

## **Existential drama and man-God's Passion in mystery plays**

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**Abstract:** *The docufilm "Uomini e Luoghi: l'Antica Pigghjiata di Davoli" authored by Vittoria Camobreco supported by Francesco Brancatella, produced by the youth association "Ostro" (<http://associazioneostro.jimdo.com>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVNukEtXnjs&t=157s>) provided us with the opportunity to revisit the mystery play performed in Davoli (Calabria, Italy) in 1966 with the purpose to be a dutiful acknowledgment to those women and men of the community, belonging to any social rank, that, after hard working days, have submitted themselves to rehearse exhaustingly in the night for six months. It pays tribute to the extraordinary merits of a brilliant and versatile director such as Vitaliano Ambrosio. It comes as a generous gift of the pioneering amateur insight of Antonio Bagetta, beloved general practitioner in Davoli for half a century, who immortalized on a 8 mm film faces, images, situations, otherwise doomed to sink into oblivion.*

**Keywords:** *Mystery play; Pigghjiata of Davoli; Christ's Passion*

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### **Background of The Pigghjiata of Davoli**

The play plot is structured in seven scenes tracing out the Evangelical tale and bringing out the figure of Christ as sacrificial lamb that suffers, bleeding in torment, and dies for the redemption of mankind.

Costumes and scenography, natural environment scattered with olive trees, palms, grapes and brooms, which represent building images of the Christian symbology, describe faithfully the Holy City scenery.

The lexicon used by the first twentieth century anonymous author reveals a classical-like syntactic structure.

The massive and extraordinary popular participation and the great cohesion among different social classes, in tune with Church and institutional figures of the moment, give evidence to this happening remarkable and emotional impact.

Thus, the "Pigghjiata" of Davoli set in 1966 moves on the traces and the traditions of similar Italian and European mystery plays and represents the first filmed play of this kind in Calabria.

### **History of the mystery play**

The most renowned European mystery play is the one of Oberammergau (Bavaria) dating back to the far Middle Ages.

In 1633, the town council of that city, in order to ward off the perpetrating of a plague epidemic which had decimated the population, deliberated to perform Christ's Passion and Death once every ten years.

Technicians, musicians, singers, actors and organizers (about 2000) are chosen peremptorily in this area.

They practice the script for the whole year in a permanent theatre, establishing the actors that will play the most significant characters of the Passion.

As much famous is the mystery play of Christ's Passion in San Gallo and in Zurich, in Switzerland; Angers Passion and the mystery of Passion of Jan Michel in France; the anonymous "everyone's call" in England; Passion and Resurrection of Jan Engine in Spain; boats trilogy of Gil Vicente in Portugal; Our Saviour's Passion in Croatia.

### **Mystery play in Italy**

In Italy, similar dramatic-religious initiatives are so many, but the most quoted and characteristic come from Erto (Cadore), Borgomanero, Gessopalena, Oppido Lucano, Isernia, Cittanova (RC), Trapani.

The genesis of the one of Erto is analogue to the one of Bavaria. All the Cadore, in the late Middle Ages, was affected by bubonic plague or dark plague. Erto was spared and the population, in sign of thanks, made the vow to perform every year Christ's Passion and Death with actors and technicians native of the place.

Among the above listed Italian plays, analogies and differences may be highlighted.

Combinations between the mystery play of Oppido Lucano and Davoli "Pigghjiata" are extraordinary: stress of the recitative and emotional aspect of the script; all of the actors dabblers of the people; the great popular participation which is the real strength of the happening.

The mystery play of Gessopalena has a particular characterization: the way has a snowy mountain in the background following a road which ran uphill in the green of the woods surrounding the urban built-up area and the medieval village.

As explained by the founder and director of the Drammateatro of Pescara, Claudio Di Scanno: "the starting point is the both worrying and touching character of Jesus Christ, in his most beautiful and intriguing quality: the one of innocence. Christ is the innocent who preaches in vain in the desert of barbarity and foolishness".

Even in this Abruzzi representation, in symmetric analogy with Davoli anonymous' text, there is an involving musicality of the word; interventions input of people or of angels, re-evoking the chorus, typical of greek tragedy; people beneath purpose, of a community telling its culture, its own human experience through Jesus Christ's Life, Passion and Death.

The need to portray, scenically and by dialogues, rituals and dramatized ceremonies, was felt in the first Middle Ages: the most ancient text of the Passion, in Montecassino codes dates back to XII century.

A further development was introduced during the Renaissance by a high theatre and poetic value production going from "Cassinese Passion" to "Our Lady's crying" by Jacopone da Todi to "Mystery play of Saints John and Paul" of Lorenzo il Magnifico.

### **Genesis of the mystery play**

Toschi P. (1940)[1] attributes the "geographic" genesis of the mystery play to Eastern Church rituals between IV and IX century.

Contini G. (1960)[2] quotes the first contribution present in Byzantium: Homily for the Holy God's Mother's Annunciation and a Christ's Passion of a classic culture fed uncertain author.

It seems that, in the west, holy drama has developed later, as derivation of the eastern one, with references to roman and pre-roman paganism classic ages.

Frazer J. (2006)[3], leader of confirmed anthropological schools, states that the mystery plays of the Holy Week would come "from rural-pastoral tradition rituals celebrated on the occasion of spring calendar anniversaries. Ceremonies through which mankind renews, thanks to the repeating of Agnus Dei sacrifice, have replaced pagan rituals of the ancient naturalistic religions, deeply rooted in all the people's folklore, and in which, with clear cyclic propitiation, we find the scheme of a god's death and resurrection. Since then, the rebirth of earth-mother has never been celebrated, but the one of man God".

Moreover, mystery play, according to some scholars, such as Alessandro from Ancona (1891)[4] and Vincenzo De Bartholomeis (1924)[5] has to be considered as: "climax of a religious theatre evolutionary parable which, from latin liturgical drama, would have become vulgar and would have municipalized in the straightforwardly popular experience of XIII and XIV century Abruzzi-Umbrian dramatic lauda.

At last, it finds accomplished shape in the well educated and progressively secularized, but always of popularizing nature, revision operated by the intellectuals linked to Medici family in 400.

### **Why were mystery plays born?**

Ambrosii-Traversari (1968)[6] attributes to the 40's of 400 "the custom to perform dramatic texts as revision, in Christian key, of ciceronian and quintilian pedagogy, which considered acting as a tool to polish expressive, mime and sign language capabilities of the child", in Saint Mark in Florence Purification communities.

Ventrone P. (1992)[7] reports that homiletic rhetoric, institutionalised by the prior of Saint Mark's Dominican convent, then Florence bishop, Saint Antonino, was: "docere, delectare, flectere". Texts, through verbal and visual communication, underline this educational and pedagogical character distinctive feature of the Florentine play. They fulfill the directness of the relationship with the audience and incitement to identification.

"It is a pressing invitation to linger over our fragile existence, reverberated in sorrowful and powerful Christ, arising again, with full truth, life and death never-ending drama, which is human spirit drama", as reported by Alberto Genovese (1994)[8].

In a recent ethnology graduation thesis – supervisor professor Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, assistant supervisor dr. Rosa Parisi – with the title: "Feast of Our Lady of the Assumption in Gerandia Santafrondi. Penance way: mystery plays and devoted bodies", the author Giovanna Paradiso (<http://www.ritisettennali.org>) underlined a sentence emerged in her research work: "Come on, you're not alone, but a wide group of men walks with you by the way embracing dead and living and that, even if reaching you through your most direct educators, actually makes you share set ages and vanished societies".

### **From mystery play to cinema**

Since that 1966, social, economic, political, structural, communication and information contexts have remarkably changed. Through sectorial scenic play, devoid of soundtracks and of the most advanced audiovisual techniques, we have come to the resounding success of "The Passion" by Mel Gibson in 2004.

The movie, of which the external scenes were shot in Basilicata and in Puglia, focuses on Jesus' last life hours, favouring the highest insistence on the cruel flagellation – Pino Farinotti has suitably summarized: "90 minutes of tortures and 2 minutes of resurrection" - to the extent to have been defined by the critics the bloodiest movie of this kind (<http://cinemaleo.wordpress.com>).

Apart from the unquestioned success, the topical theme, the evocative images and the never ending Messianic message, the maniacal obstinacy of the cruel flagellation, sometimes excessive, does not promote that sharing and identification of the audience, typical of these mystery plays, as it happened with different meanings and feelings, in "The Gospel according to St. Matthew" by Pasolini and in the "Jesus of Nazareth" by Zeffirelli. Not to compare the stature of these Italian writers and directors, the Pighgiata filmed in 1966 by Antonio Bagetta yields today the feelings described above.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Prof. Fiorella Seminaroti and Dr Damiana Scuteri for their skilfull collaboration during the preparation of the manuscript.

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