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Performing Lampedusa in *Miraculi*: Thoughts on theatre and research in a saturated field-site

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Abstract

*In the summer of 2011 I carried out ethnographic research on the island of Lampedusa on the ways in which those who lose their lives on their journeys to Europe are buried and cared for by Lampedusans. In September 2013 I returned to the island with seven theatre makers from the devised theatre school Jacques Lecoq to carry out a month of collaborative fieldwork research. The main idea of the project was to employ anthropological methods, observation and immersion in people's daily routines to develop a performance about life on this frontier island. By focusing on people's memories and on understanding what the everyday involves at the edges of Europe, we wished to address bigger questions of belonging and responsibility. Our group fieldwork developed into a theatre show, *Miraculi*. This article explores the different stages of the project and examines the ethical questions and methods, both theatrical and anthropological, employed along the way, in the hope of contributing to thinking through the significance of artistic projects and collaborative research in over-mediatized and saturated field-sites.*

Keywords

theatre

ethnography

collaborative research

ethics

Jacques Lecoq

critical migration and border studies

Sugnu nu scogghiu ndi l'azzurru dilatatu

Li putenti d'ogni tempu mannu marturiatu

I am a rock in the dilated blue

The powerful of all ages have tormented me

Lampoesia, Giacomo Sferlazzo

Introduction

While the Mediterranean region 'has for several centuries served to stage the distinction between the West and "the rest" in the most intimate geopolitical settings' (Ben-Yehoyada 2014: 871), the Italian island of Lampedusa in particular has in recent history been fashioned to embody the concept itself of the frontier (Cuttitta 2012: 12). Re-baptised Porta d'Europa, Gateway to Europe, by media and political discourses, the island prominently features different police bodies, military cum humanitarian operations, international organizations, visits by local and foreign politicians from across the political spectrum, and seasonal influxes of journalists, academics, tourists, activists and artists. It thus serves as the ideal backdrop for the 'border spectacle': 'a spectacle of enforcement at "the" border, whereby migrant "illegality" is rendered spectacularly visible' (De Genova 2013: 2), making it appear as an intrinsic characteristic of people on the move and as an almost objective fact, as

opposed to a historically contingent and legally produced criminalization. This scene thus displays, generates and justifies the exclusion of migrants, while dissimulating their actual inclusion as a deportable, and so vulnerable and exploitable, work force – a mechanism that De Genova terms the ‘obscene of inclusion’ (2013: 6). In Lampedusa, the border spectacle and the industry that supports it also result in implicating the island’s residents in the material and symbolic creation and functioning of the border, as the local economy comes to rely on it more and more.

I started carrying out ethnographic research in Lampedusa in the summer of 2011. My fieldwork focused on the ways in which its inhabitants relate to the people who pass through the island, and how those who die trying to reach it are cared for, buried and mourned by locals. Following Donnan and Wilson’s proposition that what anthropology can bring to border studies is ‘how people experience the nation and state in their everyday lives’ (1999: xiii), I aimed to study the ways in which people organize around the presence of these dead persons by looking at the day to day, lived experiences of the residents of the European Union’s border. In light of the current anti-immigration climate in both Italy and the EU, one would tend to expect people in Lampedusa not to feel personally obliged to bury and remember those deceased at the border. Yet my research showed that the presence of these unknown dead triggers particular affects and knowledge, and is meaningful to those who live at Europe’s margins. The dead bodies of strangers – whose deaths would not normally be understood to have caused disruption to the local community – call for rituals and engender emotions in particular instances,

and might even influence the understandings of the state, justice and ethics of those who come into contact with them.

After leaving the island, and subsequently attempting to 'capture' it in the form of a master's dissertation, I felt 'frustrated by the difficulties one can face in communicating the atmospheres and complex characters that we met in our fieldwork via either of the established genres of ethnographic dissemination: text or film' (Long 2015: 306). Neither of these mediums seemed appropriate for conveying the impressions I had gathered during fieldwork to audiences, whether within, or more urgently beyond academia. Articles, books, documentaries and films about Lampedusa were already starting to proliferate – even BBC Two aired a documentary in 2011 emphatically entitled *The Invasion of Lampedusa*. Few, however, were created in conversation with Lampedusans themselves. This struck me as ethically problematic, insofar as these depictions often extracted irregularized migration from both the larger historical and political context within which it emerged and from its actual micromanagement on the island, making readers and viewers feel it almost natural that the border should exist in this particular locale and that thousands were to arrive there in strenuous conditions. Moreover, much of this written and visual production, I feared, ended up feeding into both the media's and politicians' tendencies

¹ to characterize Lampedusans, dichotomously, as either inherently welcoming or fundamentally racist, and to depict the island through '[i]mages of "flow", "invasion", "crisis" or "emergency"' (Friese 2012: 67); images that are ultimately complicit in maintaining a violent and deadly border regime.

As a result, two years later, during the month of September 2013, I returned to Lampedusa together with seven theatre makers I had studied with at the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris, a school that specializes in physical theatre and in devising new work in a collaborative fashion. This month-long theatre residency and collective fieldwork experience in Lampedusa formed the basis for creating a play about the island: *Miraculi*. Our company, Théâtre Senza, was born out of a shared desire, stemming from our positionality as white European citizens in whose name the EU's frontier was supposedly being guarded, to go to Lampedusa and develop a performance about life at this borderland based on anthropological research methods, observation and immersion in people's daily routines. By focusing on individuals' memories and self-narratives, and on how time and space are managed and experienced in Lampedusa, we wished to tackle bigger questions of belonging to so-called Europe, and of the responsibility of both citizens and states vis-à-vis those excluded from rights and citizenship.

This article will explore the different stages of the project and will examine the methods, both theatrical and anthropological, employed during the research, creation and performance phases. Our project was very much an experiment in attempting to juggle these two disciplines, and in our efforts to combine research and practice the ethical dimensions of our encounters in Lampedusa emerged as the guiding aspect of our methodology. As such, the following pages wish to be a means to reflect upon the processes and purposes of our work while putting across insights about Lampedusa and about the border regime within which it exists, with the aim of reflecting on the potential of creative endeavours and collaborative research in over-mediatized and

saturated field-sites. In the spirit of the recently published volume *Anthropology, Theatre, and Development: The Transformative Potential of Performance* (A. Flynn and J. Tinius, 2015), I hope these thoughts will be of use to both theatre makers interested in exploring the ethical scopes and implications of their work, and to researchers who wish to consider how the vehicle used for communicating findings can shape the research itself and can open up possibilities for developing different kinds of knowledge.

Starting points

In February 2013, I approached seven other theatre makers, who were later to co-fund Théâtre Senza with me. The common motivation of those who decided to join the project as actors/researchers was that while Lampedusa's name was familiar to all, being for the most part European citizens, they felt they knew little about what the everyday involved in a place that has been turned into a gateway of Fortress Europe. Despite Lampedusa having been singled out for over twenty years by Italian governments to serve as a node for the management of migration from North Africa, international media started to more persistently turn its attention to it from 2011. The Tunisian revolution and the Libyan civil war resulted in more than 50,000 people arriving at the island during the first half of the year. In February 2011, 'for weeks, more than 10,000 migrants had to sleep in the open, without any assistance from either national or European institutions' (Orsini 2015: 523). This situation could have been foreseen and avoided by the then Berlusconi government, but instead they used it to declare a state of emergency and call for EU intervention and financial support.

We had all learnt about these events from the news in our respective countries (Brazil, England, Finland, France, Italy, Scotland, Turkey), and wondered how these seasonally proclaimed crises and political interventions, or lack thereof, were experienced and conceived of on the island. 'Italy has declared migration emergencies almost every year for the past 10 years' (Perkowski 2012), and Lampedusa, it seemed to us, sat in the eye of these unnecessarily mismanaged and recurring, media-fuelled storms. We wondered therefore how these discourses of crisis, invasion, tragedy and emergency matched with the actual unfolding of events in Lampedusa, and with its inhabitants' ordinary practices of making, unmaking, contesting or simply living with the border. What does daily life involve for those who populate Europe's edges? What kinds of relations are formed between its residents and those who arrive on the island, dead or alive?

We felt convinced of the relevance of exploring these issues, and aimed to bring them through theatre to the attention of those European audiences who are the main addressees of alarmist and protectionist political rhetoric on immigration. We nevertheless realized that carrying out research in an emblematic milieu like Lampedusa with a focus on border deaths (as our project relied on my previous research on this subject) could end up feeding into and having similar effects to those sensationalist images – emphasizing violence, criminality and death at the border – that serve to strengthen a border regime founded on security measures and exclusion (Casas-Cortes et al. 2014). As was pointed out recently after Gianfranco Rosi's film about Lampedusa *Fuocoammare* won the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival 2016, 'if we concentrate our attention on border locales (which are the most

able to produce strong images and emotions) we will later only imagine actions to carry out in those places', like reinforcing border control and militarization, as opposed to asking ourselves what could be done in both countries of departure and of arrival in order to get to know, listen to and address the needs and aspirations of people on the move (Segre 2016, my translation). By focusing on the island that quintessentially stands for the border in the European public imagination, our work could feed into precisely those representations we wished to complicate and upset through the project. In this light, what are the ethics, politics, and implications of carrying out research and artistic projects on Lampedusa? How could we avoid contributing to the border spectacle?

We took these concerns with us to the island, and remained alert during our creation process regarding how to best approach the ethics of our project, which led to much debate and even friction within the group. We hoped that by understanding our field-site as situated within the border regime and spectacle, and by aiming to have a long-term engagement with this locale, we would be forced to be constantly aware of the potentially harmful and problematic outcomes of this research and theatre project. In pursuing these questions, we attempted to come up with strategies that would involve those we met in Lampedusa in critically engaging with our representation of their experiences. We hoped to mobilize their reactions and perspectives on the themes we were interested in exploring and on the idea itself of creating a theatre performance about Lampedusa, in order to then share these through performance with people living elsewhere in Europe, with the aim of generating a more nuanced understanding of European citizenship and of the different realities and

relations produced by the EU's management of immigration. We tried to develop a working method that allowed for the views of those we got to know in Lampedusa to feedback into our work, and that left room for doubt and self-questioning within the group itself.

The *enquête* as ethnographic method

We embarked on our month long residency in Lampedusa in September 2013. During this time we experimented with ways of doing participant observation in tandem with movement exploration and improvisation. We worked on bringing together these approaches in daily rehearsal sessions aimed at starting to digest our impressions of the island. The fact that we had all studied together at the Jacques Lecoq School facilitated our collaboration, as it allowed us to root our work in a shared theatrical language. More importantly, our theatre background proved especially conducive to the kind of group ethnographic research we were envisaging.

Lecoq is a physical and devised theatre school, specializing in giving students the tools for making new work. Throughout the first year great focus is placed on the study and transposition of life for the stage, as the course develops 'along two parallel paths: on the one hand the study of improvisation and its rules and on the other movement technique and its analysis' (Lecoq 2009: 14). Curiosity, observation, and the playing and re-playing of life through improvisation come together through miming, which Lecoq viewed as a means of generating knowledge:

To mime is literally to embody and therefore to understand better. A person who handles bricks all day long reaches a point where he no longer knows what he is handling. It has become an automatic part of his physical life. If he is asked to mime handling a brick, he rediscovers the meaning of the object, its weight and volume. This has interesting consequences for our teaching method: miming is a way of rediscovering a thing with renewed freshness. (Lecoq 2009: 22)

As part of the school's learning process, we were also expected every week to form groups and collaboratively create a short theatre piece related to the subject of the lessons. This exercise is called *auto-cours*, as teachers have no input in what the students produce, and within the groups there are no set roles and hierarchies, pushing everyone to be both actor and creator and to find ways of coming to consensus about what to stage. A question frequently posed by teachers after the showing of our *auto-cours* on Fridays was 'Est ce que c'est juste?' I would translate this comment as 'Is that right? Is that really how it goes in life? Is what you have shown us true to what you are representing? Can we as audiences buy into this depiction?'

The different aspects of the Lecoq pedagogy culminate at the end of the first year in the *enquêtes*, the investigations. Groups of students select 'a place and a milieu, somewhere which is part of everyday life, but not familiar to them. They become part of it and observe it for four weeks' (Lecoq 2009: 97). In our class, the locales chosen ranged from an old people's home to a betting shop, from a boxing gym to a fancy Parisian *salon de thé*. The goal of the exercise was not to provide audiences with a judgement or an opinion about the people we

were encountering and the work they were involved in: we had to strive to find the *juste*. As Lecoq put it:

It is not a matter of conducting a journalistic enquiry, which would amount to mere observation filled out with a few conversations with the people there. Instead, it involves genuine integration into a live working environment, with the aim of experiencing what happens there as full participants. Basing themselves on this lived experience, they [students] develop a short performance, using the theatrical devices which seem best suited to putting across what they have felt. (Lecoq 2009: 97)

This way of approaching the gathering of knowledge for theatrical purposes resembles anthropology's favoured method: participant observation. The *enquête* involved us paying particular attention to the ways in which space and time functioned in a specific environment. It pushed us to notice how people react to places and to objects and persons acting within it, as well as to their movements, the affects that circulate, the different tempos and rhythms of their day, the exchanges, lights, colours, heat. In sum, we were to be receptive to the *dynamiques* – a term commonly used at Lecoq that in my understanding comprises all of the above factors – and affective and sensorial aspects that make up a particular locale. It was crucial for the company members to have experienced this way of working for the purposes of this project, since we were essentially going to set out on a 'big *enquête*' about Lampedusa.

Residency in Lampedusa

We spent our month in Lampedusa carrying out a blend of ethnography and *enquête*, which involved us paying close attention to what people did and to the situations they found themselves in, rather than simply relying on what they said. This was a crucial research approach for a place like Lampedusa, where the 'intense mediatization of the island pushes locals somehow to perform the border as if to satisfy the outside world's expectations of it' (Orsini 2015: 533). In Lampedusa it is not uncommon, especially in the summer, to see documentary film-makers, journalists, photographers and academics carrying out interviews or filming. Some of my research participants in 2011 have recounted the same stories about their roles in particular incidents regarding migration again and again to different media, ranging from the Sicilian Canicattì Web Notizie to Al Jazeera. Their testimonies soon acquired a rehearsed character, which Gatta had also noticed during his fieldwork on the island back in 2005 (Gatta 2007: 191). Moreover, while for the most part Lampedusans tend to be quite welcoming towards these professionals, as they realize that they are part of a kind of tourism that could benefit the island's economy, during my fieldwork in 2011 several people complained that most of these actors use Lampedusa and give nothing back, and often portray the situation in ways that they find problematic.² We were of course part of this wave of tourists with interests, which raised ethical questions of representation and responsibility towards our interlocutors, and also pushed us to develop some methodological strategies.

To address these issues resulting from the over-mediatization and research saturation of Lampedusa, we decided we would not film or record

research participants. Instead, we wished to let them know that we wanted to create a theatre show about our impressions in conversation with them, and were not interested in hastily capturing their lives and displaying them elsewhere as the 'truth' about the island. Our time in Lampedusa was therefore spent doing individual and group research and doing at least two hours of rehearsals a day, during which different members of the ensemble led workshops to feedback to the group what they had experienced through whatever exercises they felt best served the purpose of starting to process our research collectively. We thus worked in a similar fashion to the *auto-cours*, and my role as director and writer was to act as the constant external eye, reminding the group of the research questions and goals while taking into account different members' interests and initiatives, using my prior knowledge of the island to guide the collective.

During our first week in Lampedusa we thus concentrated on exploring the three main go-to places for tourists of our kind: the port, where migrant boats are brought by police bodies and dumped, waiting to be one day destroyed by the authorities; the cemetery, where both locals and unknown persons, victims of the border, are buried; and the detention centre of Contrada Imbriacola, hidden inland, reachable through either one of the best paved and lit roads of the island, which leads to the main gate, or through hilly, rocky paths that take you to holes in the fence from which people squat out of the centre to walk into town. Because I was the only one who spoke Italian, we explored these places mainly through observation work, by visiting them at different times of the day, noticing the rhythms and the people who populate them. For example, we made trips to the port at 3 a.m., at lunchtime, at sunset,

and early in the morning, each time remarking new aspects of life in this busy setting where tourists, migrants, policemen, humanitarian workers and fishermen cross paths. During the weeks that followed, we enlarged our research scope beyond these three focal spaces that more visibly display the workings of the border, and started focusing on getting to know other places and people that different actors/researchers wished to get closer to. This took us deeper into the lives of several inhabitants and of some of the people who were passing through the island on their way to Europe.

We also tried to engage more people in our work by organizing workshops and short performances. We had originally hoped to carry out theatre workshops with adults as well as with children, to involve them more directly in helping us create the show. The former though turned out to be impossible, since most Lampedusans are still working full time during September, as most jobs depend on the tourism industry. What's more, the only two rehearsal spaces we could have used were being renovated – one was the high school's auditorium, the other was a building owned by a religious order, as there are no theatres in Lampedusa – and so we had to find another approach for including people in our process.

Figure 1: Theatre workshop with children in Piazza Castello during our residency in Lampedusa, September 2013. Photo: Bronya Deutsch.

We therefore started doing street theatre performances and game sessions with children twice a week. The school year only properly begins at the end of the month, after the local religious celebration of the Madonna di

Porto Salvo, and so young people had time to participate in our workshops. We had also noticed that they used the main street of the village, Via Roma, and its adjoining squares as their playground, roaming on bicycles and assembling for games, and so we hoped they would take interest in us as newcomers to their open-air realm. Through these sessions with them we were able to better understand their points of views as young residents of the island, which resulted in us developing child characters for the final play.

Doing street theatre was a way for us to 'give something back' to the community while negotiating our place. It slowly transformed us into a recognisable presence in the public space, which enabled us to reach individuals beyond the small circle whose work or political stances are more closely connected to migration issues, and who are therefore the ones who are regularly interviewed and whose voices are often taken to be representative of those of 'Lampedusans'. It also allowed us to notice how we were being perceived as 'European looking' foreigners bearing yet another 'project', and how that changed over time as people got to know us – and how it also differed from, for example, shopkeepers' and passers-by's contacts with groups of other young foreigners who were not identified as 'European looking'.

We also used street theatre to present short, first-draft performances capturing our observations of the island on two separate evenings, one in the middle and one towards the end of our fieldwork. We hoped in this way to gather responses and feedback about our representations-in-the-making of Lampedusa, whether it be from tourists, children, Lampedusans, or from those who had exited the detention centre through one of the holes in the fence and joined the crowd walking up and down Via Roma. We had initially thought of

this exercise simply as a way to test material and to instigate conversations about our tentative inferences, but in hindsight these small theatrical presentations of our observations acted as what Cantarella et al. would call a 'productive encounter': 'an exchange, dialogue, performance, interface or process that generates workable solutions to problems that emerge in pursuing ethnographic research on difficult objects of study' (2015: 58). The theatrical medium helped us materialize our freshly formed ideas in the form of brief movement-based pieces, during which we mostly used miming (as defined by Lecoq above) to portray different places and people on the island, which had the effect of making our research-based speculations visible and accessible to audience scrutiny.

After one of our scratch performances, for instance, a group of middle school children wanted to double check with us whether they had managed to guess all of the different situations we had been miming, which were adaptations of scenes we had witnessed in Lampedusa. One vignette they were puzzling over featured actors hanging clothes to dry by throwing them upwards, as if wanting to get the clothes over something taller than them. After thinking through this scene together, the children finally guessed that we must have seen this happen at the detention centre, which led us to have a conversation about why people would have to throw clothes on top of a fence to dry in the first place. It turned out that this group of young people rarely went near the camp, and knew very little about what was happening within it. We discussed this fact together with the children. Beyond the utility of this exercise in forcing us as a group to start channelling our research through theatre, and thus come to agreements as to what to include, how, and why, the

main methodological gain was the 'encounter itself and its potential as a space of knowledge production' (Cantarella et al. 2015: 58). As Long notes, '[a]ny live theatre production presents a situation in which audience members exist in a web of relations with each other and with live actors onstage' (2015: 315), making it a prime form for co-developing knowledge.³

Figure 2: A scene from our performance of *Miraculi* in Lampedusa, during which the characters representing Lampedusan children are getting ready for the celebration of the Madonna di Porto Salvo. Photo: Alessia Capasso

Devising *Miraculi*

We returned to Paris from Lampedusa on 30 September 2013. Three days later, 366 people lost their lives and 150 went missing just under one kilometre from the Spiaggia dei Conigli, Lampedusa's top tourist attraction, voted best beach that same year by TripAdvisor. A week later, on 11 October 2013, at least 200 more people died in the waters between Lampedusa and Malta, only 34 of them were recovered. After more than twenty years of enormous loss of life at this maritime border going by for the most part unreported in international news, these two shipwrecks marked a turning point in how the media and EU politicians approached border deaths. As Ritaine argues, the fact that these particular incidents were so hugely mediatized and politicized meant that from then on the dead entered the public debate, albeit without it resulting in significant change in migration policy (2015: 120). This meant though that our work, like the work of journalists, artists, academics and activists on the subject

of migration in the Mediterranean, had to take into account that our audiences' awareness of these issues had changed.

European publics have since become more and more accustomed to news of border deaths, and Lampedusa has become known beyond Italy. The photos of African migrants on overcrowded dinghies that had for years accompanied comment and news pieces on immigration to Europe were now supplemented with those of rows of black body bags on docks – just as, more recently, the image of deceased toddler Aylan Kurdi lying face down on a Turkish beach made front-page news the world over, affecting public perception of migration. To add to this imagery, in the aftermath of these shipwrecks the Italian navy launched the military and humanitarian rescue-at-sea operation *Mare Nostrum*, and thereby 'inaugurated what can be called the scene of rescue. From the border spectacle of the migrant invasion, media attention shifted to the humanitarian tasks performed by military actors in charge of saving migrant lives' (Tazzioli 2015: 2).

We started creating *Miraculi* knowing that our future audiences would come to our performances with these visions in mind, and that our theatre piece would need to speak to the debates that these events had generated in Europe. Equipped with the material we had collected and the significance we had originally hoped our play could have in advancing audiences' understanding of just how state decisions vis-à-vis migration affect ordinary life and ethics in a place like Lampedusa, we now faced the typically anthropological challenge of making work that is rooted in time and place relevant to spectators in the here and now. The fact that we were no longer in Lampedusa during and in the aftermath of these shipwrecks and that we were

creating our play at a distance, in tune with the anthropological divide between the fieldwork and writing-up phases, helped us set our work in the larger context of evolving European politics and imaginaries regarding migration. It also helped us stay close to our original intention of not wishing to dwell on big, shocking events, too easily spectacularized and exploited, so overwhelming they risk swallowing up all the small details that make up the border regime and that allowed them to occur in the first place.

We thus stuck to our original idea of setting the play in a specific time – the Summer of 2013, the period during which we carried out our research – while still aiming to give the audience an understanding of life at the border as mutable, historically contingent and performative (Green 2010). How could the stories and impressions we had gathered speak to how people relate to each other in Europe more generally? Could they help audiences in our different countries reflect on the ways in which processes of ‘bordering’ – the individual and collective work of constructing borders, identities and difference in the realm of the everyday (Yuval-Davis 2013: 10; Brambilla 2015: 8) – are also at play in their own day-to-day encounters and experiences?

Our methods for creating the show were similar to the ones we had employed in Lampedusa for starting to digest our research through theatre. Our initial rehearsals were focused on improvising situations, basing ourselves on ones we had witnessed in the milieus we had explored on the island, like the port, the cemetery, nightlife in Via Roma, and slowly beginning to construct scenes. We came up with characters by mixing stories and traits belonging to different people we had met while in Lampedusa, aiming to preserve their anonymity by creating fictional persons that were nevertheless drawn from the

real life stories we had collected and from our observations of the ways people walked, behaved with one another, spoke, moved. The 'truthfulness' of our work therefore did not stem from directly transposing real persons onto the stage and having actors repeat their exact words, as a more verbatim type of documentary theatre would have it (see Long 2015). Instead, trying to create representations that we all felt were *juste* forced us to refer back to our memories and notes in order to come up with a collectively fabricated 'reality' that we could all agree was loyal to what we had seen, heard, and experienced in Lampedusa. For every scene we had to determine as a group what we wanted to say about the place and about the people we were representing, similarly to the way in which anthropologists choose the ethnographic vignettes most apt for conveying a particular point.

By improvising the different milieus of the island, we developed a series of snap-shots of ordinary life in Lampedusa, featuring fishermen, tourists, migrants, divers, politicians, street dogs, policemen, children, and the elderly, in the hope that the island itself may in this way emerge as the main character. These different groups of people in *Miraculi* go about their daily business, but they rarely interact and coexist in the same spaces, which was a way for us to put across our impression that in Lampedusa the lives of locals and tourists and the lives of migrants are kept separate, and that ultimately locals have very little if no say about what happens to those who pass through their island. The moments of encounter between these groups are thus sparse in the play, and when they do happen we tried to convey some of the uncertainties and misunderstandings that may arise, hoping that the multi-vocal quality of the

piece may complicate the single story we most often hear through the media about the island.

Figure 3: A scene from our performance of *Miraculi* in Lampedusa, during which characters representing persons held in the detention centre of Contrada Imbracola make their way out of the camp through a hole in the fence and walk up a rocky unlit path to get to the town. Photo: Alessia Capasso.

Despite there not being a main storyline and a central character, *Miraculi* unfolds around two movements that have to do with personal and collective relations to life and death. The first thread follows the story of an elderly fisherman, Salvatore, who decides as the plot progresses that he will not go to the ‘mainland’ to get the operation that could save his life – there is no proper hospital in Lampedusa, only a polyclinic, and so births, and very often deaths, are by law supposed to take place elsewhere. The second movement comprises the reactions to loss of life at sea of all of the different groups that are represented in the play. The various characters are either implicated or affected by a shipwreck happening close to the island, which serves as the climax of the piece. In the case of our fishermen characters, we felt it important in this scene to highlight the moments of choice that result in them either taking action or failing to do so. Coming to the aid of migrant boats in distress has been actively discouraged by Italian law, resulting in some fishermen being accused of smuggling for having rescued migrants, and in the majority being held for days in port by the police for investigations purposes, thereby losing precious working days. We, like Orsini, had heard stories of fishermen who

'changed course when sighting a migrant boat in distress at sea. In total contrast to the law of the sea, local fisher folk expressed a deep inner conflict which they had been grappling with for years' (2015: 531). This is a dilemma that we wished to highlight in *Miraculi*, and aimed to avoid spectacularizing the shipwreck in this scene by bringing to the foreground how assistance and solidarity are deterred by the law and curb people's choices and scope for action.⁴

The different storylines and characters come together at the end of the play for the celebration of the Madonna di Porto Salvo, patron of sailors much worshipped in Lampedusa, where there is a sanctuary dedicated to her veneration. During fieldwork we had felt the excitement of the preparations that envelop the island during the last weeks of September leading up to the festivities. Banners praising the Virgin and colourful lights hang from people's balconies. The town band parades through the streets to wake up the island in the morning. On the day, the whole population follows the statue of the Madonna, the mayor and the priest to the port shouting 'Viva!' and praying together. At night, there is a huge fireworks display from the pier. This event, we sensed, was lived in an almost cathartic way, as it brought up sentiments and conversations about identity, belonging, brotherhood, welcoming and salvation. The Madonna di Porto Salvo, historically revered on the island by both Muslims and Christians, protector of those who travel the seas, while at times serving to legitimate Christian and thus Italian hold on this small island so close to North Africa, also stood for many as the symbol of a different kind of envisaged future. Working towards it in *Miraculi* became the drive that tied different stories and themes together.

Final thoughts: Back to Lampedusa

'Good evening. We are actors, and we come from different countries. Tonight, we will tell you about Lampedusa as we experienced it. The characters are fictional, but you might recognise some stories.'

In September 2014, exactly a year after our residency, we went back to Lampedusa to perform *Miraculi* at the opening of the LampedusaInFestival. We began the show with the above sentence, which our Turkish company member had learnt in Italian – rather teasingly, since in Lampedusan dialect the word for Turks, *turchi*, is often used to refer to all foreigners. We had also translated some scenes to be performed in the Lampedusan dialect, so as to be more comprehensible to the local audience. Showing our final show to the people we had got to know during the residency and whose stories we were portraying was a crucial part of the project, which we had aimed to do right from the beginning. We did not want to start touring the performance without first touching base with them, and hearing what they thought about our work. Yet we had not envisaged that this aspect of the project was what ultimately gave the most meaning to the whole endeavour.

Figure 4: Our audience in Lampedusa, waiting for *Miraculi* to begin. Porta d'Europa, 25 September 2014, opening of the LampedusaInFestival. Photo: Alessia Capasso.

Amongst our spectators in Lampedusa were people we had worked with, but also activists, artists and academics that had come for the festival (which is organized by the cultural collective *Askavusa*), and some people who had travelled through Lampedusa and now resided in different European countries. Performing *Miraculi* to this audience made us realize that they were ultimately the spectators for whom we had constructed the play. A question that we perhaps should have asked ourselves more during our project is who we were producing this work, knowledge and meaning for. While creating the performance we often wondered whether our scenes were comprehensible to audiences that had heard about Lampedusa only through mainstream media. How much background information would they need to understand our show? *Miraculi* ended up having different entry points and readings. We aimed to make it accessible to all audiences, but depending on the amount of experience and knowledge of Lampedusa of the spectator, different nuances, inside jokes, references, and levels of understanding are transmitted. Our performance in Lampedusa was possibly the one during which the audience was most 'deeply' with us, as they could judge if we had managed to capture the *juste*, and so could assess the success and pitfalls of this experiment in doing theatre through anthropology and anthropology through theatre.

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Notes

¹ For instance, for an in depth analysis of Italian media discourses regarding migration in 2013 see Associazione Carta di Roma (2014).

² Different inhabitants of Lampedusa find media portrayals of the island problematic for different reasons, depending largely on their employment and politics. There is nevertheless a general sense that the media's focus on migration in Lampedusa is detrimental to the tourism industry, as it makes potential tourists feel like Lampedusa is indeed being perpetually 'invaded'.

Additionally, it is felt that the media's obsession with the island has helped the causes of neither islanders nor of people on the move.

³ In hindsight, as we were devising our short 'scratch' performances we did not give enough thought to how we were going to gather an audience and how we could have engaged them more in questioning and modifying our depictions of the island. Exploring further the medium of street theatre itself and other techniques aimed at involving audiences in the development of a show anchored in their experiences and realities, like Augusto Boal's forum theatre, could have helped us attract and reach more people, and would have made for a more participative and engaging 'productive encounter'.

⁴ Similarly to our 'productive encounter' performances in Lampedusa, we did not yet manage to find a way of making the play interactive, and of involving audiences in actively engaging with these moments of choice with us. We might be able to do this if after performances we devise sessions aimed at getting audience members to re-play some scenes and propose alternative solutions for the central choices characters face in those particular situations, once again in line with Augusto Boal's forum theatre techniques.