity for social mobility.

Rocco and His Brothers is a pivotal text to see the connections between boxing and dancing. It is also a film linked to my family history: my father was a boxer both because he liked it, and because in the gym he could find free food like chocolate, for example. He participated in a local league: at times he would win… a coffee pot – it was another world then. As I was preparing for the show ROCCO, I asked him to share some stories about techniques and training, but also personal

experiences since he was a peasant who boxed on the side. He would go till the land in the morning, then train in the gym in the afternoon, and then fight in a match at night: when he talked about the physical pain he was not complaining like dancers often do for far lesser discomforts. His tale of ordinary physical endurance was staggering and moving.

Italy features prominently in your sources. Besides the inspiration coming from Dante's Divine Comedy, Pasolini's Teorema and Verdi's music, I am thinking of the collaborations with perfumer Alessandro Gualtieri and the Milan-based Moleskine design company, which are all part of your constant interdisciplinary quest. Has this been a way for you to travel back home through art in light of the difficulty in going back to Italy in other forms during the first part of your career?

These forms of return to Italy were all made possible by Pieter: his foreignness has allowed me to have a relationship with Italy that is not a tribute or a self-referential act. These risk being folkloric or pandering moves. I would have never allowed myself to return to Italy in this form, but Pieter added some distance that made the encounter more reasoned and clean. I felt authorized to do it through this intellectual filter and even classic texts became approachable, and this includes Visconti's film. I have also felt comfortable in giving Italian titles to some of the choreographies I co-created with Pieter: the trilogy Fra cervello e movimento (Bianco, Rosso, Extra-dry) and Rimasto orfano.

Going back to Italy has not been easy for you. At some point, while Northern Europe called you a prodigious dancer in the 1990s after an astonishing version of Ravel's Bolero, Italy remained blind and, even when you went back to perform, it was on occasions that did not really provide concrete forms of interaction with the dance scene in Italy, at least until the 2000s. What about your relationship with Italy today?

Yes, it has not been easy to be understood in Italy and to develop fruitful dialogues. But now I am very happy about the projects with Teatro Festival in Naples, especially since it is in the South. And, I also work in Turin. I tried to develop a collaboration with Palermo's Teatro Massimo, but unfortunately as it often happens in Italy, bureaucracy and silence took over. I feel like after so many years I am ready to go back and work in Italy, an idea I rejected for a while.

The same for setting up residence in Italy: frankly I would love to buy a house in Sicily and in particular in Pantelleria, where I go during the summer. This is more of a personal dream because moving the company to Italy would not be possible anymore: at some point Sicily represented a mythic and unknown land that provided an ideal counterpoint to Amsterdam, and we were considering building an artistic bridge. This said, I would like to work in Sicily, if possible.

I am available, I feel ready: I can "allow myself" the South [concedermi il Sud]. Sicily holds a particular attraction for artists, even though right now it is experiencing real challenges. It is a land of magnificence historically, and until not long ago it went through an amazing renaissance: if it was possible then, it's possible now. Indeed, I am interested in moving beyond this rhetorical cul-de-sac by which the South is said to have great potential that remains untapped – I am interested in action. Too often there is this representation of Italy as a place that has incomparable cultural richness and historical greatness to offer: yet, this view can be immobilizing, especially in the South.

At the same time, the South can offer ancient history and art, which I find more authentic: its archaic quality makes it different from the Renaissance, with its soft and genteel character. In the South you often have this leap from antiquity to modern, and this is what makes the South so special. Appreciation of art, culture, and history in the South does not follow the commonplace expectations. For me, for example, Catania is the most beautiful Italian city.

In an area like Apulia, you had no access to dance performances in theaters, in particular in the 1970s and '80s. In some interviews, you have talked about the influence of TV in

your early formation, including pop icons such as Heather Parisi and Raffaella Carrà who "defined" dance for people living away from main cultural centers.

They were definitely my guides along with Renato Greco who danced with Raffaella Carrà in the 1960s. He is somehow related to my family, a distant branch that later moved to Rome. Undoubtedly Raffaella Carrà has been my door towards dance, and then there was also the talented Heather Parisi. I owe so much to this pop culture: it has allowed me to then enter other forms of art. Today the artists I admire in Italy are not so much in the dance scene, but rather in theater, Emma Dante and Romeo Castellucci in particular. [Note: Romeo Castellucci has presented his work at the Kasser Theater of Montclair State University on a number of occasions in recent years].

What does it mean to present your work on this side of the Atlantic, especially in New York, which you see as an emanation of Amsterdam in some ways, a liberal city with a mercantile soul?

We have come several times to the U.S., including at Mass MOCA and the Joyce Theater in NYC, but NJ was the very first time. Every visit is an important step because performing in the U.S. is still a form of both personal and artistic recognition, which I would call a victory [una conquista]. The distance from the U.S. we experience in Europe and its mythical quality makes every visit exceptional. We would like to come back soon.

*Note: For their poetic quality, some expressions used by Emio Greco deserved being transcribed in Italian as well (see squared parentheses).

Links
[1] http://440468.6bgr9ubv.asia/files/roccoandhisbrothers1426628500jpg