

Interweaving Stories:
Hamlet in Jerusalem
by Gabriele Vacis and Marco Paolini

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I'm not interested in doing "civic theater"; on the contrary, I think theater should be "uncivil", like Pasolini said. It should stage conflicts that can't be resolved ideologically, and should never dictate the good guys and the bad.

(Marco Baliani)

Brief prologue on the practices and poetics of dialogue

Amleto a Gerusalemme (Hamlet in Jerusalem), written by Gabriele Vacis and Marco Paolini, was first performed in March 2016 at the Teatro Stabile in Turin. The pièce is a multilingual drama (Modern Standard Arabic, Classical Arabic, English as lingua franca, Elizabethan English, Italian) directed by Vacis, and performed by Paolini, with young actors – five Palestinian and three Italian who were largely, but not exclusively, stage interpreters. A few months later, a book with a similar title, *Aristofane a Scampia*, written by Marco Martinelli, director and playwright of the Teatro delle Albe, was published in Florence. The two titles are akin not only because they begin with the same letter, are both octosyllabic and refer to a Classic where author and protagonist have been transferred to an unlikely place, but – as *kin and kind* – because they

point to similar aesthetic and ethic experiences, based on a common idea of theatrical pedagogy that has very little in common with the norms and methods of the Academies.

For Martinelli, who in the book portrays 25 years of an innovative theatrical laboratory of the Teatro delle Albe, programmatically called *non-scuola* or non-school, “theatre cannot be taught”. The aim of the company workshops, organized with adolescents in a wide variety of different social and geographical settings (from Ravenna to Scampia, Dakar, Chicago), is not the *mise-en-scène* of “classics in a canonical way, reading them at the desk, assigning roles, distributing lines” (Martinelli 2016: 30). The aim of this non-school is the *mise-en-vie* of classics.

Such pedagogy, common to Martinelli and Vacis, is not a Method, with a capital M, i.e. a list of actions the students should perform, or abilities they should acquire. It is more an attitude, a different way of approaching art and theatre based on a declared and stubbornly pursued practice and poetics of dialogue and listening, an open and unprejudiced dialogue between the Classics and adolescents, guides and apprentices. Such approach leads to a different dialogue of the young actors among themselves, because theatre is also, and not marginally, a community experience, a path toward “awareness”, a “discourse” (Vacis 2014, and 2013; see also; Martinelli 2015; Martinelli and Montanari 2014: 110-130). These dialogues give birth to a new autonomous text, continuously interwoven with the hypotext. The new text questions the source text, and is questioned by it, it moves it in unexpected ways, performs the play, plays it and plays with it, instils in it a new, different energy and perspective.

Hamlet in Jerusalem is not a philological *mise-en-scène* of Shakespeare’s tragedy. What the audience watches is the narration (or better, a rivist after eight years) of an experience of theatrical *bildung*, a pedagogical path which is an aesthetic and vital experience *in se*, a creative and dynamic dialogue among actors, and between actors and *Hamlet*. It is the story of how *Hamlet* by Shakespeare intermingled with a theatrical school that Vacis and Paolini directed in Jerusalem in 2008, and how the group (directors, professional actors, students) blend with the tragedy of the Prince of Denmark. A book, edited by Katia Ippaso in

2009, accurately describes the first part of the project (*Tam: Instruments of Peace*) – from the selection of 34 Palestinian students (aged 15-22) and the three intense summer months of work in Jerusalem (2008), to the international theatre workshop in Italy (within the “Biennale di Venezia”, October-November), and the final performance, *On the footsteps of Hamlet*, staged in the Palestinian territories in spring 2009.

Vacis and Paolini’s 2016 pièce, with five of the former students (now professional actors) on stage, can be seen as a second part of this experience, which is dependent on the 2008-2009 workshop. A thorough evaluation of the play should probably move from a detailed description of this first part of the experience. But since the 2016 performance is not likely to be staged again, and there is no publication of the text, it is more fruitful to focus on a close reading of the second part of the experience, and to refer to the above mentioned works for the description of the workshop. A close reading of the performance calls for an intratextual multilayered analysis that has to take account of the narrative structure, the linguistic dimension of the performance, characterized by the presence on stage of a number of different languages and their translations. Such analysis should also focus on the intertextuality of the play, with direct citations and allusions to the Shakespearean text, the very choice of the tragedy of Hamlet, especially owing to the role the Prince of Denmark has played in Arab theatre as political drama, and finally as a pretext for a reflection on vengeance, oblivion and “identity of relation”. These topics will briefly be considered in this essay.

A polyphonic narrative theatre

Amleto a Gerusalemme is first of all a polyphonic narration of a theatrical-life experience¹. Marco Paolini is both the leading storyteller

¹ Two micro-stories of the pièce (as well as few paragraphs of this article, though broadly revised) have been published in the *Dossier*, “Amleto a Gerusalemme di Gabriele Vacis e Marco Paolini” (Nasi ed. 2016), in *Prove di Drammaturgia*, entirely dedicated to Shakespeare. But see also the beautiful documentary *Diario di Amleto a Gerusalemme* by Giulietta Vacis (2016),

on stage and a stepfather, being the representative of the parent generation in a drama that deals with a sons' search for identity. From a structural point of view, he is the voice that recounts the frame story, or macro-story, in which the micro-stories told by the Palestinian actors are inserted. After a prologue performed by Ivan Azazian, Paolini introduces the frame story, with the narrations of his flight from Venice to Israel in 2008 together with a hilarious group of catholic pilgrims from Veneto, of his arrival in floodlit Tel Aviv like a middle-eastern Las Vegas, and of his lonely first night excursion to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. And finally he declares the reason for his trip: the creation in Jerusalem of a school for young Palestinian actors, under the auspices of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with himself and Vacis as Artistic Directors, and *Hamlet* by Shakespeare as the text chosen to open the school.

As the pièce unfolds, the Palestinian actors take turns narrating the stories of their own families. In many cases these stories are complex genealogies marked by migration, uprooting, return. In all, four short narratives are offered revolving around their families and the past. While these stories are told and the audience begins to imagine how Jerusalem used to be, the actors are patiently at work constructing a model of the city with hundreds of empty white plastic water bottles, used as if they were pieces of a gigantic Lego. Along the streets of the miniature city, as wide as the whole stage, Bahaa Sous recounts his story, which can be considered the turning point of the entire play. Bahaa tells about a visit to downtown Jerusalem in the company of his mother who was born there. She wanted to show her son the places where she had spent her childhood. But the things she sees and points to exist only in her memory; not even the water that used to run out of the many fountains just a generation before can now be found. The only things that Bahaa sees are ruins, decay, and empty plastic bottles. He does not intend to deny the legitimacy of his mother's memories, but is rather

broadcasted by RAI5 on April 23, 2016; see also Vacis, Paolini (2016). I'd like to thank Gabriele Vacis who allowed me to work on the unpublished script of the play, Gerardo Guccini and Marc Silver for their valuable advice.

determined to free himself from those memories, memories that don't belong to him. In a sudden outburst of rage he destroys the model of Jerusalem shouting "let it go", let things go the way they have to. The destruction of the city perpetrated by all the actors on stage is the symbolic act through which they lay claim to the centrality of the present against the nostalgic lingering of the past, the obsessive visiting and revisiting a city that probably never existed if not in a problematic narrative construction of a people's identity.

Paolini takes the floor again and recounts a story related to one of the students of the workshop who was not allowed to leave Palestine and join the company for the Italian premiere. His name is Habel from Hebron, the landlocked territory of the West Bank. From the outset he had problems with the Israeli authorities, who would not allow him to attend the workshop in Jerusalem. Thanks to the mediation of Italian authorities, Habel was not only able to be part of the school, but took part as well in an adventurous and risk fraught "school trip" to the seaside. He was finally able to see the sea for the first time in his life, a sea that is only a few miles from his hometown, one that once belonged to the Palestinians and is now precluded them. The same sea, as Paolini says, that "Wants to See Palestinian Kids", as much as "Palestinian Kids Want to See the Sea" (which is also the subheading of the play). While Paolini tells his story, the bottles/ruins of the city, gathered and folded in a big transparent plastic sheet, are dragged to the back of the stage, to form a wave-like sculpture of the sea.

As we have said, this central sequence represents the turning point of the pièce: the storytellers change costumes (the black clothes of mourning are substituted with desert colored ones), and shift the direction of their gaze. While in the first part with their genealogical micro-stories they conjured up the past, in the hope of reconstructing a city and an identity, now they seem to look straight at the present, at the rubble, at what is there for them now. Four new micro-stories follow symmetrically in the second part. They no longer deal with their ancestors, but with the actors themselves, their love affairs, frustrations, disillusion, doubts about the present. Paolini conducts all of them as a discreet director on stage, who checks that everybody is doing his part

properly, that everybody, with his narrative, contributes to building a new image of the city of Jerusalem, as it is now, with cafés and crumbling high-rises, restaurants and junkyards, walls and city doors, streets and check points. Paolini closes the frame-story with the narration of the flight back to Venice, and the presence on the plane of the same group of catholic pilgrims from Veneto. They see him reading *Hamlet* and ask him about the tragedy, and listen to Paolini's final reflection on the meaning of classical texts.

If we were to reduce the play to a concatenation of stories, we could easily talk of a polyphonic version of narrative theatre. A single storyteller, as a modern Homer, could narrate the theatrical experience on stage, inserting the micro-stories told by the young actors into the frame-story during the workshop. Vacis, on the contrary, has assigned the role of storyteller to the whole group. This new role required a careful labor based on the patient reciprocal audition and harmonization of the different voices.

Translations on stage

Understanding is obviously the first difficulty one has to face in a polyvocal narrative, where storytellers and audience do not share a common linguistic code. Surtitles are a possibility; another is the presence of a linguistic mediator on stage. In the performance both are used: surtitles, in a very creative form, are employed for the Shakespearian passages, but for the storytelling recourse is made to mediators. Palestinian actors, who sometimes speak in English, sometimes in Arabic, are flanked by three young actors who translate into Italian. It is immediately clear that their function is not merely passive, as an impersonal translating machine. The three Italian actors play an active function and have great performative value. Short consecutive interpretation is generally the technique adopted, centered around brief speech segments. The speaker talks and the interpreter translates immediately after. Or at least this is the case in the beginning with Ivan's story; but then little by little, the segments become shorter, the interpreter begins overlapping the speaker, and the translation

becomes almost simultaneous. The two voices reach the ear of the listener as a full voice, doubled by a linguistic counterpoint.

In *Hamlet in Jerusalem*, it seems that no text and therefore no language is servile to a "source" text, but rather each utterance contributes to the creation of the different rhythms that modulate and lead the narration forward.

During the performance, the vocal harmonies of the actor and translator's voices are recurrently followed by Paolini's solos or by powerful choirs, in which the Palestinian actors chant rhythmic poetic lines in unison. This choral recitation is a movement of the more general musical score of the pièce, but is also a phonetic analogon to "the Schiera", one of the techniques used by Vacis in his theatrical workshops (see *infra*). It also calls to mind the in unison recitation of Martinelli's choirs both in his non-scuola experiences and his more recent staged works, from *Pantani* (Nasi 2014: 8-18) to *Vita agli arresti di Aung San Suu Kyi* and 2017 *Va Pensiero*.

Shakespearean inserts

Elizabethan English and Literary Arabic, almost unexpectedly, join standard Arabic, "international" English and Italian, in a multilingual symphony of words. The intense passages from *Hamlet* are declaimed in Elizabethan English and Literary Arabic. Shakespearean citations, often repeated in more than one language or translated on a big screen, mingle with stories told by the Palestinian actors, as a counterpoint or doubling of the dominant note, establishing a dialogue with them. It is taken for granted that the audience knows and is familiar with the quotations since it is not possible to reconstruct the plot of Shakespearean play by watching *Hamlet in Jerusalem*. The tragedy is not performed nor is the plot told, but it is revisited through fragments with the post-modern irony of one who knows that the audience knows. So the poetic Shakespearean lines are perceived as already familiar motifs, known lines that live by themselves, but that gain a new meaning when recalled next to the Jerusalem stories told on stage. And thanks to their exemplary poetic power they add new meaning to those stories.

The architecture of the narrative that, as we have seen, is balanced but complex, becomes even more composite with the Shakespearean inserts, which force the audience to move back and forth between the actors' stories and the story of Hamlet. The stories, told with a continuous variation of recitative and linguistic styles – using a generally informal and discursive register, sometimes with comic digressions or animated discussions – find a lyrical complement in Shakespeare's quotes. During the workshop in Jerusalem these passages were the fuses that ignited the micro-stories.

Let us take a closer look at a couple of examples of interconnection between the micro-stories and the Hamlet quotations. Ivan Azazian's is the first story, told in English and translated into Italian by Marco Valpengo. Ivan retraces his family genealogy – from his Armenian great-grandfather who escaped the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman government in 1915-16 and moved to Jerusalem, to his grandfather who migrated to the United States, to his father, born in America, but who went back to Jerusalem because Ivan's Palestinian mother was afraid to raise her children in a dangerous place like the USA for its lack of moral values and the frequent use of drugs among teenagers, finally to Ivan, who was born in Jerusalem and is ironic about his mother's fear, knowing very well that drugs and danger are anything but absent in Palestine.

Ivan's genealogy is followed by Paolini's first monologue, at the end of which he remarks that everywhere in Jerusalem, from the Wailing Wall to Golgotha, it is easy to feel the weight of his fathers' legacy in the air. Here is the first Shakespearean insert in which Claudio invites Hamlet to throw off his mourning dress. The text is recited by Alaa Abu Gharbieh in Arabic (I, II, 87-110) and translated by Paolini.

The second story is also a genealogy. Nidal Jouba tells of his grandfather, a wealthy trader from Hebron, the two uncles he lost during 1967 war, and his father, born in 1966, who was entrusted by his own father to find his missing brothers. So, over the years, he moved with his family from Hebron to Jordan, Syria, Jerusalem, and then to Egypt and again to Jerusalem, in search of the lost brothers. They searched for their bodies and sought revenge. Parallel to Nidal's moral

commitment to shed light on the family members is Hamlet's decision to take revenge on his father's murderer (I, v. 92-112): "Thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain [...]".

The pièce goes on by alternating stories of the young actors and quotations from Hamlet. In the first part of the play the stories seem to accompany the narrative of the Prince of Denmark as they tell of the knowledge of an unbearable truth, of the abuses suffered by Israeli politics, and of the urge to action as one's hereditary duty. But in the course of the play the stories change direction, and tell of the desire, shared by the young people on stage and by many Palestinian and Israeli peers, to close with that parental legacy. Paolini says, toward the end of the play:

Hamlet is definitely endowed with a responsibility, he has the truth, he is the one elected ... Whoever is endowed by the truth, the elected one, is a non-judgeable judge. [...] In Palestine, [...] so many people are convinced that they have the truth. But luckily there are many other people who ask themselves: what can we do?

The stories told by the actors in the second part of the pièce intend to suspend this endowment, bracketing the duty of heritage, and let things be free to go as they have to. "Let it go" screams Bahaa, to his mother, at a central "turning" point of the performance, who wants instead to stop the transformation of the city, and thus freeze her own identity with it.

Hamlet in the Arab world

Hamlet, then, as pretext and hypotext (Genette 1997: 7-8) of the workshop. Gabriele Vacis, in his essay *Le città più illuminate sono quelle che hanno paura* (*The most well-lit cities are the most frightened*, and the reference in the title is above all to Tel Aviv), describes the role attributed by his Palestinian colleagues of the Jerusalem school of theater, namely

that they did not care much about "art for art's sake, but art for change". He continues:

I thought they meant to work on an author with solid certainties, one of those who know where the truth is, I do not know ... Bertolt Brecht. But no ... when I asked what they would like to work on, they said: Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. (Vacis 2016: 5)

At this point, it would be interesting to pose the question: "Why *Hamlet*?", or better "Who is Hamlet for a middle-eastern playwright?" In the western world, particularly since Romantic readings, Hamlet has been seen as the Hegelian "Schöne Seele", the extremely meditative mind who knows, but who cannot carry out the decisive act: aware of his responsibility to seek revenge, but hesitant. Perhaps this interpretative tradition that sees Hamlet wearing a black robe of mourning, an existential brother, poet and philosopher, who talks to himself in moments of solitude, might seem to be the exact opposite of the stubborn hero who is determined to put "The Time" that "is out of joint" in its place, the symbolic character of a theatre resolute to "change" things. In the western interpretative tradition from Coleridge and Schlegel onward, Hamlet is not Spartacus. But in the Arab world, and it has been this way for a long time, Hamlet is a different kind of hero, and even today his symbolic political meaning is still important.

In *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, Margaret Litvin (2011) describes the reception of Hamlet from its first musical *happy ending* adaptation of 1901, through the more edifying and moral versions of the years following the end of colonialism in the area, to the most recent parodic and post-modern rewritings. Hamlet's reception has been so widespread that Shakespeare's tragedy is now a sort of proverbial text, the source of quotations for political speeches and newspaper articles of people coming from different political orientations, and second only to the *Koran* for number of quotations.

For Litvin², *Hamlet's* reception in the post-colonial Arab world can be divided into three distinct phases. The first – from 1952, the year of the Egyptian Revolution that dethroned the monarchy, to 1967 – coincides with the revolutionary optimism of Nasser. *Hamlet*, staged by the Egyptian National Theater in 1964, represents the hero as a symbol of moral integrity, a model for the new political class that had to radically reform the corrupt monarchical institution. The second phase begins shortly after the defeat in the Six-day War of 1967 and continues until 1976. Here *Hamlet* assumes the role of the militant hero, more concerned with putting time back in place than philosophically reflecting on the essence of being – a sort of Arab Che Guevara, influenced by the image of the 1964 Soviet film by Grigori Kozintsev (based on the translation by Boris Pasternak, with music by Dmitri Shostakovich). The third phase, which refers to the last thirty years, coincides with what Litvin calls "the bitter phase of the Arabian tradition of *Hamlet*." Here knowledge of the text is taken for granted, and the playwrights play ironically with the hypotext, adopting strategies typical of postmodern culture (play within a play, concurrence of different styles, intertextuality, etc.). *Hamlet* often seems hopeless, absolutely incapable of setting the world back into "its joint"; and all this because his efforts (even the self-sacrifice) in stopping the endless cycle of history and its eternal recurrence of crime and revenge are useless (see *Al-Hamlet Summit*, by Al-Bassam 2007, and its critical analysis by Faini 2009), and also because he is confronted with an enemy, a deaf and dumb political power, that doesn't even understand what he is alluding to.

A post-post-colonial Hamlet

A prime example of this interpretative direction is the 1984 pièce *A Theatre Company found a Theatre and theatred Hamlet*, by Nader Omran.

² See also Litvin's lecture delivered at Cornell University in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgpHrJbBIO4>

The Jordanian playwright creates a frame in which the story told by Shakespeare is duplicated. On stage there is a royal Arab family, with a young prince, his despotic uncle/king, his mother – who, needless to say, is the widow of the former king killed by his brother. On stage there is also a director, a censor, and other actors who constantly switch the character they play. Everyone, except for the prince, is drinking and seems to be completely taken by his/her main goal: to have fun. In this context, the *play within the play* is inserted: but it is Hamlet's tragedy itself, not "the Murder of Gonzago". The Arab prince tells the tyrant about the plot of the Shakespearean tragedy. The king is skeptical because the tragedy is written by an English, colonial poet, which seems to be his main concern: "It seems my boy, that you want people to say we encourage colonialists and read their culture! No.... No... my boy, we shall not have this colonialist poet. Down with colonialism!" (Omran in Carlson – Litvin 2015: 172).

The prince defends the text by saying that it was written many centuries before middle eastern colonialism, in a completely different cultural context, and that, after all, the author's intention was to denounce the corruption of the English world. He then recounts the Hamlet plot that, obviously, reflects the frame situation. (Actor 1 is the Arab king, the Actor 2 is the Arab prince)

ACTOR 2: As for Shakespeare's play that we will "theatre" tonight, it is called *Hamlet*. (to the audience) He is a prince from Denmark, who, upon returning to his homeland, discovers that (with dramatic gestures) his father has been murdered and that his uncle has married his mother. (ACTOR 2 wails) And that this traitorous uncle is none other than... the murderer of his brother, Hamlet's father.

ACTOR 2 stand at the center of the stage. He turns toward ACTOR 1, raising his bottle.

ACTOR 2: Can you imagine having such a treacherous uncle... my dear uncle?

ACTOR 1 (slyly): Sounds like an amusing premise, my dear nephew. Pour me another cup, page! (laughs) Continue...

ACTOR 2: Does this premise not remind you of anything, uncle?

(...)

ACTOR 1: It does! It reminds me of Denmark. Ah, what a beautiful country, renowned for its dairy products. There I've seen types of dairy that I haven't seen anywhere else in my entire life (...) What a country! Continue my dear boy. (*he stands up*) But remember to deride colonialism as much as you can! (*Ibid*: 172-173)

Nader Omran uses Shakespeare's text as a pre-text for ironically and mockingly taking position against an ideological theater, that pretends to be the spokesman for absolute values, such as a declared and stubborn opposition to colonialism or a pure post-colonial identity, but that only becomes a screen behind which a perverse and corrupt power tries to hide itself.

The text is provocatively presented for the first time at a Moroccan theater festival whose central theme was the search for the roots of Arab theater. The result is that this text, as Litvin writes, "is an authentically Arab play drawn from a foreign source". The "happy ending" of the play, "after the prince and king kill each other" consists in the fact that the actors rebel against their director, refusing to enact a didactic theatre. "The play both engages and critiques the Brechtian model of consciousness-raising plays prevalent in Arab theatre throughout the 1980s. Besides being a kind of tyranny, Orman's play suggests, allegorical political theatre is also just plain ineffective" (Carlson – Litvin 2015: 157). Hamlet plays the role of the ironic postmodern protagonist who looks with irony (the gnoseological faculty of the romantic tradition) not only at the theatrical fiction, but at power itself, a despotic power that uses a presumed idea of a people identity to maintain its own status quo of privileges. The way in which *Hamlet* intertwines with the narratives in the play by Vacis and Paolini presents interesting analogies with the "ironic", savvy, detached and disenchanting postmodernism, to which Litvin refers in relation to Omran's text.

Identity of relation

One of the most effective features of Vacis and Paolini's play is this radical change in perspective. In the prologue, Ivan recounts the genealogy of his family. Following the direction of the gaze of a speleologist, Ivan is looking downward, vertically, at the foundation of his ancestry. He is looking for his roots, and from it he tries to construct his identity, tie himself and remain faithfully fastened to it. But at the end of his second story, in the second part of the play, Ivan starts singing a moving, slow and dreamy interpretation of *I'm a poor wayfaring stranger*, a piece of classic Afro-American gospel. Ivan's parents had been migrants to the USA but went back to Palestine. Ivan feels that his promised land is somewhere else, perhaps in America, the land abandoned by his parents. His singing describes that longing better than any words. The direction of his gaze changes radically from vertical to horizontal. The identity that Ivan is seeking is not tied or rooted to a single place (real or imaginary), it is not an identity laden with a heritage of unsolved problems he has to take care of, an identity that can dangerously turn into closure, monism, deaf and dumb nationalism, singular and self-referential rooting.

Maurizio Bettini recently wrote an interesting essay on the critical reconsideration of the concept of "root". For Bettini such a notion has often been used to artificially construct a collective narrative so as to reach and maintain political consensus. In his essays he also deals with the "case" of Jerusalem:

The extreme case of Jerusalem, where we see a multiplication of divergent traditions and roots in relation to a single city – or even in relation to the same areas within the same city –, can be seen as the paradigm of how traditions develop by the reconstruction of their own memories according to the needs and impulses of individual groups. And this is also and especially true when those traditions try to make their own partial corner of the world absolute, by opposing the claimed truth and authenticity of their roots to the usurpatory falsehoods of others' roots. How much

easier it would be to live, especially in similar harsh and conflicting areas, if the idea spread that traditions are not vertical but horizontal, that they don't emanate from the land, but from education and the continuous reconstruction of a collective memory. (Bettini 2016: 61)

Mahmoud Aboudoma is an Egyptian playwright and director (b. 1953). In 1989 he staged an interesting adaptation of Hamlet with the title *Dance of the Scorpions*. A brief and enjoyable narration about his work entitled *Gamlet is Russian for Hamlet*, closes the collection of *Arab Hamlet Plays* edited by Carlson and Litvin. Aboudoma recounts how he met Hamlet for the first time. He was ten years old, and Khrushchev was in Cairo to seal a new alliance with Nasser. Two huge pictures of the political leaders were hanging on the entrance wall of the Russian Palace, on Shafiq Street, as proof of the new friendship between the Egyptian Republic and the Soviet Government. In that building Aboudoma watched the projection of *Gamlet* (1964), the movie by Kozintsev (for a contextual and political analysis of the film see Lehmann 2013). Since then the impressive sentence "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark", written across the screen, has remained with the playwright, who repeatedly refers to the movie as an inspiring model. But Hamlet in *Dance of the Scorpions* has nothing of the resolute hero of Kozintsev's movie. In *Dance* Claudius plots with Fortinbras to start a fake war to extort money from the rich, neutralizing and excluding the apolitical Hamlet. The political situation in Egypt has radically changed since 1964, and Hamlet represents here the apathy and inability of the Egyptian people to act at the end of the 80s, disenchanted after the defeat with Israel and the Post-Nasser political crisis. But regardless of the performance, that signals as we have said a different season in the Arab reception of Hamlet, the final part of Aboudoma's story is quite significant:

When the years went by and changes came, and the tree itself abandoned its roots, Shafiq Street and Heliopolis filled up with tall buildings, but the Russians' Building stayed as it was. Except that

they put a new banner on it, red like the other one: a picture of some guy smiling for no reason, with the words "Kentucky Fried Chicken". (Aboudoma in Carlson- Litvin 2015: 291)

That in place of the USSR flag there is now a red flag with the smiling face of a confederate Colonel advertising an unhealthy fast food chain might not be comforting, for some at least, but it is a fact. And, through the metaphorical statement that "the tree itself has abandoned its roots", a fact is also that the city is now a composite of pieces of different puzzles, which are ordered and put near one another in unexpected ways, despite the aspirations of some to maintain a completely arbitrary loyalty to a rooted tradition that exists only in reconstructed tales.

The identity emerging in Vacis and Paolini's pièce reminds us of a city in movement with a composite, horizontal identity. The theatrical experience of the school was a poetic education in reciprocal listening. One of the techniques used by Vacis in his theatrical workshops, elaborated for the first time with the 1984 performance *Elementi di struttura del sentimento (Elements of structure of feelings)*, is "la schiera" (the rank). The actors who take part in this "collective movement" exercise must walk within a space in unison, and seek with the utmost naturalness and economy to make themselves into a single moving body, without having previously defined their steps. To do this one needs first of all to pay attention to the rest of the group, to look and listen carefully, to find unity in variety. It is a way to build a community on stage, beginning with a body movement that is respectful of the others (see Vacis 2009: 215-16).

Theater can build an environment, create a contemporaneity in which it is possible to comprehend (cum-prehendere), in the sense of catching hold of or seizing in one's mind at that moment. In the theatrical city of Jerusalem, built with tales and bottles, with emerging memories and the walls of the city as ruins, restored and destroyed again and again, comes the awareness of being "an environment"; an environment made of relationships among people: Palestinian and Italian actors, Israeli soldiers, Armenian grandparents, centuries-old

migrants, characters of Elizabethan tragedies; an environment made of foreign languages in relationship to one another or varieties of the same language overlapping and in counterpoint. It is not a monolithic identity, but an "identity of relation" as Édouard Glissant defines it, replacing the image of the root with the more vital one of the rhizome:

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and even, perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relation with the Other. (Glissant 1997: 11)

Such rhizomatic identity seems to be one of the main mooring points of Hamlet's journey in Jerusalem: a vital identity that lives in and of relations and movements. Together with the image of a multiplying root, the journey has also brought the poetic image of the seed of a "new" gesture. The Epilogue is entrusted to Mohammad, who in Classic Arabic recites the monologue where Hamlet reflects on the meaning of the war the King of Norway is moving against Poland for " a little patch of ground / that hath in it no profit but the name" (IV, iv, 18-19). To those lines he adds a few adapted verses from Shakespeare (IV, iv, 30 ff.) and from the *Book of Isaiah* (43, 18-19: "Forget the former things;/ do not dwell on the past./See, I am doing a new thing!/ Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? / I am making a way in the wilderness / and streams in the wasteland."). Here the translation of the closing lines of the play:

It is worth living only if you have something for which to die,
they say
I would have those reasons, yes, to act,
And instead?

I'd want to live in Jerusalem, instead, because I love her...
I won't let me be driven, instead, by revenge, anger, foolishness.
And I'm no hero for this... I do not want to be a hero.
And I'm not a victim.
I'd want to live in Jerusalem, because I love her...
And so I'm doing a new thing:
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I'm Hamlet and I want to live.

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The paper

Date sent: 15/05/2017

Date accepted: 30/09/2017

Date published: 30/11/2017

How to quote this paper

Nasi, Franco, "Interweaving Stories. *Hamlet in Jerusalem* by Gabriele Vacis and Marco Paolini", *Maschere del tragico*, Eds. C. Cao, A. Cinquegrani, E. Sbrojavacca, V. Tabaglio, *Between*, VII.14 (2017), <http://www.betweenjournal.it/>