

TeatroNatura® in Feudozzo

Perceptive attention and bodily impulses, traditional song, and narration of an ancient myth in natural spaces as a contribution to a new sustainability culture.

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Abstract. *This paper presents a combined educational and artistic contribution intended for a community of researchers from different disciplines interested both in ecology and in complexity. The experience we proposed highlights the lived quality of participation in a theater workshop and the encounter with the aesthetic dimension through a performance involving traditional polyphonic songs from rural cultures and oral narration of an ancient myth.*

The face-to-face exchange of resonances from different disciplines in shared knowledge building benefits the participants and becomes an integral part of the vitality of the processes that unfolded during the meeting. The underlying hypothesis is that all these aspects can regenerate contact with the senses, the body's memories, cognitive openness and flexibility, the poetic relationship with the archetypal figures that inhabit Western culture. While the centrality of scientific thought is in no way denied, the aim is to reconnect it with the mysterious and vulnerable depth from which every human desire for knowledge stems. To establish a new culture, we need to find a new way to create a successful alliance between science and artistic thinking and to open ourselves to lived wisdom, a vision of health ethics, intimately entwined with the health of the Earth.

1. Introduction: before the Cammino of Feudozzo (CaFe)

The invitation from the Italian Long-Term Ecological Research Network (LTER-Italy) for the Cammino of Feudozzo experience (CaFe) was the occasion for O Thiasos TeatroNatura® to offer a combined educational and artistic contribution intended for a community of researchers from different disciplines interested both in ecology and in complexity.

CaFe was for me an encounter like that of a karst river that flows underground for years and then emerges thanks to new favorable conditions. Each encounter was influenced by the different place in which it took place. This began around twenty years ago, thanks to the invitation by Elisabetta Falchetti, under a large oak in Centeno, between Lazio and Tuscany, at a farm owned by my family which for a while gave its name to a heterogeneous company, the “Centeno group”. After this first meeting, the group launched several projects together with some of the organizers and other participants of CaFe, such as conferences at the Scientific Museum of Rome and the related publications (Falchetti and Caravita, 2005; Falchetti, 2015), and later with the University of Turin, within the Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Sustainability (IRIS). In 2016, we worked with Alice Benessia, who brought us into IRIS, at the Cantiere Immateriale (Immaterial Building Site) in her new Research Centre in Pianpiccolo Selvatico in the Langhe region, through our contribution to the realization of an archive of

natural local sounds and creating a narrative performance (*Viaggio di Psiche* by Apuleius) and a concert of itinerant polyphonic songs held in that landscape (*È lu me amù. Passi cantati*). With Giuseppe Barbiero, who we met at IRIS, we worked on some research projects involving education, theater, nature, and neuroscience, aimed at students from primary school to university¹. Finally, the river re-emerged as part of the CaFe experience, thanks to the work of Alba L'Astorina (2018), a promoter of innovative scientific thinking, and of other research partners, both old and new.

During my first visit to Feudozzo, with my colleagues Camilla Dell'Agnola and Valentina Turrini, I already had some questions in mind, but they were still not expressed or even sufficiently conscious because, as occurs within the performative arts, where the building process alternates doing, observing, and re-doing in line with the typical procedure of theatrical workshop and rehearsals, they grow as they are stumbled on during concrete experience, with the intention of grasping and shaping the complexity of an action. Our questions were: How can TeatroNatura® contribute to transdisciplinary research on sustainability? What importance and what role do *places, bodies* and therefore also *emotions* have in knowledge? How can staying in *a place in nature* boost research on sustainability? Can *being in nature* encourage knowledge building or does it pertain only to the personal wellbeing of participants? Can immersion in nature relevantly affect the creation of a methodology and a language suitable for sustainable thinking and acting?

With these questions in mind, we built our contribution to the CaFe experience, with a workshop and a performance, to create an intimate connection between the participants and the natural location in which we were immersed.

2. The impact of theatrical performance

When working on performative art in natural spaces we have found that technological mediation (both written and digital) makes it difficult to perceive and truly encounter Nature, even when we are immersed in it. We keep on “thinking” it or “imagining” it, as for instance advertising does, drawing on our need – deep and partly removed – for real nature, but we do not know how to *feel* it anymore. We no longer know how to consciously perceive the *lived quality* of beings. Through a theatrical performance it is possible to stimulate continuity of attention towards a place and its atmosphere, giving space to new psychophysical

¹ Progetto Biofilia 2010/2011; Bambini e Natura percorso di ricerca interdisciplinare su natura vissuta e natura narrata 2014/2015

perspectives, training an imagination rooted in the present and, from here onwards, spread new visions for an awareness of the relativity of our ordinary way of seeing things (Bramini and Galli, 2007).

The contribution of TeatroNatura® to the commitment for a new culture for sustainability lies first in the rediscovered importance of theatrical practice, ephemeral but complex, which makes sense only with its audience and in the unicity of each performance. This art, when practiced in nature, without the use of recordings and digital streaming, can educate both performers and audience about uncertainty and the unexpected, awakening attention and the perception of the body, taking care of the human and environmental context, the vital experience of community, interconnectedness, and the embodied meaning of the aesthetic and ethic act in nature. In this way, it can induce a transformative process of conscience both in the performer and the audience (Bramini, 2019).

2.1. *Transdisciplinarity*

Other cultures, which are *closer* to the wisdom of Nature, should be listened to and integrated into our own before they disappear. We should find a transdisciplinary space and time in which to trace common fundamentals which, without surrendering to the reductionism and simplification of facile globalization, are able to connect scientific knowledge with a *wisdom* beneficial to the health of people and the planet. We should work on the permeability points of disciplinary boundaries, on the overcoming of cultural separations, thereby exploring new languages and listening to ancient ones and other cultures. Perhaps we should look for experiences and knowledge that can be shared between disciplines, above all in the context of *real life*, what the wise members of many cultures call “the art of living”, and educate ourselves within a different body of knowledge, where conscience and body feed into and out of each other.

But where can Science and Art meet? According to Bateson (1971) scientists must begin to look inside the “black box” that they avoid while they follow their protocols. They must delve into that part of knowledge which is usually considered the object of study of philosophy or art, but which is still fundamental to any form of knowledge. The dark and vulnerable area between reality and the language that tries to define it probably cannot be explained. But ignoring it or thinking that it can be neglected has crucial consequences on the search for truth itself. Art is constantly listening to how that forgotten mystery still pervades life. Science is

indispensable to us but must be allied with philosophy and art to found a new human ethics committed to realizing full planetary health. Such a *health ethics* will be strictly connected to a *practice of care* based on the acceptance (not resignation) of the vulnerability of humans and all living beings (Pulcini, 2009), and will avail itself of the knowledge embodied in performing arts through their emblematic and empathic ability to speak to the present and specific context.

3. The concept of the TeatroNatura® workshop and of the performance

With Camilla Dell'Agnola and Valentina Turrini, we divided the CaFe experience into two parts: a workshop in the morning and a performance at sunset. We decided to work in the morning with the group on sensorial and perceptive aspects and to share during the afternoon, through a participative theatrical experience, a more complex and profound level of our research (Figure 1).

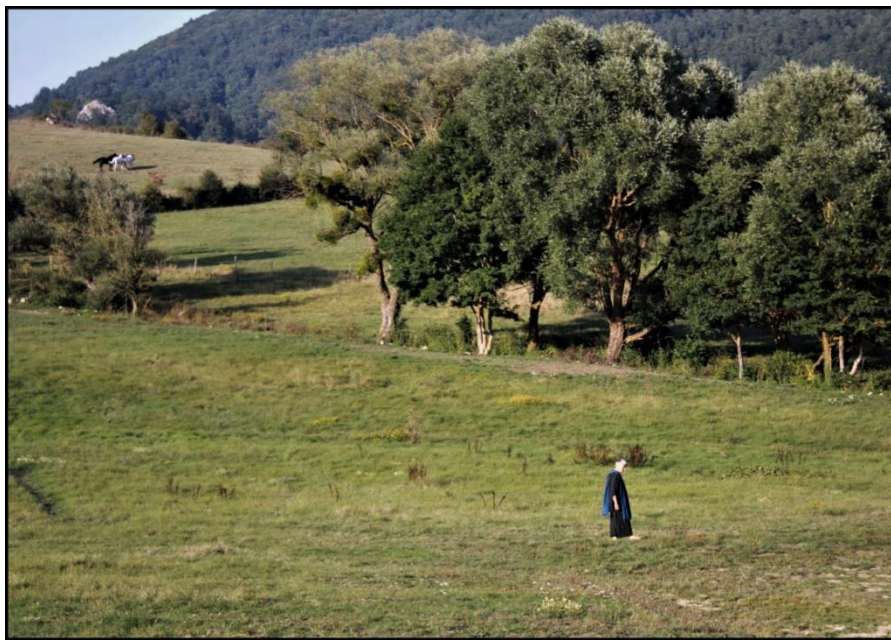


Figure 1. Sista Bramini in the setting of Foresta Demaniale Feudozzo e Azienda Sperimentale La Torre (Photo credit: Amelia De Lazzari)

We arrived one day in advance, to have time to *meet* the place, to find the right space *where* to perform, to choose *how* to create the setting and to understand which elements we could use to prepare the experience. The place is not just a pleasant or evocative container or frame for an experience. It has its own character, a particular morphological conformation, and its own acoustics. It is inhabited by living beings and provides its own atmosphere to come into contact with. The more articulate and sensitive listening to the space is, the more the creative possibilities essential for a *true encounter* are revealed.

The most common approaches to a natural place, if we exclude hiking and competitions, are intellectual and sentimental. The first, if not focused on studying the place, naming, or cataloging it, tends to relegate it to the background and consider it just as a *container* for whatever the *content* is to be and which gives value to the encounter itself. The sentimental approach *fantasizes* the place but does not *see* it, does not perceive its specific characteristics, its vital and unpredictable aspect, because it is really *imagining* a meeting with the place to derive pleasure from its narration, while truly meeting it is not. This is a cultural habit we share with our audience and our task is not related to seeing, giving, and listening to objective information, but rather to learning to forget it to be able to remain in the place with the body, its vulnerability and its impulses, its memories, and sensations, to *breathe it* (Bramini 2020). This is not easy. Thoughts keep on invading our minds, stealing our attention, blocking sensations to classify, judge, comment, even invent problems and solve them, to avoid just staying in the open air, in the uncertain, in the moment. These thought mechanisms are connected to precise psychophysical postures which we are accustomed to and that we feel as “natural”. Our theatrical work starts from these cultural limitations (Bramini, 2021).

We would like us to feel free to dance, roll around, sing, breathe next to each other with our eyes closed. All these activities can be considered bizarre by those who look at us from the outside and this can influence us, so as secluded a place as possible is ideal for calmly letting ourselves go, where our triggered watchfulness could be investigative, not defensive. The words of William Blake (1988) have accompanied us from the beginning of our research and come true in a different way on every new occasion: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite”. This perceptive relationship is not measurable, nor scientifically demonstrable, but it is profoundly real and requires precise exercise to become a part of the world that we want to learn to listen to.

3.1 *The workshop*

After a preparatory phase in the meeting room, the participants were invited to take off their shoes, to open up to the perception of the place, and we went outside to be on the bare ground and under the sky. We have largely lost contact with the extreme sensibility of the naked foot which, covered with sensors, knows how to communicate with the backbone, the organ of orientation which possess the ability to adapt to the conformation of natural spaces. For some people it can initially be unpleasant to take off their shoes but, after overcoming that reluctance, often thanks to the playful lightness of others, small dynamic actions, contact with the earth, gravity and balance transform the relationship with our body into motion, and encourage us to *perceive differences* and *consonances*.

Everyone is then invited to move so that each step is different from the previous one in form, amplitude and rhythm. In this way we warm up, getting out of all preconceived ideas of movement. There are smiling faces and expressions of enjoyment. Then, by making impulses leave different parts of the body, imagining them as energetic flows or beams of light, we start some imaginary “battles among shamans” with mysterious powers. In an exchange of actions and reactions we put thoughts and purposes to rest, awakening a language made of gestures that, with different energetic intensity, are rooted in an aroused body. Impulses that are not reasoned or programmed, but attentive and present and which, as if danced, go beyond the description or illustration of intentional thoughts. This is a living process that moves from preliminary phases to those in which movements are freer and “wild”, not related to a “performed” simulation or a physical exemplification of concepts. Our body in motion is, as our thoughts and emotions often are, a prisoner of emotional and cultural mechanisms so that in order to be spontaneous, it is necessary to remove those habits that give us the impression of naturality, but which are merely mechanical if we look into them deeply (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Topic moments of the workshop organized by O Thiasos TeatroNatura® (Photo credit: Sarah Gregg)

After having awakened the body with the “battles and shamanic dances”, bare-foot for those who feel comfortable with it, in single file and with eyes closed, one hand on the shoulder of the person in front, we move toward the stream. With open eyes we cross the stream, jumping on the stones, and we are now on the lawn. We divide into two groups, and one explores the place with eyes closed, the while other group watches and, if necessary (although it rarely happens), protects those who move forward in the darkness. Then the groups exchange roles. The exploration of each group lasts 15 minutes, but how different the perception of time is for those who touch, smell, caress with closed eyes, and for those who keep their eyes open! Despite being in the same time and place, two different worlds are experienced (**Figure 3** and **Figure 4**).



Figure 3. Moments of the workshop organized by O Thiasos TeatroNatura® (Photo credit: Sarah Gregg)



Figure 4. Moments of the workshop organized by O Thiasos TeatroNatura® (Photo credit: Sarah Gregg)

3.2. *The theater of vulnerability in the experienced place*

Without a rational thematic intention, we choose as our performance *Tempeste, trilogia della rinascita* by Ovidius, which tells of three catastrophes that highlight human vulnerability as a resource. One is about the birth of democracy from the overcoming of the fear of calamities. The second shows how the individual storm of jealousy gives rise to the invention of wine as a common good. The third presents how, after a planetary catastrophe, the selfless love of an elderly couple, the only survivors, manages to regenerate all living beings from stones (**Figure 5** and **Figure 6**).



Figure 5. The performance *Tempeste, trilogia della rinascita* by Ovidius with Sista Bramini, Camilla Dell'Agnola and Valentina Turrini (O Thiasos TeatroNatura®; Photo credit: Sarah Gregg).



Figure 6. The performance *Tempeste*, trilogia della rinascita by Ovidius with Sista Bramini, Camilla Dell'Agnola and Valentina Turrini (O Thiasos TeatroNatura®; Photo credit: Sarah Gregg).

4. Reflections on the experience

Such workshop and theatrical performance experiences have the potential to contribute to creating, in the participants, a livelier affective relationship with that stream, that line of willows, those stones, the sunset behind the hill where the horses are. The narration and the polyphonic songs that mix with the breeze can integrate the place with the artistic experience so that it does not remain a decorative aspect. During the CaFe experience, the chance to hear the comments of the audience gave us a kind of heartfelt gratitude, as if the performance had re-activated some lost contact with the natural place and ancient myth. In this occasion, two evaluators took part actively in the workshops and performance for participant observation (Falchetti and Guida, 2021). This observation, supported by the photographic documentation by Sarah Gregg, revealed a gradual transformation of attitudes and postural changes inside the Feudozzo group, which from initial embarrassment and perplexity loosened into a sort of global and collective participation, deeply embodied and emotional, a true liberation. From the collective debates emerged that these workshops and performances impacted on communication attitudes too, undermining the usual prevailing professional expressive modes and making way also for emotions. All the participants declared they had improved their levels of pleasure and wellbeing through exploring different stimuli, narrations, and expressive languages. As the evaluators suggested, the theater performances and workshops fostered “embodied” knowledge and emotions together with dialogue with natural elements. Telling through body posture images and emotions, feeling the limits of “being scientists”, had the effect of fostering in the group of “performers” new perspectives, critical concerns, and visions for more participative processes.

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Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.



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