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Questions for Pippo Delbono

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Brigitte Enguérand Pippo Delbono in his work “La Menzogna” (“The Lie”).

PARIS — The Italian actor and director Pippo Delbono has long had a cult fan base in Europe and South America — a following that expanded last year when he won the prestigious European Prize for New Theater. (Previous recipients have included Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine.)

So, it was no surprise that the opening of his latest work “La Menzogna,” or “The Lie,” at the [Théâtre du Rond-Point](#) in Paris set off a frenzy of articles in the French press as well as the usual tooth-and-claw fight for last-minute seats.

Born in Varazze in southern Italy in 1959, Mr. Delbono started off working in traditional theater before a series of events — a period living in Asia, where he became a Buddhist and studied Oriental dance; collaborations with luminaries including Ryszard Cieslak, Iben Nagel Rasmussen and Pina Bausch — led him to create his own company in the mid-1980s.

Part theater, part dance, part carnival, part music, the works of Pippo Delbono are hard to categorize; they leave viewers alternately elated, drained, shocked and thoughtful.

His company, with which he has performed all his works since the 1980s, is also hard to categorize. It includes Bobo, 73, whom Mr. Delbono met at a mental asylum in 1996. Bobo was born deaf and with microcephaly and had been institutionalized for 45 years. Gianluca Ballaré a former pupil of Mr. Delbono’s mother, has Down’s Syndrome. Nelson Lariccia, emaciated, was for many years homeless. Mr. Delbono refers to the company as “family.”

Mr. Delbono wrote “La Menzogna” as a response to the 2007 fire at a Thyssen-Krupp factory in Turin, Italy, which claimed the lives of seven workers. We talked to the director after a performance this week about how he came to write the play and how it feels to appear nude on stage. Here are excerpts from the conversation:

In your introduction to “La Menzogna” you talk about pushing the audience to a sense of revelation. Is confrontation an important role of theater for you?

I am a Buddhist and have been for many years. And for me theater is an act of love, it is not there to shock. But, I also think that I have a sense of the need to revolt, to bring us back to a sense of lucidity. For me these are important themes, but I don't use them to propound an ideology. Nor do I think that the plays are necessarily sad. Things happen and it's love that picks up the pieces and makes us start over. At the end of "La Menzogna," it is Bobo who comes over points me towards my clothes, takes me by the hand and brings me back to myself. It's collective responsibility. In Italy, people complain about Berlusconi. O.K., but it was the people that voted for Berlusconi. You have to take responsibility, you can't keep putting all your misery, desire or anger and blaming it on one person.

In Italy, there is this huge sense of conservation – Rome, Florence, Venice, they are magnificent cities, but nothing new happens. There is a loss of the poetic spirit, which comes with something new. So I think it is important to use theater to reflect on things. It can evoke rage, make us rediscover things, provoke us, reawaken us.

There is quite a bit of nudity in the play, which echoes in a way this sense of "revelation."

Being nude on stage was something I had never ever wanted to do in my life. If someone had told me that I had to stand on stage alone and nude at the end of a play, I would have said, "not on your life." But, in the end, I went through a sort of journey with dance and you take a sort of responsibility for your nudity. And I wanted, at the end, for my character, the presenter of the evening, who is a strong character, to show that vulnerability, that shyness. It is the opposite of exhibitionism. It's a desire to get back to the real nakedness of everything.

You say toward the end of the play that sometimes you wish you were deaf like Bobo and there is a lot more movement and fewer words in "La Menzogna" than in previous work.

I was lucky to have many years studying the traditions of Oriental dance in Thailand and then working with Pina Bausch... and I think that in the movements and gestures of dance, you have all the meaning you need. I am not a fan of the psychology of theater, the Lee Strasberg methods, getting into the role... With dance, you learn all these movements, these signs, and how they can completely change the emotion and direction of a scene with no words. Bobo and Gianluca are incredible at that, they have had no training and they come up with gestures, movements that I could never have thought of. With Bobo, it was something he created living in the streets and then in the asylum, a way to protect himself. He could change a mood, by putting his cup "there," instead of "there."

You built a 10-minute pause into "La Menzogna," during which the lights came on, the actors interacted with the audience and, on yesterday, about 25 people walked. Is the break on purpose: Do you expect people to walk out and this gives them an easy chance to do so?

For me there are many different elements in the pause. It's a play that leans a lot on the sense of being in a theater and so for me the pause is a way to add a sort of lucidity, to remind us that we are

seeing a show. And yes, I know that there are always going to be people who will walk out, so why not? That is the moment for it. I like that they take that decision. Watching a play is a bit like starting out of a journey, at some point there are those that will not want to continue and those that will want to stay, it's a choice.

You have shown your plays all over the world from Colombia to Portugal to Palestine, do you notice different audience reactions when you travel?

Yes. I mean, the plays are different, so already there are different reactions to the different plays. But yes, it changes from country to country. For example, I put on a play in Romania at the time when there was still the dictatorship of Ceausescu, and there, there was no one who was disgusted by things in the play, no one who reacted violently. It's true that there are countries where war, death, dictatorships put things into a sort of perspective. When I played in Iraq I noticed it too, a sort of immediate reaction, a more open spirit, they are already used to seeing things that are different. In Rome or Paris, there are people who will see actors like Bobo or Gianluca on stage, and they will respond "Oh, I am not too sure about that, that's not right." There is a sort of false morality, because in the end it is the audience that is projecting its problems onto Gianluca or Bobo. They feel uncomfortable seeing them on stage. In Milan it is worse than in Paris, people reacted far more strongly.

Have you ever played in New York?

No. And I would love to. I love New York. I have played in Canada, in South America, Japan, in over 50 countries around the world, but never there. But, it looks like we will be playing there in January 2011.

Are you working on a new play?

I am working on an idea for a sort of lyric opera... something with the music of Verdi, maybe. I am reading a lot of Whitman, I would like to do something with that. I work a lot with music in my plays, but this time I would like to try to compose some of the music too. I am asking myself a lot of questions, we'll see.