
Paola Bono, *Il Bardo in musical*
(Roma: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2009), 223 pp.

Reviewed by **Alessandra Marino**

“Spectacular spectacular!” shouts Harold Zidler (Jim Broadbent), owner of the “Moulin Rouge” in Baz Luhrmann’s film with the same title (2001). This slogan, repeated again and again, describes Zidler’s theatrical art so faithfully that it becomes the very name of his future show. What is a musical, the character seems to ask, if it does not make you “dumb with wonderment”?

The definition of a genre is the most complex question for film critics, but Luhrmann’s meta-filmic reflection on the nature of his work neatly inserts the musical within the frame of surrealism. Hybrid and impure, *Moulin Rouge!* is a mosaic of film quotations and musical reverberation, filled with dreamlike scenes and presenting a continuous tension between realism and fantasy. Surprisingly enough, in its ending, this sparkling bohemian world is translated into black and white pages typewritten by the hero (Ewan McGregor).

In her latest book *Il Bardo in musical*, Paola Bono undertakes a similar experiment of double translation: she analyzes the transposition of the Shakespearian plays into flamboyant musical performances and ties them once again to the page. In this transcodification, as Walter Benjamin argues in “The Task of the Translator”, if something is lost something else is happily gained.

The ‘skin’ of musicals – constituted by dances, songs and atmosphere – cannot be thoroughly captured in a book, but the irreverence towards Shakespeare’s authority underlying the transformation of his plays into musicals is successfully transmitted and visualized. The symbolic figure of the universal genius representing Western modernity is displaced in the very form of Bono’s work, which does not construct a whole, coherent body or linear narration of Shakespearean musicals, but plays with the fragments of a long history of appropriations.

In the first chapter, “Panorama”, no straight chronological order is followed; a mobile network arises from the relations between appropriations of comedies such as *The Taming of the Shrew* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Among the films inspired by these ‘love and sex’ affairs, Bono considers *You Made Me Love You* (Monty Banks, 1935) and *Kiss me, Kate* (George Sidney, 1953), but also Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle’s *Dream* (1935), *Sogno di una notte d’estate* by Gabriele Salvatores (1983) and the recent queer film *Were the World Mine* by Tom Gustafson (2008). Even though some of the works quoted cannot be strictly classified as

musicals, a category subdivided after Altman into 'show', 'folk' and 'fairy tale', in all of them music seems to have the function of enriching the narration with an additional level.

The following chapters are dedicated to *Kiss me, Kate*, *Love's Labour's Lost* (Kenneth Branagh, 2000), *West Side Story* (Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins, 1961) and its Italian remake *Sud Side Stori* (Roberta Torre, 2000). Mostly adapting comedies and euphuistic plays, musicals seem to be close to the preciousness and baroqueism of Shakespeare's language but are far from restoring the authority of the Bard. Their spectacular and comic components prevail over fidelity to the narrative plot, thus challenging Shakespeare's belonging to the high strata of culture. *Kiss me, Kate*, for example, presents a commodification of the poet's highbrow figure in the song "Brush up your Shakespeare!", where the two gangsters, Slug and Lippy, transform him into an instrument for 'getting the girls'. In this attempt to popularize English drama, high and popular culture overlap. Their coexistence, as Bono highlights, is embodied in *Kiss me, Kate* by Lilli and Lois. Since the casting scene, where roles are distributed for the play within the play, they materialize the two poles of culture: Lilli, proud of her ability to cheer up the audience without showing her legs, stands for the literary 'elevated' entertainment and faces Lois's popular sexy tip-tap.

But the convergence of England with the Hollywood dream-machine does not guarantee success. Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*, though combining Shakespeare's text with the classical American musicals of the 30s, was a box office failure and provoked contradictory reactions from the critics. Bono rehabilitates the film, presenting it as a hybrid product in which songs interrupt and give resonance to the 'original' poetic form; like fragments from Western film history, the songs compose Branagh's postmodern mosaic. Indirectly, Bono's criticism seems to question the very possibility of succeeding in the production of a modern version of Shakespearian comedy while keeping its complex language. Her doubt echoes Katherine Eggert's statement, in an article on Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost* and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, that "to film a Shakespearian comedy is to know that one's production, despite its high culture imprimatur, will never be designated 'great', that it will never be taken seriously" (in Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose, eds, *Shakespeare, the Movie II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*, 85).

Eggert's implied suggestion that comedies cannot attain the universal success of tragedies, though debatable, is somehow confirmed by the fame gained by the musical adaptation of the only tragedy discussed in the book: *West Side Story*, a cult remake of *Romeo and Juliet*. The family antagonism of the Venetian tragedy is transposed to New York in the mid-50s, where the love story between the white Tony and the Puerto Rican Maria takes place against a backdrop of harsh ethnic fights. Both *West*

Side Story and *Sud Side Stori*, its Italian appropriation by Roberta Torre in which Romea is a Nigerian prostitute and Giulietto a Sicilian boy, represent urgent social issues like immigration and racial hatred; their political commitment shows that musicals are not just timeless fairy tales, but share the function of ‘holding a mirror up to nature’ that Hamlet attributes to theatre.

Torre’s language is particularly interesting for its combination of a hallucinatory and unrealistic style with documentary-like scenes presenting the real stories of the immigrant women who appear as actors in the film. This technique increases the social/gender tension of the plot, but it also underlines the film’s distance from both Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*. Because of its eccentric relation with the poet, *Sud Side Stori* might be considered one of the “camp” films that “maintain a measured distance from their source-texts – even when they launch most fully into them”, as Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe explain in *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (24).

The genre/gender question is inscribed at the very core of *Il Bardo in musical* and sustains the *Disseminazioni* series, to which the book belongs. As Bono affirms, the project reconsiders the intersections between Shakespeare, film, genre and gender. From these overlapping border zones, the author does not look at Shakespeare as a stable entity or authentic origin, but her queering gaze, “questioning his transcendent universality, seem[s] to re-confirm his disposition to become the common ground for thinking upon relevant contemporary issues” (13; my translation).