

From Doppiozero Arts Section

Four pieces on Identity

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“My hair hurts”: Remember that? Monica Vitti playing Giuliana in *Deserto rosso*. This famous quote is what you first hear along with the others sitting around the classroom in Santarcangelo's Pascucci School (Northern Italy). From her chair Daria Deflorian says these words to around 40 spectators and her colleagues, Antonio Tagliarini and Francesco Alberici. This is the very beginning of a journey about the making of Antonioni's 1964 film, undertaken with the Assistant Director's diaries, statements, letters by the main stars, documentaries. This 'archeological' work is called *Scavi - Digging* - a companion piece originating from the preparation of the next performance by the Deflorian-Tagliarini company to premiere this Autumn, called *Quasi niente* (Almost Nothing). But *Scavi* is no lesser work: it fully represents the poetic approach of artists deeply innovating our theatre, from performance to performance, exploring the painful 'knots' of the contemporary condition, with increasingly sharp stage (and literary) writing; based on negligible but whirlwind shifts between actor and character, between everyday admissions and asserting the political, the existential, human, even the metaphysical, with everything possible in-between, pronouncing those grey areas that make up our present. No plot is discernible, or pretence, yet there's a continual projecting oneself somewhere else and back, in little jumps or just crumbling away, through subsidence, even nose-dives: until something intimately hidden is revealed.

How parts of the film were made by the *Maestro* from Ferrara are described here; stories about people in the background of an epochal change in Italian society as it moves towards industrialisation. Starting from hair and the simple act of combing it and suddenly you slip from the film's characters to the performers themselves. Giuliana's character often looks slightly dishevelled, unkempt even, due to the wind machines but, she is also approaching the edge of the black hole of madness, in a world, in a system of relationships that she no longer understands. Monica Vitti, as soon as filming was over, would compulsively tidy her hair. From this episode Daria goes on to reflect about her own relationship with her hair, and then her mother's, a farmer from Trento, followed by the other performers until the real subject of the story starts taking shape: the fading of youth, health, beauty, that plunging into pain, melancholia, seeing one's own image crumble, the moment when you do not recognise yourself any longer. The characters evoked, from the making of the film or personal memories include: the poet Amelia Rosselli, Patti Smith, a melancholic young woman, in a dense, insidious allegory on hair, angst, anti-depressants for survival and the shame of feeling inadequate. Daria says: “Giuliana in the film has attempted suicide, that we don't see, no-one talks about it. Antonioni describes her in an interview as ‘a neurotic, with psychotic tendencies

who has both visual and aural hallucinations'. Only if you watch the film more than once you might notice that she takes a pill from a small box, surreptitiously, in the background". There's what you see, what appears and whatever is underneath it all, gnawing away, bringing on the pain.

Michelangelo and Tonino Guerra, austere rigour and vitality. Monica and Michelangelo, who separated at the end of the film. And other abandonments. "Monica left me... I'm not used to managing pain". Documentaries, letters, confessions. To delve behind this work, into the pressures and its glitches... A film interview with Lea Massari that couldn't be filmed: she had opened the door to a film crew, dishevelled: "She'd let herself go... She doesn't even get dressed anymore, doesn't go out, she's not herself" the film director reported. The prison of beauty. Getting old, in real life, in the life of actors, for Daria, for Antonio, for all of us... Taking an overview of it all. Snow, the snow. This was the other unfilmed ending for *Deserto rosso*. Not just the **camera** driving around the factories. Snow that falls, white, snow. The three performers open the windows. Noises from the underlying Piazza Santarcangelo filter in. Daria, Antonio, Francesco look out, far away. Silent. There were many moist eyes in the audience inspired by this solemn path to profundity, which seemed made up of little or nothing (*almost nothing*) and like in films, like in the 1960s, still manages to talk about us. [Like] Skinning us with a scalpel.