

Sacrificio d'ammore (dir. Carlo Cerciello)
 Performed at the Attianese Park, Pianura (Naples), 22nd September 2024
 After John Ford's *Love's Sacrifice* (1633)

Reviewed by Roberto D'Avascio

John Ford, the Elizabethan playwright, arrived in Pianura, a far western outskirts of Naples, in the last days of September 2024. The project "Affabulazione", financed by the Municipality of Naples and Italian Ministry of Culture, made it possible to stage *Love's Sacrifice* in the small popular amphitheatre of the Attianese Park. In Naples, the Elizabethan text has been the battlefield of a series of International workshops with professional actors, starting from a new Italian translation by Gian Maria Cervo and Roberto D'Avascio. David Petrarca – director at Goodman Theatre in Chicago from 1988 until 2005 and the well-known director of HBO's *Games of Throne* and *True Blood* – worked on this text in the first theatre workshop, leading the actors to a passionate reading on the topic of lie and fake news in contemporary society. The last step of the project was the performance – directed by Carlo Cerciello – from a second translation of Ford's playtext into Neapolitan language. Ford's drama has become *Sacrificio d'ammore*. This new dramaturgy has turned the original, tragic love triangle into the terrible revenge of Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa (1566-1613), the famous madrigalist, against his wife's betrayal.

John Ford was an English playwright and poet of the Caroline period. He was born in Islington in Devon in 1586 and later left home to study law at Middle Temple in London. After publishing poems and pamphlets, he began an intense dramatic writing from 1621, first collaborating with more experienced playwrights – Massinger, Dekker, Wester, Rowley, Middleton, Fletcher – and then as solo artist from 1626, writing tragic plays, which dealt mainly with the extreme conflicts between passion and conscience, love and duty, individual and society: first the tragicomedy *The Lover's Melancholy*, then the tragedies *Love's Sacrifice* and *The Broken Heart*, and lastly *The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth* (written c1629-1634) – a play highly praised by T. S. Eliot, and the last English historical tragedy before the closure of theatres by the Puritans in 1642. However, John Ford is best known above all for the violent tragedy *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, which deals with the topic of incest. Linked to Catholic circles of the court – the Earl of Arundel, diplomat, courtier and art collector was the leader of this coterie – Ford was a major playwright during the reign of Charles I Stuart and he was defined as "the last Elizabethan playwright" by Italian scholar Agostino Lombardo. His dramatic work was re-evaluated at the beginning of the twentieth century by Antonin Artaud, who took Ford's plays as a model for his own "theatre of cruelty", comparing the actors' activity to that of a plague patient and defining the features of a theatrical revolution starting from the violent, ritual and bloody scenes of Ford's play-writing.

The date of *Love's Sacrifice's* first performance is uncertain; the play was first published in 1633 by the bookseller Hugh Beeston. Ford dedicated the play to his cousin John Ford of Gray's Inn and the title page of the first quarto states that it was acted by Queen Henrietta's Men at the Cockpit Theatre. John Ford largely based the main plot of his playwriting on the complex and tormented life of Carlo Gesualdo, who murdered his first wife Maria D'Avalos and her lover Fabrizio Carafa. The play, however, reshuffles the historical cards about location and characters: the setting is moved from Naples to Pavia, Gesualdo becomes Philippo Caraffa, Duke of Pavia, and Maria D'Avalos turns into Bianca; Roderico D'Avalos – literally like a devil (*diavolo* in Italian) – is the name of the Duke's secretary, the villain of the play. Ford employs a three-level plot structure to stage an Italian well-known story for the English audience. In the main plot the Duke of Pavia has recently married Bianca,

the beautiful young daughter of a Milanese gentleman. Fernando, his best friend, falls in love with the Duchess, who rejects him at first, but later admits her love for him. This is where their platonic relationship begins, made of furtive glances, kisses and hugs. Fiormonda, the widowed sister of the Duke, who has previously suffered from an unrequited love passion for Fernando, discovers the illegitimate attraction between her sister-in-law and her brother's best friend; she reveals the betrayal's crime to the Duke, angrily pushing him towards revenge. Although their betrayal is not physically consummated, the Duke kills his wife and causes the death of his friends, to end up committing suicide in the last scene of the play, and requesting, before that, to be buried with them.

David Petrarca worked on the new translation in June, teaching Italian actors how to stage an Elizabethan text, of which he provided his interpretation, in open air in the Attianese Park in Pianura, a difficult space for staging a play because the park is regularly attended by families with children, loud groups of students after school-time, young people jogging or cycling, and where there is besides a basketball playground near the amphitheatre. Petrarca told the actors of his experience in Central Park in New York, when he was a student going to see every summer the Shakespearean productions by Joseph Papp – a very famous American theatrical producer and director, founder of The Shakespeare Workshop and later of the Public Theatre. Petrarca drew inspiration from that kind of stage experience for his Neapolitan workshop. “The goal of the workshop”, said Petrarca, “is both to clarify the text and to bring it into the modern era”, in an attempt to find the right scenic energy of Ford's old playwriting. He created a new dramaturgy of *Love's Sacrifice*, focusing the workshop with the actors on making the female point of view more evident, and on looking at it in relationship to the male point of view. Recalling the basics of drama, he wanted theatre to be a cathartic experience.

When in September 2024 Carlo Cerciello, one of the most important theatre directors of the Neapolitan scene, began his workshop on the second translation of the play, this time into Neapolitan language, *Love's Sacrifice* turned into a new dramaturgy: the setting comes back to Naples and the Duke is now Carlo Gesualdo. In order to give communicative shape to an ancient language, Gian Maria Cervo has studied and selected verbal choices, expressions and strategies contained in the works of Giordano Bruno, Giambattista Marino, Giovan Battista della Porta, Giambattista Basile, Salvatore Di Giacomo, Eduardo Scarpetta, Eduardo De Filippo and in the “*farse cavaiole*”, farces written by authors from Cava de' Tirreni in the Renaissance period. From Giordano Bruno *Sacrificio d'ammore* took several words which had clearly a Neapolitan root and had probably been italianized by the sixteenth-century philosopher and playwright, in an attempt to neapolitanize/re-neapolitanize them. Neapolitan had already lost its quality of official language in the Kingdom of Naples at the time when Ford's *Love's Sacrifice* was written, but the language was spoken by the nobles throughout the history of the Kingdom. Hence our attempt to play with the characters' mannerisms in the alternation of Italian and Neapolitan. The translation-rewriting adopted a strong strategy of voice differentiation between the characters: the character of Gesualdo quotes from the texts of the composer's madrigals, the jester speaks like a character of the “*farse cavaiole*”, while his servant Jacopo – later turned into Jacopa by director Carlo Cerciello – talks like a Scarpetta character. The rewriting also offers an alternative version of Gesualdo's story by dealing straightforwardly with potential historical same-sex relationships.

The Neapolitan adaptation has a strong metatheatrical dimension. A prologue is added played by “Gioan Fordo” (a translation in ancient Italian/Neapolitan of Ford's name) in which there is a reference to the (broken?) friendship between Gesualdo and the famous painter Caravaggio and a comparison between Ford's original play and Caravaggio's *The Flagellation of Christ* (1607, which is supposed by some to have originally portrayed Gesualdo as one of the torturers) now at the Neapolitan Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte. Also there are quotes from *Il Candelaio* (1582, “The Candle-maker”) by Giordano Bruno and from plays by Giambattista Della Porta; an excerpt of the prologue from Della Porta's *Cintia* (1601), spoken by a personification of the river Sebeto, which ran through

the Greek city of Neapolis (the present Naples), appears in the scene where Ferentes, the second villain in the play, is slain by the three women who get cheated by him. The actor speaking in the play-within-the-play in the scene quotes from “I see the high palaces, the golden roofs, the ornate loggias and the sacred temples of my great city reduced to a small breast, and one Naples reduced perhaps to another Naples”, in some sort of both poetic and ironic self-reflection on the rewriting/reconstruction work of the adaptation. The final staging in the park became an articulated and happy performance, in which the actors underlined a grotesque dimension and played with the audience, as in a Elizabethan play.

Ford arrives in Naples, and Gesualdo comes back home with a revenge, wandering like a ghost in that part of his city, the beautiful Astroni crater, where he used to go hunting...