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# NATURALEZZA | SIMPLICITÉ

Natürlichkeit  
im Musiktheater



[transcript] Theater



## Actio, actio, actio

A director's point of view on naturalism and naturalistic staging of the early opera repertoire

DEDA CRISTINA COLONNA

"Ma sopra tutto, ancorchè il recitativo sia detto coi necessarij cangiamenti di voce, pause e punti, egli sarà però sempre languido e fiacco, se non verrà accompagnato da una convenevole azione. Questa è quella, che dà la forza, la espressione e la vivacità al discorso. Il gesto è quello, che a meraviglia esprime il carattere di quel personaggio, che vuoi rappresentar. L'azione finalmente è quella, che forma un vero attore; quindi Tullio stesso disse, che tutto il grande ed il bello d'un attore consiste nell'azione: *actio, actio, actio*."

GIAMBATTISTA MANCINI<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "But above all, even if recitative be said with all the necessary changes in the voice, pauses and dotted notes, it will always be languid and weak, unless it is accompanied by a suitable action. This is what gives your speech strength, expression and vividness. Gesture wonderfully expresses the character you are trying to represent. Action is what ultimately shapes a true actor; even Tullius said, that the greatness and the beauty of an actor consists in action: *actio, actio, actio*." Mancini, Giambattista: *Riflessioni Pratiche sul Canto Figurato*, Milano: Giuseppe Galeazzi Regio 1777, p. 241. (Translation like the followings by DCC)

## I. ARTISTIC APPROACH

I am an opera director and choreographer; I have come to my profession mainly through the practical experience of a performing career on stage, as a baroque dancer and actress. I have staged nearly thirty operas so far and my repertoire comprises opera and drama of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. I am going to try to explain how, when staging works of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, various ways of reflecting upon the concept of 'naturalness' come to influence my work, also taking into account how the staging is influenced by the producer's requests and expectations.

I was formed technically and artistically in Paris in the 1980s, between the School of Philological Early Dance Reconstruction led by Francine Lancelot at the Sorbonne University, the Advanced Technical Ballet Pedagogy at Ecole Supérieure d'Etudes Chorégraphiques, and at the same time, as a spectator, the new, amazing, breath-taking *Tanztheater* performances of Pina Bausch that left us all speechless.

Thirty years later, it seems to me that these two opposites have come back to meet again in my work. A sort of philological passion and the need to express myself through my work have fought a long battle to conquer supremacy of my interests, but with the so-called "maturity" – whatever that may be – I have acquired the certainty that for me, philological research is one tool among many and not a mission in itself.

My further training at the Acting School of Teatro Stabile di Genova in the years immediately following my time in Paris, together with the chance I had of acting internationally in productions – ranging from Shakespeare to Cechov, Genet and German contemporary theatre – have certainly influenced the development of my 'method', in search of what I feel I can express when working with the early opera repertoire.

For me, the process allowing the development of an idea that brings a text from the page to the stage is, after all, a mutual revelation of the inner, intimate 'nature' of the piece itself and of the personality of the interpreter.

A purely philological approach (an approach that has the reconstruction of an original form as its primary goal) is the first, precious ingredient in this process. But by itself it does not necessarily lead to what I research, i.e. an artistic creation that bears the sign of the past, vivified by the attribution of meaning that happens through re-creation in our present times. My aim is to rediscover and re-evaluate historical practices with the express intention of reaching today's audi-

ences, rather than a literal reconstruction of historically documented performances. I think that this requires interpretation rather than modernisation.

On one hand, the early opera repertoire is often modernised in contemporary stagings that, with the pretext of making the work relevant for contemporary audiences, overlook the actual contents of the piece. On the other hand, some stagings attempt to reconstruct the original, without taking the contemporary audience's taste into account. I suggest instead that historical knowledge gathered through a philological approach can be used to devise an informed interpretation of the piece, which is more likely to reveal its original contents alongside the contemporary director's view, thus excluding reconstruction a priori, but keeping the contemporary audience in the picture.

I work for the stage; I consider philological reflection a key step in a process that ends in the fertile zone in which artistic creation dwells. I am not interested in reconstruction per se, as a final result; I actually find it a futile effort to copy art forms from the past; what fascinates me instead is to look at a piece so thoroughly and deeply, that through the knowledge of it and of the relevant sources I will also end up learning something about myself.

### 1.1 Historically Informed Practice versus naturalistic staging

In particular, I have come to profoundly dislike the terms 'baroque gesturing', or 'gesture acting', that are so commonly associated with the historically informed staging of works of the baroque and classical repertoire. In general, when Artistic Directors ask me whether or not I will use 'baroque gesturing', or 'baroque dance', they are in fact enquiring whether or not my characters will be acting according to the widespread, sometimes stereotyped, modern aesthetics that have originated in the field known today as 'Historically Informed Practice', within which there are as many personal takes and 'styles' as there are directors. I'd rather say that I have developed my own, 'naturalistic' approach to the early opera stage.

It seems to me that when we aim to reconstruct a dance from a score, or when we read an opera libretto or a play and prepare a proposal for a staging, rather than seeking its original form encrypted in the text, our task is to decipher and integrate it with a parallel reading, in order to rebuild a context within which we can identify a subjective layer in meaning. Without a context, there can be no meaning in a message, and no freedom in our expression as artists. Technical proficiency is the practical tool that allows theoretical and historical evidence to be applied to stage material today. I think that both narrow-minded intellectual-



isms and practical stage habits that are not illuminated by historical knowledge are just as likely to keep the performer or the director away from the inner value of the piece, at a distance that makes the staged result sterile, and after all, in my view more historically 'deformed' than 'informed'.

### 1.2 Actio: Naturalistic characters

For me, staging characters who dance, sing, or speak, corresponds to finding the *actio* that informs the text, rather than putting into practice performance rules to be found in the sources what applied to each individual step, or to the focus of a single verse, or the shape of the individual gesture.

Information is stratified, encrypted and accessible at various levels in the text. A stage-orientated analysis of the text requires that we look for action and that we stage that action with the help of historically informed practice. The text tells us what the character says, and it is our job to figure out what the character means, therefore does, so that we can find a way in which such action and words are connected and expressed in a logical and effective way, mirroring the outer and inner circumstances in which the character finds itself, within the context of the play.

My words unsurprisingly echo Stanislavskij's notion of "subtext"<sup>2</sup>, which also implies a logical correspondence between meaning, action and circumstances. It is not directly applicable to 18<sup>th</sup> century acting for evident historical reasons; however, in 1755 Bérard writes about that same correspondence:

"Le caractère des personnes & les circonstances où elles se trouvent doivent encore décider la nature des gestes dont on doit faire usage."<sup>3</sup>

2 "Il sottotesto comprende tutte le innumerevoli linee interiori della parte e del dramma, tracciate dai 'se' magici e non magici, dalle finzioni dell'immaginazione, dalle circostanze date, dall'attenzione interiore, dagli oggetti dell'attenzione, dal vero, dagli adeguamenti e da tutti gli altri elementi. Il sottotesto è ciò che ci costringe a dire le parole della parte." ("Subtext comprises the innumerable inner lines of the role and of the piece, traced by the magical and non-magical 'if's', by the fictions of imagination, given circumstances, inner attention, objects of attention, the truth, adjustments and all other elements. Subtext is that which compels us to say the words of our part." Stanislavskij, Konstantin S.: *Il lavoro dell'attore*, ed. Gerardo Guerrieri, trad. Elena Povoledo, Bari: Biblioteca universale Laterza: Universale 1988, p. 465.

3 "The character of the people and the circumstances in which they find themselves, must also decide the nature of the gestures that are going to be used." Bérard, Jean-

### 1.3 Historical works and modern performers

Once the historical information is collected, it is time for the modern interpreter to 'close the books' and begin a creative process, without claiming to find the historical data in the final product in a quantifiable form. Once the equation behind the chosen scene, dance or work is understood, the responsibility of the interpreter is to show his/her vision with courage, possibly right next to the motivations that inspired the original composer. Once aware of the available historical evidence, we have to trust our instincts and choose the solution that best addresses the needs of our expressive gesture.

So, for me, the naturalistic precept of 'staying true' on the stage, thus revealing one's inner nature and possibly the nature of the piece expands and encompasses the role of the director, a function that was created after all in very recent times. It corresponds also to an inspiring criterion in the shaping of the actual staging itself; in other words, I try to practice *naturalzza* when I tackle the libretto or the score using the historical knowledge I have gathered in order to nourish my sensitivity and allow it to hopefully suggest something not too far from what would have been the original aim of the piece. This may result in shapes that, seen from the outside, are more or less reminiscent of the relevant iconography; this of course challenges the idea of those who define 'historicity' in shapes, rather than in method.

When instructing modern performers on or for the stage, and once I have found a 'concept' for the staging or choreography, the practical, creative process consists in 'bringing it before the eyes' of the spectators, by means of the bodies and sensitivities of the performers. As a director/choreographer working mostly in early music festivals or in opera houses, I am usually confronted with singers, actors and dancers who have varying degrees of awareness of the issues relating to different styles, or aesthetics, or even techniques in connection with the specificities of any given century.

I have often experienced that, even if artistic and stylistic matters are settled in the director's mind and have helped shaping a philologically acceptable concept, the instrument through which the concept comes to a practical realisation is ultimately the relationship that the director is able to establish with the actors, singers and dancers – and even before with the conductor and the set-, costume- and light designers.

Antoine: *L'Art du chant, dédié à Madame de Pompadour*, Paris: Dessaint et Saillant 1755, p. 148. (Translation DCC)

Modern opera singers and professional dancers receive very technically-orientated training. Singing and dancing have taken on an athletic side that privileges the display of virtuosity along lines that do not always run parallel to the criteria of stage proficiency in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a consequence, the instruments through which the artistic plans are carried out often need a sort of re-tuning, as if the canons of what is beautiful, expressive, acceptable, of good taste, needed to be re-established before a constructive rehearsal period can begin. One could say that this is a form of re-education, which over time leads to a re-building of intuition.

Performers that are not trained in the subtleties of physical expression often find distinctions such as the ones between comical/ugly/grotesque, sad/pathetic, furious/angry, ugly/terrifying/awe-inspiring, as well as a developed interest for parameters such as decorum, taste, gracefulness, elegance, finesse, intelligence and naturalness pointless and uselessly academic. Therefore, in order to tackle directly the issue of how to achieve a 'naturalistic acting', I often have to re-establish the relationship of the interpreter to the text, which in turn generates a natural tendency in the performer to reacting as a character. Once that reaction naturally arises, I can shape it, polish it and give it the 'stylistic touch', stimulating the performer's acquired awareness.

The main lines that shape my 'method' in view of a practical approach to naturalistic acting are:

- helping the performers metabolise the poetic language of libretti, borrowing exercises from theatre practice, in order to foster immediacy in a language that is often foreign and anyway distant;
- promoting awareness of the plot as a network of relationships among characters, in view of unveiling the *actio* and in order to determine direction in acting (as opposed to concentrating only on each single character);
- training the performers in awareness of shape, timing and coordination in gestures as expressive tools;
- promoting a sense of 'ownership' or 'authorship' and encouraging the performers to gain assurance and guide my work as director through improvisation exercises. How can the respective roles of singer and director actually be understood when approaching works that were originally staged without the help of a director in the modern sense?

My experience has shown me that, much like the spoken or sung word, learned gestures and actions must be 'owned' by the performer in order to acquire their

full meaning and importance; when the staging is suggested and even demonstrated by the director, it is the performer's responsibility to manage his/her relationship with the director in order to foster this process of appropriation and instigate active collaboration with the director.

## II. WORKS IN MY WORK DEALING WITH NATURE AND NATURALISM

### II.1 Naturalism as theme

#### TETRAKTYS, OVVERO LA PRIMA ETÀ DEL MONDO

*Balletto, liberamente ispirato a La Dispute di Pierre Carnet de Chamblain de Marivaux (1688–1763)*

*Musica di GEORG FRIEDRICH HAENDEL (1685–1759)*

*Teatro Lirico Giuseppe Verdi, Trieste 2008/2009*

*Project by Deda Cristina Colonna, Massimiliano Toni*

*Staging and choreography: Deda Cristina Colonna*

*Set design: Pier Paolo Bisleri*

*Costume design: Chiara Barichello*

*Conductor: Paolo Longo*

*Solo dancers: Massimo Arbarello, Danilo Palmieri, Silvia Casadio,*

*Alice Serra*

*Giuseppina Bridelli, mezzosoprano*

*Orchestra and Corps de Ballet of Teatro Lirico Giuseppe Verdi, Trieste*

In this case, naturalism was a matter of choice in the theme for this new piece. The piece was commissioned by the theatre, with no specific requirement as to the staging techniques (baroque dance, singing, musical practice); rather, the deal was making an instructive performance for an audience of students on the theme of the birth of society.

'Tetraktys' is the representation of the number 10 by Pythagoras: sum of the first four figures (1+2+3+4=10). It is the image of totality in movement and a symbol of universal creation. In this ballet, the language of dance intersects with



song and drama; the texts are freely inspired by the play *La Dispute*, by Pierre de Marivaux (1688–1763). The plot brings the four protagonists, first alone, towards the formation of a small group, and then of a larger community, in which human instincts and impulses manifest: aggregation, marginalization of the “different”, fear of the unknown, struggle for supremacy, factionalism, war and death. *Tetraktys* depicts the stages of self-discovery and discovery of the other, the birth of seduction, relations and rivalry, the disappointment of betrayal and jealousy (figure 1).

Figure 1: ‘*Tetraktys*’, Teatro Lirico Giuseppe Verdi, Trieste 2008/2009.



Source: Fabio Parenzan, Trieste.

None of the performers (dancers, singer, orchestra) had any knowledge of historical performance practice. The final result was a modern piece, inspired by the authors’ (myself and Massimiliano Toni, musician and composer) artistic background and sensitivity; the performance was well received by the young audience, who was exposed to a thought-provoking experience, that also showed how art can be a way to reflect upon human nature.

## II.2 Naturalistic Reading

### IL MATRIMONIO SEGRETO

by Domenico Cimarosa (1792)

Drottningholm Slottsteater 2013

Staging: Deda Cristina Colonna

Set- and costume designer: Ann-Margret Fyregård

Conductor: Mark Tatlow

Il Signor Geronimo: Jens Persson

Elisetta: Anna Hybiner

Carolina: Sofie Asplund

Fidalma: Frida Josefin Oesterberg

Il Conte Robinson: Richard Hamrin

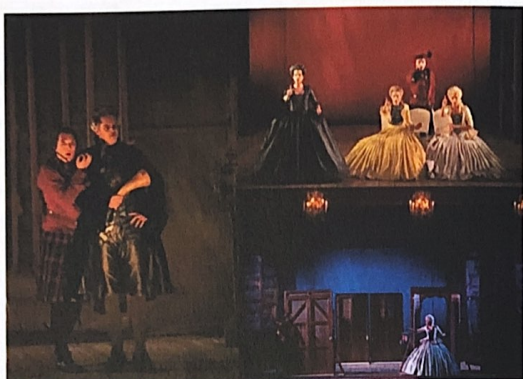
Paolino: William Baker

Drottningholmsteaterns Orkester

In this case, I would say that a certain understanding of naturalism inspired the reading of the libretto and the general theme of the staging. The theatre made no special request, other than the staging should reflect my vision of historically informed practice, and that I should use the existing painted sets at Drottningholm. No money was budgeted for the construction of a new set, and I soon realised that none of the existing sets had the four doors that are mentioned in the libretto and are therefore necessary to stage the piece faithfully.

Whilst reading the libretto, I was struck by the frequent references to the modifications of body functions, according to the situation, and to the feelings involved. Organs are very often mentioned in relation to feelings, and references to temperaments are made in order to describe people, especially in critical moments or negative aspects. The theory of the humours was used in order to investigate the functions of the body; however, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was rather referred to as a means of categorising characters and personality types. The 18<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed a growing interest in anatomy and in the study of the body as a mechanism; doctors were dissecting bodies in order to see the true nature and function of the organs. This inspired the costume design by Ann-Margret Fyregård, in which representations of parts of the inside of the body are used as ornaments on the costumes. By the same token, the sets at Drottningholm were reversed, in order to show their inside, which also solved the problem of not having an adequate set in stock. In this case, the orchestra was skilled in historical practice. The singers were not, a priori; but the generous time allowance for the rehearsals fostered a truly experimental rehearsal process, in which the singers became acquainted with my understanding of 18<sup>th</sup> century acting. Spontaneous, ‘natural’ gesture – in the sense of gestures that come spontaneously to the singer when performing, as a nonverbal complement to the expression of the text in a given circumstance – was identified and studied in relation to words and music, and also used in some choreographed ensemble pieces as a way to reveal the inner relationships in the structure of music.

Figure 2: 'Il matrimonio segreto', Drottningholm Slottsteater 2013.



Source: Mats Bäcker.

The selected photographs in figure 2 show intense facial expressions, gestures and actions that came 'naturally' to the singers. This level of 'naturalezza' was achieved by building a historically informed acting practice, rather than by copying the graphic representations of expressions and postures that can be found in acting manuals of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### II.3 Naturalistic Acting

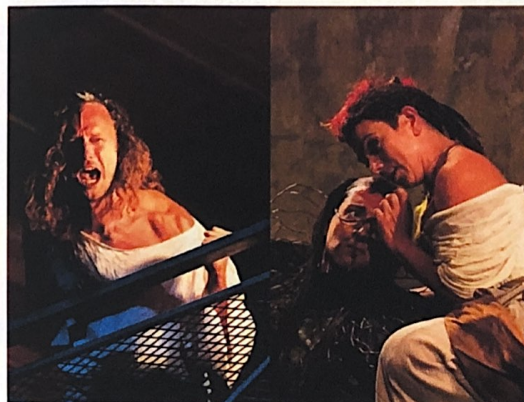
ACI, GALATEA E POLIFEMO  
by Georg Friedrich Haendel (1708)

Copenhagen Opera Festival 2013  
Staging: Deda Cristina Colonna  
Set- and costume design: Karin Gille  
Light design: Martin Braad Pedersen  
Conductor: Alfredo Bernardini

Aci: Deborah York

Galatea: Sonia Prina  
Polifemo: João Fernandes  
Actor: Joseph MacRae Ballantyne  
Concerto Copenhagen

Figure 3: 'Aci, Galatea e Polifemo', Copenhagen Opera Festival 2013.



Source: Mathias Boiesen.

In this case, the Festival's input and requests were:

- an 'urban' baroque opera: a staging that would connect baroque opera to the city
- staging the orchestra Concerto Copenhagen
- a pre-performance event in the bar
- using 'Pakhus 11', a post-industrial location (an old warehouse)
- no specific request concerning the style of the staging, but a certain, negative preconceived idea about historically informed performance.



In the pre-performance event, an actor recited Polyphemus' song to Galatea, taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; the same actor was used at the end of the performance, in the staging of the metamorphosis of Aci into a river, for which we used a reference to classical iconography.

The set design was conceived in order to match the selected location, therefore using 'urban' materials (pallets, beer crates, some of the existing machinery). The orchestra, a numerous ensemble very well known in Copenhagen, was staged as part of the general landscape. They wore workers' overalls and blended better in this way with the surrounding architecture than if they had been wearing their usual musicians' outfits.

Historically informed practice was proposed to the singers, who initially had stereotyped ideas about what that meant, but ended up letting themselves be lead by the director. In this case, naturalistic acting was intended as paradigm for the acting method (figure 3).

**OTTONE IN VILLA**  
by Antonio Vivaldi (1713)

Copenhagen Opera Festival, 2014:

Staging: Deda Cristina Colonna  
Set- and costume designer: Karin Gille

Conductor: Lars Ulrik Mortensen  
Concerto Copenhagen  
Ottone: Sonia Prina  
Cleonilla: Sine Bundgaard  
Tullia: Deborah York  
Caio: Sophie Junker  
Decio: Leif Aruhn-Solén

Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik, 2010:

Staging: Deda Cristina Colonna  
Set designer: Pier Paolo Bisleri,  
Costume designer: Monica Iacuzzo  
Conductor: Giovanni Antonini

Orchestra Il Giardino Armonico

Ottone: Sonia Prina  
Cleonilla: Veronica Cangemi  
Tullia: Sunhae Im  
Caio: Lucia Cirillo  
Decio: Krystian Adam

I staged this piece twice; the first time in Austria, at the Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik in 2010 (figure 4), and for the Copenhagen Opera Festival in 2014 (figure 5). This staging was nominated for the Reumert Awards for 'Best Opera Production in Denmark 2014'. This experience allowed me to witness the development of my directing skills over a period of four years and it was a great satisfaction to stage it the second time, with the advantage of the experience that I had accumulated in the meantime.

Figure 4: 'Ottone in villa', Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik 2010.

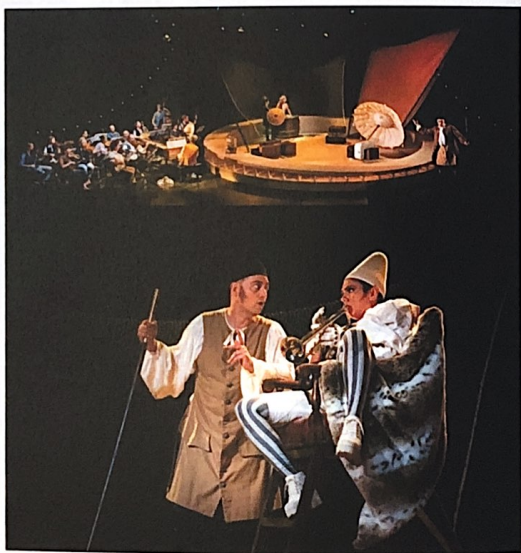


Source: Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik.



The first 'Ottone' was set in a more 'literary' way (figure 4): Ottone's garden was in fact represented as a garden, and even Roma appeared quite reassuringly in a drawing of the Appia Antica by Piranesi, that we projected whenever needed. I think that with this production I came to the end of the first period of my directing career. Developing and ultimately exploiting the performer's expressive means advanced my project. I proposed each and every movement, expression and gesture, thinking that it would be easier for the cast to just copy me, and that the staging would be more 'historical'. The performance was well received, but some critics misunderstood my playfulness for derision of the characters. For me it marked the end of a whole professional era.

Figure 5: 'Ottone in villa', Copenhagen Opera Festival 2014.



Source: Soren Meisner.

The second *Ottone in Villa* was staged in a modern theatre in Copenhagen, and this time I ventured into a more daring type of staging (figure 5). For the first time, I dared to change the original context. The plot was staged in the tent of a travelling circus, instead of a garden in the Roman countryside. My reading of the network of relationships connecting the characters in the plot suggested the idea of a circus, seen as a closed, structured society in which each character has a specific position, determined by his/her ability or speciality. Understanding the Emperor as a clown, his counsellor Decio as a fortune teller, or his lover Cleonilla as an acrobat clarified the relationships, therefore the singers' acting became more 'natural' and better expressed the original content of the text, even if the setting was far from the original.

Unsurprisingly, giving the performers a clearer idea of how special Ottone's 'villa' was, inspired them immensely and we came a lot further on the path of what I consider the right style of acting for a piece like this, actually an *opera buffa*, at times in serious disguise. *Ottone in Villa* has a serious plot and its characters are serious. However, the relationships connecting the characters show a 'buffo' nature of the piece.

I was very flattered and thought that I had scored a good point, when the critic Gregers Dirckinck-Holmfeld wrote "It is all put together like a game [...], similar to the football challenges between Messi and Ronaldo. Applauded, admired, adored."<sup>4</sup>

I take naturalistic acting very seriously, be it in a comedy or in an *opera seria*. Its strength lies in the intimate relationship between the word (intended both as meaning and as sound), the music and the gesture that shapes the action. I would like to finish quoting Riccoboni's *Dell'Arte Rappresentativa* (1728), who in this passage summarises the whole sense of acting:

"La principale, e necessaria parte  
Dell Comico è di far chiaro vedere  
Che da Verità non si diparte.  
Così facendo, quasi persuadere  
Potrai che non sia falso quel che è finto.  
E se fin là non vai non puoi piacere.

<sup>4</sup> Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Gregers: 'Ottone In Villa' Cop. Opera Festival I Teater Republique, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2014, <http://gregersdh.dk/ottone-in-villa-teater-republique-30-7-2014-anm/> [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2017].

Per seguitare il naturale istinto,  
E moversi senz'Arte or che s'ha a fare?  
Scordare i quattro membri, e forse il quinto,  
Che è la Testa; ma si ben cercare  
Di sentire la cosa, che ci esponi  
Che si creda esser tuo l'altrui affare."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Riccoboni, Luigi: *Dell'arte rappresentativa. Capitoli sei*, London: s.n. 1728, p. 17. "The main, and most necessary part of the actor's profession is to show clearly that he does not step away from the truth. In doing so, you can almost persuade that what is fake is not false, and if you don't reach this point you can't please [the audience]. What shall then one do, in order to follow the natural instinct and not move artificially? Forget the four limbs, and maybe the fifth one too, which is the head; but endeavour to feel what you are presenting so deeply, that one would believe the business is in fact your own." (Translation DCC)