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Interview with Francesco Vitali, Filmmaker of *Voluptas Dolendi: I Gesti del Caravaggio*

BY ANNALISA PAPPANO

I had the pleasure of corresponding with Francesco Vitali, the fascinating director of the film *Voluptas Dolendi* that Catacoustic recently screened as the Western Hemisphere premiere - right here in Cincinnati! This exquisitely beautiful film used music and visual art to recreate the mood of paintings by the great Caravaggio.

1) The thing that struck me about this film is that so many art forms are brought together with such high quality. It seems like an overwhelming project for one person! This project intricately interweaves dance, gesture, visual art, history, film technique, early music, and poetry. How did you come up with this concept, and how did it all come together in such a unified artistic manner?

The theatrical performance for harp and dance (*Voluptas Dolendi: I Gesti del Caravaggio*) was born in 2002 from an idea that harpist Mara Galassi developed with dancer/actress Deda Cristina Colonna, costume designer Barbara Petrecca, and myself as lighting designer. This was initially performed as part of the Marco Fodella Foundation's 2002 concert season and received great success touring Italy and Belgium through 2006. I later directed this as the film you saw in Cincinnati, and it was also produced by the Fondazione Marco Fodella. The film's title *Voluptas dolendi* (the pleasure caused by pain) refers to a specific aspect of seventeenth-century aesthetics, typical of Caravaggio's contemporaries.

The film was born as a synthesis of different artistic expressions: music, dancing, acting, and painting. It deals (through different filming, post-production, and montage techniques) with the problems connected with the staging of a theatrical performance limited to a theatrical space that is well-defined, neuter, and recognizable. This film suggests glimpses of the Baroque, developing like a painting in slow evolution through allusions to Caravaggio's works. Mara and Deda felt that between the gestures in the paintings of Caravaggio and musical gestures, there should be a form of communication and emotional rhetoric. So, the meeting point was physical gesture, which helped to evoke Caravaggio's paintings.

My job was to translate this project, through camera and lights, the manner of thinking that already existed in its theatrical performance into a motion picture. I consider this film to be a continuation of the path initiated by Deda, Mara, and myself in 2002 with the original show.

I did not want the film to only be a television shot of the theatrical play. For example, Mara's harp could not follow Deda as happened in the live show, because the sound of the harp would have responded differently from slot to slot. Mara taught me that an ancient musical instrument requires a precise location for the "natural" sound - not amplified. Thus, in the film I chose the monumental sacresty as a suitable place for her to play her double harp. She remained in the same place from the beginning to the end of the film. Deda, instead, moved around in the 15th-century Cathedral of San Marco, where the film was shot in Milan.

Keeping in mind the theatrical origins of this film, I wanted to maintain a synthetic vision of settings and scenery, processing this vision through a filming method I particularly love: steadycam. I used it for 70 per cent of the scenes, finding interesting suggestions in Alexandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), especially as concerns its rhythm, which empathetically involves the spectator. The steadycam is a special camera that is hooked on the operator's body, becoming almost a part of the body, and through a system of counterweights allows soft turns without sharp cuts. The operator can easily follow the movements of the dancer, and the viewer enters the movie in a much more empathetic manner.

This film is an imaginary voyage, in which the protagonist Deda Cristina Colonna accompanies us, through acting and dancing, into apparently recognizable places, given the ambiguous architectures evoking ancient palaces or sacred basilicas, revealing then an intimate, neutral nature. Space is continually modified and dried out until its final hiding and annulment. I built a clear image and sense of drama. In this film, the camera explores, approaches, and makes sure that everything that is foreign to the audience during the theatrical performance can be seen more closely, but also more emotionally, and irrepressibly.

Music from Caravaggio's time, played by the harpist Mara Galassi, sometimes dilates the perception of space and time and sometimes accelerates it. The music creates a suspended level – a limbo, and with its rhythm it guides the spectator in the obscure meanderings of the mind, the emotions felt by the protagonist. The camera moves, approaches, wraps, and investigates, as in a continuous dance. Light witnesses events. As an absolute protagonist, light reveals its double, divine, and material origin, thanks to the contrast with shadows, which sometimes seem to devour both dancer and harpist, cruelly and realistically.

I think the uniqueness of this project is about a specific historical period through the art of Caravaggio, as a starting point to enjoy the music and dance of that time, without falling into banality simply talking about the biography of Caravaggio. Few people know that Caravaggio was a great lutenist. This helps us better understand the context in which he lived and his art.

2) From conception to completion, how long did this project take? What was the time frame for this project? How many people were in your crew? How did this compare with other projects?

The film was shot in five days in the Cathedral of San Marco in Milan with a crew of 22 people between church services. During the daytime, Mara recorded the songs in the sacristy, which was then used by Deda, dancing during the night. Only in two specific moments did Deda and Mara film together. In these two moments the sound and video recording was unique because it was impossible to dub the music played on harp by Mara.

3) In the US, the popularity of Facebook and YouTube has created a demand for marketing Classical music with video in a creative manner. It is becoming quite popular and almost necessary. Do you see this as a trend in Europe with Classical music? With early music? Do you see the impact of social media on film and music in Italy?

I think that technology can greatly help spread this kind of music, especially among the youth. In Italy it happens less than in the U.S. We are fortunately or unfortunately still bound to tradition, and a live concert can never be compared to the post of Facebook or YouTube. These social networks could be a fantastic start, but depth should always be a rule in each and every century and everywhere, not just an option.

I just returned to San Francisco after 15 years. I was shocked when a dear American friend of mine, an opera singer, told me that the libraries in your country are closing. I think that in Italy this unlikely to happen. At least for now the technology coexists with tradition. I love iTunes, but I also love to touch a CD and handle it to get the feeling of really "owning" something that remains over time. If my computer breaks or the harddrive dies and is not backed up, I lose my virtual files. With a book in-hand or a CD or vinyl record, I still savor and reflect. With technology I run faster and am not sure where I'll end up.

Voluptas dolendi I gesti del Caravaggio has thus far been presented in various places of great cultural significance in the Mediterranean: Mola di Bari, Venice, Athens, Milan, Modena, Trieste, Naples, Palermo, Messina, Siracusa, Padua, Rome, Argentario, Bari, San Giorgio di Nogaro, Haifa, Tel Aviv, Crema, Saint Jean Cap Ferrat; in Europe: Vilnius, Strasbourg - European Parliament, Helsinki, Copenhagen, Dublin; in East Asia: Shanghai, Kyoto, Osaka; and now in America (Cincinnati). In the days between April 10th and May 6th, SKY Classica.tv (satellite channel 728) will show the film six times to their subscribers in Italy.

For more information on the film, see: www.fondazionemarcodella.it. If you missed the Catacoustic Consort's screening of this film at the Cincinnati Art Museum, you may purchase a copy of the DVD in European format at the Libreria Pecorini by contacting them via email: pecorini@iol.it.

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ARTE & CULTURA

Spettacolo

La pittura del Caravaggio, fra musica, danza e teatro

I dipinti di Michelangelo Merisi prendono "vita" in una nuova rappresentazione (film e documentario insieme), ora in Dvd, ambientato nella chiesa di San Marco a Milano.

di **Giovanni GUZZI**

Spettacolo di musica, danza e recitazione, «Voluptas dolendi - I Gesti del Caravaggio» è un omaggio tutto milanese al maestro lombardo e a buon diritto si inserisce, come contributo originale, nella miriade di iniziative espositive ed editoriali dedicate a Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio in questo 2010, nel quale si celebra il quattrocentesimo anniversario della sua morte.

Proposto a Milano nel 2002, nell'ambito della tradizionale stagione musicale della Fondazione Marco Fodella, da progetto teatrale è diventato anche un film: presentato nel corso del 2009 in importanti rassegne nazionali culminate, nel febbraio 2010, nella proiezione a beneficio dei nuovi eletti al Parlamento Europeo di Strasburgo.

Nel quarto centenario della morte

Più travagliata, in analogia alle vicende biografiche del suo protagonista, è stata la realizzazione del corrispondente DVD che, accompagnato da un libro bilingue italiano/inglese, è finalmente disponibile al pubblico proprio alla vigilia della ricorrenza (18 luglio).

Nato come spettacolo da allestire in luoghi diversi, per l'ambientazione del film la regia di Francesco Vitali ha scelto un'unica simbolica sede: la suggestiva cornice della chiesa di San Marco a Milano. Sotto la sua cupola, fra gli scranni del coro ligneo, sulla scacchiera "metafisica" dei suoi pavimenti, l'arpista Mara Galassi e l'attrice e danzatrice Deda Cristina Colonna, offrono un'efficace combinazione delle rispettive arti che, come in Caravaggio, soltanto la luce delle candele strappa alla penombra dominante di questo scenografico sfondo architettonico.

«Non trasposizione cinematografica di una pièce teatrale né documentario; non un film musicale e neppure un balletto» (Dinko Fabris), il film ripercorre la produzione pittorica di Caravaggio evocandone atmosfere ed emozioni e "dando vita" ai suoi dipinti grazie alle peculiari virtù "descrittive" della musica e del gesto.

Lo aprono, scelta felicissima, le note del tema della "Fantasia XIII" per liuto (ma eseguita sull'arpa doppia) di un altro artista lombardo di primo livello: Francesco da Milano, il maggiore virtuoso al liuto della prima metà del Cinquecento e per questo meritevole dell'appellativo di "Divino". Mara Galassi le suona pettinata come la *Santa Caterina d'Alessandria* di Madrid e appoggiata allo strumento come la martire alla sua ruota di tortura ed estasi mistica. Sono note che Cristina Colonna ascolta assorta prima di pronunciare un testo tratto dalla "Vita di Giorgione" del Vasari.

Un suggestivo allestimento

Perché l'arpa e non il liuto, strumento ampiamente dipinto da Caravaggio? E perché testi non direttamente riferibili a Caravaggio? La ragione di questa scelta risiede nella volontà di realizzare un progetto artistico che non fosse una didascalica rappresentazione caravaggesca ma avesse valenza autonoma.

Nello specifico, il dualismo della relazione fra l'arpista, immobile ma vibrante nelle note di Frescobaldi, Kapsberger ed altri virtuosi del tempo di Caravaggio, ed i movimenti della danzatrice (oltre ai testi tratti da "Vite" e "Cronache" coeve) narrano una "storia possibile" che risulta dall'insieme di diversi linguaggi espressivi: gesti, colori, luci, suoni e parole... e costumi. La costumista Barbara Petrecca ha infatti disegnato per Mara Galassi, un sontuoso abito tardorinascimentale che non muta e non si modifica, come se fosse tutt'uno con lo strumento. Gli abiti di scena di Cristina Colonna sono invece componibili e, assecondandone gli arabeschi gestuali ed espressivi, «riproducono mirabilmente le suggestioni degli originali dipinti nelle tele di Caravaggio, dal corsetto più elaborato di una Giuditta o una Madonna alla semplice sottoveste d'angelo fluttuante nella *Fuga in Egitto*» (Davide Verga).

A Milano il DVD è acquistabile solo nella libreria Pecorini di Foro Buonaparte 48 che ne è anche il distributore nazionale ed alla quale ci si può rivolgere per informazioni su dove reperirlo nelle principali città italiane (telefono 02-86460660 - pecorini@iol.it).