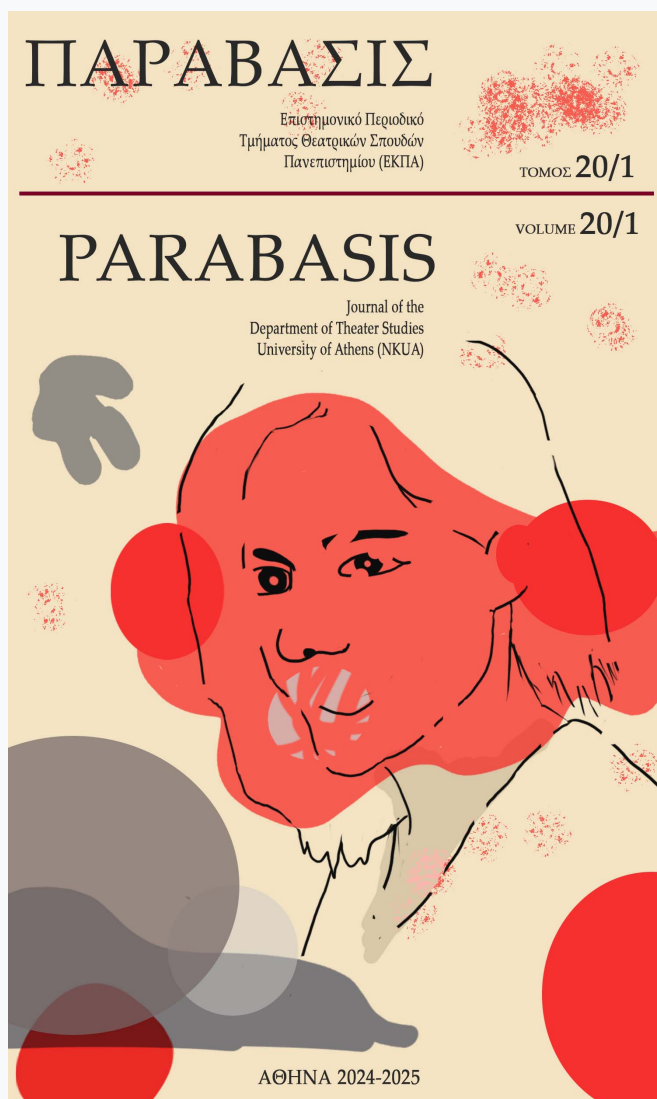


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THE LANDSCAPE OF ITALIAN THEATRE-NATURE: ARTISTS, COMPANIES AND FESTIVALS

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**THE LANDSCAPE OF ITALIAN THEATRE-NATURE:
ARTISTS, COMPANIES AND FESTIVALS****1. Introduction**

Theatre and other performing arts have always been created in outdoor spaces and natural settings. The Italian scholar Fabrizio Cruciani argues that through the history of theatre, only a minor quantity of theatrical performances is conceived for «theatrical buildings as places equipped and designed specifically for performances».¹ Theatre has inhabited many other spaces where the community gathers, such as markets, squares, streets, gardens, archaeological spaces, and nature itself. However, the historical perspective has often favoured the focus on the performance inside a deputed space, ignoring or dismissing other solutions.² In the second half of the 20th century, we witnessed a revolution of theatrical spaces, even in the creative process. Many masters of theatre created performances in non-traditional spaces, publishing books in which they reconsidered the creative approach. In this sense, Richard Schechner's *6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre* (1968)³ still represents a turning point. In this declaration of intent, Schechner describes how to approach a found space through the theatre.

(1) The given elements of any space –its architecture, textural qualities, acoustics, and so on– are to be explored, not disguised; (2) the random ordering of space is valid; (3) the function of scenery, if used at all, is to understand, not disguise or transform, the space; (4) the spectators may suddenly and unexpectedly create new spatial possibilities.⁴

¹ Fabrizio Cruciani, *Lo spazio del teatro*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1992, p. 91 (where not indicated the translation from Italian texts is by the author).

² «And we find it at all times, now emphasised by historiography as in the “genre” triumphal entrance that transformed the city into a theatre, or as in the calendrical occurrence of carnival; now sidelined in “folkloric” spectacles or religious processions of the 18th or 19th century. Often with echoes of the mythologies of originality, spontaneity, the “popular”; often as “minor theatre”», Cruciani, *Lo spazio del Teatro*, *ibid.*

³ Richard Schechner, «6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre», *The Drama Review* 3/12 (1968), p. 41-63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Therefore, many scholars adopt a wide perspective on theatrical performances, considering all the spatial possibilities in which theatre⁵ or dance⁶ can take place. Space becomes a performative element,⁷ capable of influencing and being influenced by the creative process. Additionally, many artists use their practices to elaborate new theories. The work of Mike Pearson is significant in defining all the characteristics that pertain to site-specific performances through his work⁸ outside the theatre in the building.⁹ Similarly, Fabrizio Crisafulli, through his «teatro dei luoghi», outlines the creative process behind the relationship of theatrical elements (lights, movement, actors, texts, costume, etc.) and the landscape, encompassing natural and cultural aspects.¹⁰

Nevertheless, a comprehensive perspective that elaborates a new taxonomic scheme of performative possibilities is still lacking. A different approach is urgently needed, especially in recent years as outdoor performances become more frequent, driven both by aesthetic preferences and environmental-political subtext and context, capable also of intercepting new audiences. In this regard, the ecological waves of performance studies in the 1990s represent a good methodological strategy of hybridisation, if applied to natural spaces as well. These new tendencies stem from a new approach to theatre studies, more ecologically conscious, encompassing metaphorical,¹¹ aesthetical and ethical viewpoints.¹² Ecology, indeed, is not solely a scientific concern but also a model for «cultural observation: what is so crucial in ecology, and what is subsequently so interesting for the arts is the possibility of analysis that focuses on these inter-relationships, on in the «in-between» of the human and nature, on the idea of the possibility of a «relationship of opposites» within a given «environment».¹³ From this methodological framework, new perspectives arise such as ecoperformance,¹⁴ ecodramaturgy¹⁵ or ecoscenography.¹⁶

⁵ Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performances: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Cornell University Press, Cornell 1989.

⁶ Rossella Mazzaglia, *Danza e spazio. Le metamorfosi dell'esperienza artistica contemporanea*, Mucchi, Bologna 2012.

⁷ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2004; *Estetica del performativo. Una teoria del teatro e dell'arte* (tr. Tancredi Gusman), Carocci, Rome, 2014, p. 190.

⁸ Mike Pearson, *"In Comes I": Performance, Memory and Landscape*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 2007.

⁹ Mike Pearson, *Site-specific Performance*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2010.

¹⁰ Fabrizio Crisafulli, *Il teatro dei luoghi. Lo spettacolo generato dalla realtà*, ArtDigitaland, Dublin 2015.

¹¹ Bonnie Marranca, *Ecology of Theater: Essays at the Century Turning*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 1998.

¹² Una Chaudhuri, «"There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake": Toward an Ecological Theater», *Theater* 25/1 (1994), p. 23-31.

¹³ Gabriella Giannachi – Nigel Stewart, *Introduction*, Gabriella Giannachi – Nigel Stewart (eds), *Performing Nature. Explorations in Ecology and the Arts*, Peter Lang, Bern 2005, p. 19-62.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Pannek, «Ecoperformance», Wolfgang Pannek – Maura Baiocchi (eds), *Ecoperformance* 1 (2022), <https://www.ecoperformance.art.br/ebook> [26/03/2024], p. 16-29.

¹⁵ Lisa Woynarski, *Ecodramaturgies. Theatre, Performance and Climate Change*, PalgraveMacmillan, London – New York 2020.

¹⁶ Tanja Beer, *Ecoscenography. An Introduction to Ecological Design for Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan, London – New York 2021.

Particularly in the context of natural spaces, an ecological approach to the performance entails considering the action as a part of the ecosystem, including all the natural elements that inhabit the place where the performance is set. In this sense, the natural landscape becomes a co-author of the performance, which «brings a non-hierarchical and post-anthropocentric [way] for the performing art process and the human artist».¹⁷ The phenomenon of Italian theatre-nature, which emerged in the 1990s and developed and spread in the 2000s, serves as a notable example of mixing a performative approach to the space with an ecological attitude within the creative process. Furthermore, investigating this experience is crucial also from an economic standpoint. Many of these companies do not receive funding from the main cultural institution (Ministry of Culture),¹⁸ leading them to operate through a parallel and marginal production chain of production rather than being part of the National Theatre, alongside established city artists. Festivals provide the primary platform for these companies to stage their productions, offering ideal settings for their shows as well.¹⁹

2. The forms of Italian theatre-nature: origins and spreading

A multitude of practices characterise Italian theatre-nature.²⁰ Here, the reasoning does not include all artists and companies currently operating but focuses on the most important ones using some indicative shows, attempting to understand the various creative approaches, such as poetical, dramaturgical, performative, site-specific and digital ones, that have emerged in these interdisciplinary relationships between nature.

A contemporary history of theatre-nature in Italy starts between the 1980s and 1990s with the emergence of the first companies and artists characterised by a new potential relationship with the landscape that was inherited from the «re-localization»²¹ of theatre companies in the 1970s. Poet and playwright Giuliano Scabia explored this relationship with the landscape over the years, conducting initial experiments with the students in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines in 1974

¹⁷ Emanuele Regi, «A Matter of Relationships: Dramatising, Staging and Planning Ecological Performances», *Itinera* 25 (2023), p. 192-207.

¹⁸ About the recent changes of public and private funding for theatre and performing arts in Italy see also: Matteo Paoletti, «Fus, Extra Fus e spesa regionale: la riforma dello spettacolo dal vivo in Italia e i suoi effetti territoriali (2014-2020)», *Comunicazioni sociali* 3 (2022) p. 367-383.

¹⁹ Cf. Francesca Velardi, *A Nature Walk Through Contemporary Art and Theatre Towards Festivals in Nature: The case of Scena Natura Festival*, Master Degree Diss, University of Bologna, Bologna 2024.

²⁰ The first important publication about Italian theatre nature that refers about artists and companies between 1990s and 2000s is: Franco Acquaviva – Roberta Gandolfi (eds), «Agire il paesaggio: teatri, pensieri, politiche del 'luogo'» *Ricerche di S/Confine* (Dossier 1), University of Parma, 2013. Recently the theatre review *Hystrio* published a dossier dedicated to the relationship between theatre and nature, including also new companies: Laura Bevione – Roberto Rizzente (eds), «Dossier Teatro e Natura», *Hystrio* 34/4 (October-December 2023), p. 27-63.

²¹ Roberta Gandolfi, *Teatri e paesaggi: orizzonti contemporanei, fra teoria e prassi*, Giulio Iacoli (ed.), *Discipline del paesaggio: un laboratorio per le scienze umane*, Mimesis, Milano – Torino 2012, p. 209-224.

with *Gorilla Quadrumàno*,²² re-discovering traditional forms of theatre. His dramaturgical work *Teatro con bosco e animali*,²³ published in 1987, is the result of these multiple approaches with the landscape, followed by touring performances in natural spaces. In 1999, he organised the itinerary performance *Camminata notturna*,²⁴ a long walk from Santarcangelo to the Rimini's seaside, then published in poetry form in the poem *Opera della notte*.²⁵ Scabia modelled these experiences in the landscape with his poetical attitude, continuing to experiment with new forms of dramaturgical crossing until his death in 2021.²⁶

The first theatre company (as qualified and self-recognised in this particular field of performing arts research), still active today, is O Thiasos TeatroNatura, established by director and actress Sista Bramini. Bramini, who had joined the Theatre of Sources by Jerzy Grotowski in 1982, during the masters' stay in Italy –escaping from Poland due to the martial law imposed by the general Wojciech Jaruzelski–, rediscovered a relationship between the body, voice and natural spaces.²⁷ Subsequently, Bramini reintroduced the theatrical forms that were avoided in Grotowski's experiences. Initially, they adapted plays primarily by Samuel Beckett (*Giorni felici* 1991, *Aspettando Godot* 1992) in natural settings. However, very taken the interests of the company are oriented to the Greek and Latin myths. Within these myths, Bramini found elements of transformation that resonated with the natural world, allowing her to adopt an anti-naturalist and symbolic approach to real spaces while situating myths in precise landscapes: narration, adaptation of «pieces», dance, live singing etc. In fact, within the myths, we find «the transformation of human beings, the vegetal world, the animal and divine and human ones enter and are reflected in each other, all is in contact with the natural».²⁸ This allows Bramini to an «anti-naturalist and symbolic approach displayed in real spaces, allocating the myth out of the time but rooted in a precise landscape».²⁹

From *Ifigenia in Aulide* (1997), O Thiasos TeatroNatura has explored several myths, employing different approaches, such as theatrical narration (*Miti d'acqua* in 2003, *Miti di Stelle* 2007 and *Viaggio di Psiche* 2016), where Bramini, accompanied with musical instrument, narrates the stories of myth. They have also enacted myth using different actresses (O Thiasos TeatroNatura is mainly formed by women) directed by Bramini such as *Ifigenia in Aulide* and *Mila di Codra*

²² Cf. Giuliano Scabia, *Il Gorilla Quadrumàno. Fare teatro/fare scuola. Il teatro come ricerca delle nostre radici profonde*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1974.

²³ Giuliano Scabia, *Teatro con bosco e animali*, Einaudi, Turin 1987.

²⁴ Giuliano Scabia, «Opera della notte. Appunti su un'azione di attraversamento», *Culture Teatrali* 12 (2005), p. 133-140.

²⁵ Giuliano Scabia, *Opera della notte*, Einaudi, Turin 2003.

²⁶ For an updated and recent «summa» about Scabia's work: Massimo Marino, *Il poeta d'oro. Il gran teatro immaginario di Giuliano Scabia*, La casa Usher, Florence 2022.

²⁷ Sista Bramini, «In margine al teatro delle sorgenti di Jerzy Grotowski: considerazioni di metodo», *Biblioteca Teatrale* 23 (1995), p. 92-125.

²⁸ Lori Falcolini interviewed Sista Bramini, «Il lavoro sul mito», *Eidos* 44 (2019), p. 10-13.

²⁹ Maia Giacobbe Borelli, *Il teatro nella natura: attori nomadi e voci nel paesaggio*, Conference Intervention, CICLI University of Rome: Culture del Teatro moderno e contemporaneo, 2015 [unpublished].

(2015), based on Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *La figlia di Iorio*. O Thiasos developed through the years a specific methodology of theatre work in nature. The actress but also the director in nature, according to Bramini, should be capable of searching the synchronicities in the landscape and including them in the performance; similarly, Pannek defined ecoperformance as a component of the ecosystem that dialogues with it.³⁰ In this sense, always crucial in O Thiasos’ work is the concept of «synchronicity»: «those connections that are created between the performance and the unpredictable act of nature».³¹ In this framework, O Thiasos TeatroNatura uses myths’ theatrical and dramaturgical narration to dialogue with the places and their repertory adapts itself to the new landscape, trying to reactivate and create a contact with the «genius loci».

One notable mixed performance is *Demetra e Persefone* (2000), an itinerant-narrative creation that explores a Homeric hymn (8th century BC) about the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone kidnapped by Ade, focusing in particular on the «germinative force that the ancients celebrated in the secret of the Eleusinian rites».³² Bramini read the myth through a contemporary lens: picking the archetypal images (such as the daughter kidnapped and the idea of rebirth during the spring) in order to create a contemporary impact for the audience through her narration, but also adapting the mythological images in the places encountered during the performance. Several sites –evocative of the archetypal images– can be included in this show, «the audience will be accompanied by walk-in wood, glades, cave, river», but also archaeology places such as «ancient and rural ruins».³³ Moreover, the soundscape composition further enhanced the performance in the landscape impact. Francesca Ferri arranged traditional peasant songs then sung by Camilla Dell’Agnola and Valentina Turrini, specialised in the vocal part of O Thiasos.

Another approach to theatre-nature is site-specific performance, where a single performance is generated by and for a single place. A recent notable project in Italian theatre-nature is *Sentieri* by «Azul Teatro». The company is formed by Serena Gatti, playwright, actress and director, and Raffaele Natale, sound designer. *Sentieri* is a project that explores abandoned places, seeking to reactivate them through performative approaches. Since 2012, they have created eleven itinerant site-specific performances, where walking spectators experience elements of the performance that emerge «naturally» from the landscape, including poetry readings, hybrid human-animal presences, music, sounds and noises, and objects. The company defined it as a «dreamlike dramaturgy» of the landscape. In this

³⁰ Pannek, «Eco-performance», p. 29.

³¹ Sista Bramini, «Dialoghi con il *genius loci*», M. Giacobbe Borelli (ed.), *Teatro Natura. Il teatro nel paesaggio di Sista Bramini e il progetto “Mila di Codra”*, Editoria & Spettacolo, Spoleto 2015, p. 155-200.

³² Carlo Francesco Conti, «Passeggiata teatrale a Coazzolo con Demetra e Persefone», *La Stampa.it*, 21 August 2022, <https://www.lastampa.it/asti/2022/08/21/news/passeggiata-teatrale-a-coazzolo-con-demetra-e-persefone-6940881/> [22/03/2024]

³³ It has been performed in the rural landscape of Centeno (near Viterbo) and in the archaeological landscape of Villa Massenzio (Rome). Show data sheet, cf. *Demetra e Persefone*, <https://teatronatura.it/spettacoli-in-repertorio/demetra-e-persfone> [22/03/2024]

sense, the performance duplicates the landscape attitude in both the real and subconscious world. Gatti emphasises the «natural environment», highlighting how the place in *Sentieri* may not be originally natural, but abandoned and «often nature goes to inhabit, or inhabit them again, and [...] regenerate them».³⁴ The category of «abandon» is linked to an anthropocentric vision: no space is abandoned, if not by a human perspective.

Soundscape composition, even in this case, plays a crucial role in the performance. The audience is requested to be in silence all the time, this increases the listening and reception of sound and environmental aspects. Raffaele Natale composes its track on the soundscape, creating a «sonic architecture» in which all the sounds have a «dramaturgical function and conditionate the direction».³⁵ A second crucial aspect is the architecture of the site-specific itinerary, Gatti underlines that the landscape has its dramaturgical characteristics: «signs, correspondences, trajectories, architectures, colours, material elements, atmospheres, horizons, vanishing lines, lights, geometries, layers, memories, vegetation, soils, animals, soundscapes».³⁶ Then the planning of the itinerary is a sort of «path's geometry» that implies drawing the form of the route where different patterns can be applied on the landscape depending on its features, considering that every «variation of the stroke creates a surprise, opens up a dramaturgical development».³⁷ Therefore, the audience's participation in walking through these landscapes activates an intimate disposition, in which, according to Gatti, walking allows us to recognise our limits and forces us to continue searching, it is «a slight but continuous effort».³⁸ During these walks, spectators encounter various presences, such as nymphs, bodies with white animal masks, a woman in a red dress and umbrella, bodies intertwined with branches and trees and hands emerging from cracks in the wall. These entities do not belong to the category of the character, but are «figures», as Silvia Mei suggests, «that blend into the landscape or sometimes contrast because they are «out of place», but are nevertheless within, in the picture of vision that is carved out of a seamless whole».³⁹ They are not preset figures that are repeated «a priori» in each landscape encountered by the company. Rather, they are the outcome of the creative process in a given place: «they are born out of the place, out of the meticulous and slow listening with the landscape, where we ask the performers to choose a space and from that to make an action spring forth».⁴⁰ This is strictly indicative of a certain posture of the creative process in the natural space, in which there is no predominance of the human element and no creative imposition of a strong entity such as the character. On the contrary, in the work in nature «bodies

³⁴ Serena Gatti, «Drammaturgia antropocentrica del paesaggio», *Torre di Babele* 19, (2024) [in publishing].

³⁵ Serena Gatti, *Sentieri. Teatro in cammino verso luoghi da riscoprire*, Rogas, Rome 2021, p. 69.

³⁶ Serena Gatti, «Drammaturgia onirica del paesaggio. Introduzione di Salvatore Margiotta», *Acting Archives* 25 (2023), p. 169-195.

³⁷ Gatti, *Sentieri*, p. 41-42.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 55.

³⁹ Silvia Mei, «Figura, tempo e sguardo», Gatti (ed:), *Sentieri. Teatro in cammino verso luoghi da riscoprire*, p. 191.

⁴⁰ Gatti interviewed by the author (11 November 2023).

acquire a greater authenticity, perhaps it is the relationship with space that makes them so». ⁴¹

In conclusion, we would like to stress that *Sentieri's* effort is not only aesthetic-artistic but also productive. The company's policy is to make it accessible to all with free or symbolic cost admission. In this sense, support to the processual dimension is «working with low-cost or no-cost creation strategies»; productive dynamics that we could call «nature-based», which tend to «use the materials available on-site, making the event unique both for the use of space and for that of «props» that already [inhabit] it». ⁴² The metamorphic nature of the process also translates into the dynamics of the project. From time to time, they apply a remarkable form of resilience to diverse political and administrative contexts, changing the subjects of the relationship for the realisation of the route. In short, for *Sentieri* it is not only the performance that is site-specific, but the form of the project itself, which seeks different interlocutors in each place where it takes place.

Moving beyond non-technological shows, Italian theatre-nature also embraces intermedial performance. One notable example is Campsirago, a company founded in 2008 and based in Monte Brianza, Lombardy. It is an important reference point in the Italian theatre-nature scene, even from his unique production chain, which includes a residency centre for artists and a festival «Il Giardino delle Esperidi» organised every summer. Michele Losi, the company's founder and artistic director, trained with Sista Bramini and some creations follow O Thiasos' poetics based on myths (*Arianna e Teseo* in 2018). Their research incorporates also different possibilities of iteration with natural space, including the technological dimension. Together with Sofia Bolognetti, they developed the immersive dramaturgy *Alberi Maestri* (2019-), where the spectators are conducted through an interactive audio experience, guiding them through a natural path while providing insights into the scientific, cultural, and mythological aspects of the encountered trees. The route introduces us to a «hard-working and incredibly intelligent nature, resolute in resisting adversity» and is designed to «bring the viewer into dialogue with the surrounding nature and to remind us of its essentiality». ⁴³ A voice illustrates the way in which a forest functions, but sometimes the spectators can be requested to do some actions in order to build a personal perceptive relationship with the landscape. Even in this case, we can find a site-oriented approach, in the sense that some part of the dramaturgical content changes according to the biodiversity content of the place in which in that time *Alberi maestri* is set. The dramaturgy combines fixed and moveable pre-registered tracks, the company can edit the texts according to the texture and consistency of a particular place. Additionally, sometimes performers could also accompany this experience, in a similar way to *Sentieri's* figures.

The sound immersive dramaturgy creates new possibilities for dialogue with the landscape, where the sonic part is strictly different from the ones we have

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Gatti, *Sentieri*, p. 39.

⁴³ Andrea Lomolino, «Se gli alberi insegnano: un viaggio nella natura», *Hystrio* 4 (October-December 2019), p. 72-73.

seen since now. The soundscape composition of the path is different from the real soundscape in which the walking spectators are immersed. Thus, there is a disconnection between visual and auditory reality, so perception is forced to activate a new relationship with the landscape that is no longer just one of contemplation, but also questioning. This constant examination of reality allows for an unveiling of nature, constituting a further perception of it. For instance, through an electroacoustic composition, the audience hears the sound of the roots communicating. In this sense, a further component of the landscape – that we would not normally hear – is revealed. This performance seems to respond to Heraclitus's sentence, «nature loves to hide», and, as Enrico Pitozzi suggests,⁴⁴ the theatre could reveal, through its many forms and techniques, the nature of things, constituting another lens of the reality that influences audience contemplation. *Alberi maestri* responds also to this inquest of the landscape and therefore of the real.

The recent emergence of young companies post-pandemic underscores the vitality of Italian theatre-nature. These include Cifra Danza Teatro, formed in 2020, which investigates ecosystem services and empathy for nature through movement in Lauriano, near Turin, with the *Iperbosco* project and Anello Debole, founded in the same year, which uses theatre for civic engagement through site-specific actions in Felino, Parma, and organises the «I giorni dell'Alambicco Festival». In this currently expanding context, we certainly place Teatro Selvatico, also founded in 2020 and based in Torre Mondovì in Piedmont, which carries out numerous series of projects in its own premises and around Italy. The group carries out a series of activities, such as the «Hemera Festival» and above all workshops that seek a rediscovery, through theatrical training, of a new relationship between body, nature and others.

Among the productions, Elena Borgna's work *Voci dal bosco* (2022) stands out, also due to its considerable circulation in festivals. This performance is set in natural spaces, using only a wooden platform as a little stage and the spectators sit in front of it. The actress enacts a sort of tree conference, in which with body and voice becomes oak, ivy, ash etc., that should vote on an important decision: the future of the world. During the creative process, Elena Borgna stays immersed in the wood, doing physical actions and trying to keep herself confident with the natural elements: «I challenged my body to enter into a wilder and less everyday relationship with what was around me».⁴⁵ All of these more-than-human figures are embodied through this synaesthetic creative process, where the point of view remains human but also conscious about the metamorphosis that the theatrical process can enact. In addition, the vaguely Brechtian final part of the performance triggers the audience, which during the shows was indicated as other trees and through a collective ritual was transformed into a human («tree with legs»), to spread in the world the necessity of saving nature. This ecological and political message puts the performance in the framework of ecodramaturgies, as defined

⁴⁴ Enrico Pitozzi, *Acusma. Figura e voce nel teatro sonoro di Ermanna Montanari*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2017.

⁴⁵ Interview to Elena Borgna by the author (03 February 2024).

by Woynarski as «texts and intents, attending to the injustices of ecological crisis».⁴⁶

In conclusion, despite all the forms individuated here, Italian theatre-nature can be defined as that set of performative actions realised and/or conceived with and for natural spaces and thus taking into account a creative process that has taken place about them or is directed towards them.⁴⁷ In addition, theatre-nature, in its definition, is also part of a deep project on the landscape and modelling the territory. These types of theatrical productions can hardly become part of public funding (such as FNSV by the Ministry of Culture) or enter the prestigious network of «National Theatre», by its very nature, they are confined in marginal spaces, involving territorial institutions (National Parks, local municipalities and associations). However, many of these artists and companies can rely on the rising phenomenon of artistic residencies,⁴⁸ which are spaces of production managed by local companies or cultural organisations: «L'arboreto» in Mondaino, «Armunia», «A Dimora», «Tenuta dello Scompiglio» in Tuscany, «Sementerie Artistiche» and «Corte Ospitale» in Emilia-Romagna and many others. All these spaces are set out of the city or urban space, allowing the artists and companies to work with the surrounding landscape. Festivals in nature, on the other side, are the ideal space for their distribution.

3. Festivals in nature in Italy

Festivals⁴⁹ are devices capable of promoting visibility and dissemination, facilitating also access to funding. This perfectly responds to the need for theatre-nature in Italy. These theatre proposals struggle to reach a heterogeneous and wide audience due to the lack of support from a theatre environment that is still rather traditional. For the same reason, they also face difficulties in finding

⁴⁶ Woynarski, *Ecodramaturgies*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ This is an absolutely approximate definition, but one that refers to a synthesis reached by the writer at a conference and was discussed in a scientific context: Emanuele Regi, *Il teatro natura in Italia: metamorfosi sostenibili di Koinè teatro*, Marco Cucco – Matteo Paoletti (eds), *La sostenibilità tra le arti*, 18 October 2023, University of Bologna – DamsLab, (unpublished conference paper).

⁴⁸ Fabio Biondi – Edoardo Donatini – Gerardo Guccini (eds), *Nobiltà e miseria: presente e futuro delle residenze creative in Italia*, L'arboreto, Mondaino 2015; Fabio Biondi – Lorenzo Donati (eds), *Incontro al futuro. I teatri delle residenze in Italia: un'inchiesta*, L'arboreto, Mondaino 2024.

⁴⁹ The *Treccani Encyclopedia* defines festival as «a series of cinematographic, musical and theatrical events and shows that take place periodically in certain locations, with performances of particular importance and with programs that usually have their own constant character» (*Treccani Encyclopedia*, «Festival», <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/festival/i> [18/01/2024]). Silvio D'Amico, on the other hand, in *L'Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, states that «the festival is a musical, theatrical or cinematographic event lasting several days or several weeks, characterised by a particular content, artistic excellence, the time of year and the place where it takes place» (Silvio D'Amico, *L'enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, Le Maschere, Rome 1958, p. 234). Waldemar Cudny, pushes on the social role, defining it as «an organised socio-spatial phenomenon that is taking place at a designated time –outside the everyday routine– increasing the overall volume of social capital and celebrating selected elements of tangible and intangible culture» (Cudny Waldemar, «The Phenomenon of Festivals. Their Origins, Evolution, and Classifications», *Anthropos* 109 (2014), p. 640-656.

financial funds. Specifically, as far as public funding is concerned,⁵⁰ specific calls for theatre tend to ignore innovative artistic proposals, due to the rigidity of the criteria for allocating funds. This phenomenon often forces research to turn towards calls for proposals aimed at other sectors, such as the environment or tourism and the correspondent line of funding. About finding private funds, on the other hand, the difficulty is given by the reluctance of private lenders to invest. The peripheral and less conventional nature of theatrical proposals in nature is often perceived as a risk, leading private financiers to prefer more traditional projects that are considered «visible» and «safe». As a result, these innovative theatre proposals, which are disadvantaged in terms of access to public funding, struggle to find support from the private sector. By relying on festivals, therefore, these realities can respond, at least in part, to the difficulties discussed.

A Festival is a unique experience that is characterised by the artistic and/or cultural character of the proposed events, by its temporality, i.e. its place in a specific temporal moment outside the daily routine, «time out of time»,⁵¹ by its reference to the popular festival in the creation of moments of sharing and celebration of the community, and by the relationship of reciprocity established with the territory.⁵² If, on one hand, the venue determines the basic characteristics and guides programmatic choices, artistic modalities and promotional strategies of the festival, on the other hand, the festival exerts a significant impact on the location. In addition to the physical regeneration of the landscape through interventions such as cleaning, the removal of «unwanted» elements, and the use of spaces for purposes other than those for which they were planned, we can also talk about the symbolic effects that the festival experience leaves on the territory.⁵³ In this way, by highlighting their intrinsic social, cultural, anthropological, but also economic function, it is easy to understand how festivals can be an important tool for territorial growth and a fundamental support for theatrical activities in nature.

Because of this potential, since the 1990s we have witnessed the so-called «festivalisation» phenomenon, i.e. an exponential growth of festivals.⁵⁴ This is also the result of the consumerist and capitalist context that considers culture as a market product⁵⁵ and that, based on the so-called «experience economy»,⁵⁶ has initiated a competitive process linked to the proposal and organisation of events. In this context, the festival therefore becomes an opportunity to «sell» the territory

⁵⁰ Interview to Monica Morleo in Velardi, «A Nature Walk Through Contemporary Art and Theatre Towards Festivals in Nature», p. 150.

⁵¹ Marjana Johansson, «City Festivals and Festival Cities», Ric Knowles (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to International Theatre Festivals*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, p. 54-69.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Alessandro Bollo, *Il marketing della cultura*, Carocci Editore, Rome 2012.

⁵⁶ According to the theory of the «economy of experience», intangible experiences emerge as the first generators of value for a territory. For more on this: Johansson, «City Festivals and Festival Cities».

in the best possible way in order to attract tourism⁵⁷ and investment, and it is considered a «potentially lucrative source of income, a builder of brand reputation and a means of regeneration»⁵⁸ that deals with the cultural relaunch of the geographical area concerned. At the same time, however, the cultural consumption of the festival becomes an opportunity to share experiences and emotions that allow one to feel part of a temporary community based on common affinities,⁵⁹ and to make known and enhance the intangible cultural heritage, and authentic expressions of the community.⁶⁰

It is from this wave of festival growth that we arrive at the conception and design of festivals in nature. Settling in peripheral places and biophysical landscapes, far from the urban context, such as mountains, hills, and sea, they have developed in Italy, especially since the 2000s. By promoting innovative ways of making art and theatre about the surrounding environment, festivals in nature, mostly multidisciplinary, are a centre of experimentation, evolution, redefinition and cultural avant-garde. To restore a balanced relationship with the natural environment and encourage reflection on the impact of human activity, nature plays a central role in these festivals. With its unpredictable character, nature is not only a scenario but also the protagonist and co-author of the cultural product. The intrinsic elements of the landscape, such as light and sound, and atmospheric agents, such as wind, rain, etc., influence the performances, highlighting the dramaturgical role played by nature. Moreover, festivals in nature encourage us to regain contact with what surrounds us, with the essence of things. This is also thanks to the proposals for immersive experiences in nature, such as walks, conferences, and workshops,⁶¹ which can evoke encounters with the environment and at the same time with others, turning the festival into a collective experience.

Festivals in nature, usually located in remote areas that are difficult to reach without private transport, encourage the rediscovery of places that are often unexplored and the re-appropriation of spaces that are often abandoned, such as woods or public parks. By placing the festivals in these areas, the aim is to give these places a new identity and a new life and to create an empathetic relationship. The latter is fostered through the participation and direct involvement of the audience in immersive experiences in the natural landscape, such as nature walks, conferences, and workshop experiences. In this way, festivals in nature can also be said to be collective experiences that evoke encounters with each other and with the natural context.

An example in this regard is the «NaturalMente Arte Festival», one of the first nature festivals in Italy, born in 2001 in the hills of Monferrato. It can be

⁵⁷ Marco D'Eramo, *Il selfie del mondo. Indagine sull'età del turismo*, Feltrinelli Editore, Milan 2017.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Ros Derrett, «Making Sense of How Festivals Demonstrate a Community's Sense of Place», *Event Management* 8/1 (2003), p. 49-58.

⁶⁰ Marxiano Melotti, «La spettacolarizzazione della storia tra turismo e tematizzazione: rievocazioni storiche, festival e parchi a tema», Martha Friel (ed.), *Spettacolo dal vivo e turismo*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2021, p. 60-61.

⁶¹ Luca Sighel, «Una sfida di identità», Tomaso Colombo – Lorenza Zambon (eds), *Teatro e Natura. Naturalmente Arte. Vivere i parchi con gli occhi e con il cuore*, Marco Valerio Editore, Turin 2011, p. 72.

considered the result of the development of the theatrical experiments in nature of the actress of the «Casa degli Alfieri» company, Lorenza Zambon, who has always been interested in the relationship between theatre and nature so much so that she names herself as «actress gardener». The festival finds its offshoot in the Parco Nord Milano. Since 2007, other provinces of Lombardy and other parks have also been involved, making it a travelling festival dedicated to the enhancement of green areas through art. The different artistic expressions involved in the festival find in nature the humus to represent themselves and interact with each other: each with its own poetics but with the common desire to reopen the listening to the woods, the smells, the earth, and the sounds.⁶²

Always with the purpose of valorising the territory, other festivals have been born, such as the «Giardino delle Esperidi Festival» in 2004, organised by «Campsirago Residenza», a centre for the production of performing arts in the landscape,⁶³ which involves natural landscapes of seven municipalities in the province of Lecco, and the «Masi Invisibili Festival» in 2010, organised by Sorgente '90 and «Piccolo Parallelo». The latter mainly offered trekking experiences in nature and performative walks with the aim of promoting the rediscovery of the Val di Cembra territory in Trentino. Unfortunately, it only lasted three years due to the difficulty of raising funds.⁶⁴ This anticipates the way in which festivals in nature, which are mainly niche events with a decentralised location, are in fact responding to the same problems that led to their creation: the difficulty of raising funds and the difficulty of dissemination. For this reason, solutions are being sought which, without distorting the artistic proposal, will allow the involvement of a wider and more varied audience.

Thus, the «Scena Natura Festival», born in 2018 thanks to the activity of the Bolognese association Crexida/Anima Fluò, is part of the Fienile Fluò agritourism, also attracting restaurant customers to enjoy the shows.⁶⁵ The creation of a hybrid reality between the world of entertainment and the world of restoration, therefore, has advantages in terms of visibility and exceptionality of the proposal, even if at the same time it is necessary to respond to logistical obstacles and organisational limitations. The latter include, of course, the need to train a competent staff in several sectors and the difficulty of managing different audiences while trying to avoid overlapping activities.

Despite the difficulties that festivals in nature are facing, however, it is important to note that their interest in environmental issues⁶⁶ has played a decisive role in proposing a new way of performing, to establish a new

⁶² Lorenza Zambon, «Un Festival vegetale», Colombo – Zambon (eds), *Teatro e Natura. Naturalmente Arte. Vivere i parchi con gli occhi e con il cuore*, p. 17-18.

⁶³ Campsirago Residenza, *About us*, <https://www.ilgiardinodelleesperidifestival.it/il-festival/> [30/11/2023]

⁶⁴ Piccolo Parallelo, «Festival Masi Invisibili», <http://www.piccoloparallelo.net/Festivals/MasiInvisibili/2010/MasiInvisibili.htm> [01/12/2023]

⁶⁵ Fienile Fluò, *Scena Natura*, <https://www.fienilefluò.it/scena-natura/> [31/12/2023]

⁶⁶ Youngjoon Choi – Cristine N. Buzinde – Deborah Kerstetter – Alan Graefe, «The role of environmental attitude in a nature-based festival: the case of Boryeong Mud Festival», *Tourism Analysis* 17 (2012), p. 417-429.

harmonious and respectful relationship with the surrounding environment. Proposed as non-invasive events, avoiding the setting up of artificial stages and lighting systems, they are characterised by a growing concern for ecology. In the category of so-called «sustainable festivals», these events adopt practices aimed at reducing the environmental impact and developing also social and economic aspects on the territory and the community in some way. Specifically, they avoid the use of large amounts of energy for lighting and sound systems, massive waste production, overcrowding, the carbon footprint of transporting people and goods,⁶⁷ high levels of material waste, the printing of flyers, booklets and tickets,⁶⁸ etc.

Taking these ecological and sustainable initiatives almost to the extreme, the festivals in nature, using culture as a social activator, have as their main objective to draw attention to sustainable content. Among them we can mention, for example, the «Festa di Teatro Ecologico» of Stromboli, organised by the cultural association fluidonumero9, born in 2014;⁶⁹ the «Earthink Festival», born in Turin in 2012 by the cultural association Tékhné;⁷⁰ the «Umbria Green Festival», born in 2016, promoted by a private company for green energy and environmental services (Techne.srl) and the cultural association «De Rerum Natura».⁷¹ Ecological practices are behind all these festivals by avoiding amplification or artificial lighting in order to proceed to listen to nature that participates in the performances. This management addresses environmental issues such as climate change and the impact of our actions on the earth, which favour the use of recycled materials, that try to reduce CO2 emissions as much as possible. By incorporating ecological perspectives into the artistic event, the festival can create a network of exchange between different communities, leading to a questioning of established practices and an openness to new solutions.⁷²

By proposing solutions with a reduced environmental impact, and by reversing the effects usually produced by festivals and the entertainment industry, festivals in nature become important devices of progress and ecological transition. The empathic relationship with nature developed through participation in immersive experiences in the natural landscape proposed by this type of festival aims to generate in participants an ecological interest that is long-lasting. Through direct interaction with nature, both the organisers and the public are more likely to acquire a behavioural ethic capable of translating the protection of the planet and our future into daily gestures.⁷³ According to research carried out by some

⁶⁷ Maria Monakhova, «Festivals as a sustainable development tool: Case study of Teriberka, Russia», *Master diss.*, University of Northern Iowa 2020, p. 15.

⁶⁸ Roberta Sciortino, «Teatro e coscienza ecologica: il ruolo dei festival teatrali di sostenibilità ambientale in Italia. Analisi dell'Earthink Festival», *Master diss.*, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia 2020, p. 48.

⁶⁹ Festa di Teatro Ecologico, *About Us*, <https://www.festaditeatroecologico.com> [01/12/2023]

⁷⁰ Sciortino, «Teatro e coscienza ecologica», p. 53.

⁷¹ Umbria Green Festival, *About Us*, <https://www.umbriagreenfestival.it/services/chi-siamo/> [01/12/2023]

⁷² Giulia Alonzo, «I festival culturali come strumento di creazione di cittadinanza attiva: il caso di Arona Città Teatro», *PhD diss.*, Università di Bologna 2023, p. 4.

⁷³ Gaia Bindi, *Arte, ambiente, ecologia*, Postmedia Books, Milan 2019, p. 42.

students at the University of Pennsylvania (2012), it seems that the audience of this type of festival has a greater environmental ethic than the audience that chooses to participate in a festival located in an entirely built context.⁷⁴ In this way, the participating community can acquire a behavioural ethic capable of translating the protection of the planet and our immediate future into everyday gestures.⁷⁵ By making ecological conversion socially desirable, festivals in nature are pioneers in the collective involvement of the community, which can become a social process and lead to change. In conclusion, it can be argued that the development and consolidation of festivals in nature could be instrumental in proposing new alternative methods of performing arts that follow green practices and encourage audiences to empathise with nature and adopt ethical behaviour towards the environment.

In addition to the aspect of social tools and change, which concerns the proposal of new methods of making shows, among the main strong points of the festival in nature we can also speak of: the communion with the place, which involves both establishing a harmonious relationship with it and respecting it from an ecological point of view; the cyclical nature of the encounter, which involves exchanges between and with the participating community; the vulnerability in the exposure of the manifestation of nature, for which reference is made to the unpredictable character of nature, which determines the constant changes and renewals of the artistic proposals; and the creative rigour, which refers to the creativity determined by establishing a relationship with nature⁷⁶.

Unfortunately, despite these crucial points, this category of festivals has some difficulties in finding an affirmation in the contemporary artistic field, since they do not receive the resonance and attention they deserve. At the same time, the need to slow down and escape from an increasingly accelerated urban context in order to reconnect with what surrounds us, combined with the urgency to protect and respect the environment, could ensure an important success and development for this type of festival. This idea is encouraged by the growing number of such festivals, most of which have taken place in recent years.

4. Conclusion

In this contribution, we attempted to describe a new horizon in the landscape of Italian theatre, which in the last years has become increasingly important and capable of intercepting new possibilities of funding (especially due to the Next Generation EU program). However, it occupies a marginal space in rural areas and is far from the traditional financing lines and cultural network. Even theatre studies need to update their state of the art in this perspective, including interdisciplinary methodology and multiple attitudes capable of interpreting and studying these phenomena. As we argued, both for theatrical practices and for

⁷⁴ Choi – Buzinde – Kerstetter – Graefe, «The role of environmental attitude in a nature-based festival», p. 418.

⁷⁵ Gaia Bindi, *Arte, ambiente, ecologia*, p. 42.

⁷⁶ Sista Bramini, «O’Thiasos TeatroNatura nei 10 anni di Naturalmente Arte», Colombo and Zambon (eds), *Teatro e Natura. Naturalmente Arte. Vivere i parchi con gli occhi e con il cuore*, p. 50.

festivals there is a variety of forms and possibilities, which need careful and up-to-date studies, alongside new taxonomies.

Theatre-nature intercepts traditional and innovative performing arts aspects. On one side, the intangible heritage of actor training (both in body and physical aspects), the tradition of Italian theatrical narrator, and a dramaturgical repertory that is set in nature can find new strength. On the other side, the new performative forms adhering to site-specificity, the new tendencies of ecodramaturgies and ecoperformances, and the impulse of the technologically oriented scene.

Festivals in nature are the ideal container and distributor of all these practices, including sustainable strategies of cultural planning that positively influence marginal and rural territories. New cultural garrisons of places capable of producing cultural welfare⁷⁷ ecologically oriented, connecting communities and rebuilding the inner relationship of the territories. Each festival has its soul and its characteristics, which are formed by the host landscape. Many artists and companies are themselves organisers and artistic directors of festivals in nature: Campsirago Residenza and «Il Giardino delle Esperidi», Lorenza Zambon and «NaturalmenteArte», «Teatro Selvatico» and «Hemera Festival» etc. These forms are creating an alternative network, parallel to the traditional circuit of theatre productions.

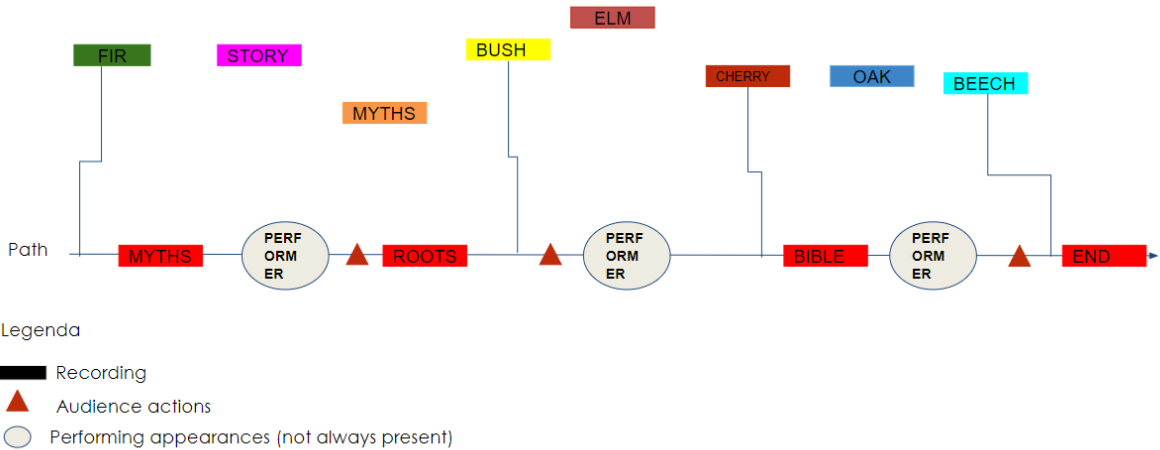
This is configured as a cultural-natural ecosystem, something that dates back to the world's oldest theatre, born of cohabitation with nature. The one that moved from the caves to the slopes of the Acropolis of Athens, passing through the woods with the «thiasi» of the Bacchae and the dithyrambic processions for Dionysus. A theatre that today also represents, with due differences, the theatre of a new possible future, that of «a humanity naturally oriented towards culture», as Bramini loves to say, and «culturally destined for Nature».⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Giacomo Manzoli – Roberta Paltrinieri (eds), *Welfare culturale: la dimensione della cultura nei processi di welfare della comunità*, FrancoAngeli, Milan 2021.

⁷⁸ Sista Bramini, «Il corpo di un sapere teatrale nella natura. Appunti di una formazione», *Riflessioni Sistemiche* 24 (2021), p. 22-35.



Director Sista Bramini, with Camilla Dell'Agnola, *Mila di Codra*, 2014.
Credit: Mario Sabatini, 2014.



Emanuele Regi, Dramaturgical Patterns in *Alberi Maestri*, 2023.

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Elena Borgna, *Voci dal bosco*, 2022. Credit: Davide Comandú, 2022.



Azul Teatro, *Sentieri #10*, 2023. Credit: Claudio Luchetti, 2023.

to investigate artists and companies (O Thiasos TeatroNatura, Campsirago, Azul Teatro, Teatro Selvatico), but also to analyse their production activities, particularly focusing on a parallel and linked phenomenon: outdoor nature festivals. The traditional theatre building and the structure of cultural funding in Italy are not always aware of «theatre-nature». Therefore, the final issue of this essay is to understand, through festivals, how this phenomenon is created, produced, and distributed.



ΟΙ ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΕΙΣ

Ο **Emanuele Regi** είναι υποψήφιος διδάκτωρ στο Τμήμα Τεχνών του Πανεπιστημίου της Μπολόνια (Università degli Studi di Bologna). Ο κύριος τομέας της έρευνάς του εστιάζει στη σχέση μεταξύ των παραστατικών τεχνών και της φύσης. Η συγκεκριμένη έρευνα πραγματοποιείται στο πλαίσιο του προγράμματος PON με τίτλο *In Nature: Paths of Biodiversity Enhancement through Performing Arts at the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines UNESCO MaB Reserve*. Επίσης, ο Regi είναι μέλος της Συντακτικής Επιτροπής του επιστημονικού περιοδικού *Antropologia e Teatro*. Έχει διοργανώσει συνέδρια με τη συμμετοχή μελετητών και καλλιτεχνών που εργάζονται στις παραστατικές τέχνες των «τοπίων». Αναφέρονται ενδεικτικά τα: *Connessioni Scena Natura* και *Parole in Cammino II*, τα οποία έγιναν σε συνεργασία με τον Michele Pascarella, καθώς και το *Convention Eirene Danza per la Terra*, σε συνεργασία με το Teatro Selvatico. Στις πρόσφατες δημοσιεύσεις του περιλαμβάνονται οι παρακάτω: «Dancing the Landscape», (δημοσιευμένο στο επιστημονικό περιοδικό *Mimesis Journal*) και «A Matter of Relationships: Dramatising, Staging, and Planning Ecological Performances» (δημοσιευμένο στο επιστημονικό περιοδικό *Itinera*).

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He serves as an Editorial Board member for the academic journal *Antropologia e Teatro*. He has organized conferences involving workers and artists who integrate performing arts into landscapes, such as *Conessioni Scena Natura* and *Parole in Cammino II* with Michele Pascarella, as well as *Convention Eirene Danza per la Terra* with Teatro Selvatico. His recent publications include *Dancing the Landscape: «Ecological Practices between Choreography and Territory»* (published in *Mimesis Journal*) and *«A Matter of Relationships: Dramatising, Staging, and Planning Ecological Performances»* (published in *Itinera*).

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