

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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### Performing Democracy.

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## Performing Democracy. Site-Specific and Forum Theatre in Spin Time, Rome

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### Abstract

In this paper, I describe a theatre project that took place for several months in 2019 in Spin Time, a nine-storey occupied building on via Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in the Esquilino quarter at the centre of Rome, that has housed more than 450 people and 25 different ethnic groups since 2013. I outline the creative process of a collective emotional and intellectual development journey of a large group of people, starting from the Theatre of the Oppressed, critical ethnography and critical pedagogy, passing through ethnodrama, documentary theatre, site-specific performance, delving into the theatricality of popular assemblies. “Can theatre serve as a reflection tool of political imaginary for the members of a multicultural community by facilitating the process of continuous reinstitution?” was one of our research questions. Driven by the tangible needs of participants, we arrived at devising a hybrid theatre, suspended between reality and potentiality, between heteronomy and autonomy, which attempts to examine and reinvent the rituals of democracy within specific performance spaces appropriately designed.

*Keywords:* Theatre of the Oppressed, ethnodrama, documentary theatre, site-specific performance, critical performance ethnography, critical pedagogy, autonomy, radical democracy

### Performing Democracy

“Theatre can reenact, enact, preenact assemblies. It can create a space of analysis, of reflection, of imagination -but the moment it becomes a real assembly, realism ends and reality begins. With all its theatricality.” (Malzacher, 2019, p.199)

Recapturing the thread of an old debate initiated by Piscator and Brecht in the German interwar period, the last decade has seen intense artistic research which examines the performative dimension of the assemblies and the possibility of theatre as an agonistic space,

as a sphere of radical imagination, and as an assemblage space of active spectators and subjects of independent thought (Fisher & Katsouraki, 2017; Malzacher, 2019, 2023; Robson, 2018). Artists as Milo Rau, and groups as Punchdrunk, Ontroerend, Public Movement, and Rimini Protocoll investigate political actions, study and create public choreographies, forms of social organisation, audience experiments in immersive theatre performances, “overt and covert rituals as ‘pre-enactments’ of possible rituals of the future” (Malzacher, 2019, p.188). Far from criticising the performative aspect of democracy, as Plato did by calling democracy ‘theatrocracy’ (Laws, 701a-b), there is an extensive debate of the political as performative and the performative as political both in social studies and in theatre and performance studies scholarship and by radical political thinkers and philosophers such as Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Judith Butler.

### Figure 1

*View to the Esquilino quarter, Rome, from Spin Time on via Santa Croce in Gerusalemme.*



This paper presents a social theatre intervention that took place in 2019 within a multinational and inclusive community in the Esquilino quarter, Rome. This intervention was based on combined artistic- ethnographic research, aiming at creating a multiple and dynamic mirror of the reality examined, useful to its protagonists but also to those who wish to ponder the possibilities of intertwining performing arts with a democratic political imaginary and citizens’ self-institution.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed account of the project and its methodology can be found in Zoniou (2023b) (in Italian) and Zoniou (2021) (in Greek and in English).

## Figure 2

*The nine-storey building of 17,000m<sup>2</sup> in the centre of Rome, where the “Spin Time Labs” project takes place.*



I outline here the demanding, creative process of a collective emotional and intellectual development journey of a large group of people, starting from the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), critical ethnography and critical pedagogy for adults, passing through ethnodrama, documentary theatre, site-specific performance, delving into the theatricality of popular assemblies. Finally, driven by the tangible needs of participants, we arrived at devising a hybrid theatre, suspended between reality and potentiality, between heteronomy and autonomy. We use the term *autonomy* according to the definition given by Cornelius Castoriadis (1983, 1998), that is, as an imperative of imaginary self-institution, self-empowerment and legal-political self-determination, as opposed to the existing status of hetero-determination and *heteronomy*. The artistic research process was partly documented in the documentary film *Spin Time: Che fatica la democrazia!* by actress and director Sabina Guzzanti, who embraced our working hypothesis with enthusiasm. Part of our dramaturgy was turned into a script and filmed as a dramatised documentary on authentic locations, in an original experiment to establish a dialogue between the language of the Theatre of the Oppressed and that of the cinematic narrative of Guzzanti.

### **Inside 'Spin Time', a Social-Housing Worksite of Urban Regeneration**

Spin Time is a nine-storey building on via Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, some five hundred metres from Termini Station in Rome and at least as far from the Colosseum. The occupied building on 55, via Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, a building of 17,000m<sup>2</sup> and nine floors, is



located in the Esquilino quarter at the centre of Rome. It used to house the headquarters of the former National Institute of Social Security and Assistance for Public Administration Employees (IN- PDAP), and had been left empty and abandoned for a long time after the merge of insurance funds and the privatisation surge of State-owned assets in the 2000s, initiated by the Berlusconi government and the infamous “creative economy”, with a hint of conflict of interests, by Finance Minister Tremonti. During the same period, because of the financial crisis, many inhabitants and families in Rome ended up in the streets after being evicted or being unable to find affordable housing. The building on via Santa Croce, like other abandoned public buildings in the Italian capital, was squatted in by the “Action” housing movement; its use was changed under the guidance of architects and architecture students thanks to the intensive work, volunteering, and know-how of hundreds of people.

### Figure 3

*A building hosting a huge “social-housing worksite of urban regeneration”.*



The building has housed more than 450 people and 25 different ethnic groups since 2013. Through hard work, the offices and spaces of the former State agency were turned into 180 living quarters –small apartments, common kitchens, bathrooms, a gym, a study hall, a play area and other common spaces– intended for people of very low income, families with a single parent or many children, low-income pensioners, former drug addicts, homeless and dispossessed people, who now occupy the seven overground storeys. The ground floor and

the two basements have been turned into 29 laboratories and cultural spaces<sup>2</sup>, beautiful and functional spaces used by dozens of Roman citizens, who act, create and work at Spin Time without necessarily living in the building: leftist autonomists with thirty-year social movement experience, anarchists, Catholic women activists belonging to missionary orders, devout Muslims, alternative and mainstream artists, LGBT activists, environmentalists, unionists, anti-fascist punks, researchers, hackers, cooks, labourers, former city councillors, parliamentary candidates, members of various “anti-movements”, academics from different Roman universities in a bizarre co-existence.

#### Figure 4

*The Theatre of the Oppressed Group inside Spin Time.*



As described by the protagonists themselves, this building is a “social-housing worksite of urban regeneration” (Gerundino, 2019), the so-called “Spin Time Labs”, widely known as “Spin Time” supported by the “Action” housing movement as well as labour, political, activist, artistic, religious and research collectivities. Their goal is to claim the right to housing, along with other rights, such as the right to decent work, to culture, equality, education, social security, cultural identity, and freedom of expression. Any collectivity with an artistic idea, a proposal for collaborative work, an inclusive action, a political intervention can request space in the building from the Spin Time assembly.

On the 2nd of May 2019 the police had cut the power supply following orders from the all-powerful Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini. To everyone’s surprise, Cardinal Konrad

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<sup>2</sup>200-seat auditorium, restaurant, library, rehearsal spaces, concert space, club, sewing and arts laboratories, carpentry, beer brewing laboratory, mental health centre, self-organised afternoon school, publishing house, youth centre, large co-working space for independent workers equipped with computers, etc.

Krajewski, a top aide to Pope Francis, who had just returned from his mission on the Greek island of Lesbos, personally reconnected the current himself so that electricity would return to the occupied building after a week of desperation, protests, violent demonstrations, and suppression, leaving veteran activists and politicians of the Left in the Italian capital stunned and causing a diplomatic incident between the Italian State and the Vatican.

### The Artistic Research Project at Spin Time, Rome

During my stay in Rome, as a visiting professor at the Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Performing Arts at the Sapienza University of Rome invited by Professor Guido di Palma, we implemented, in cooperation with a group of students and the significant support of colleagues,<sup>3</sup> an artistic research project of *social theatre* (Bernardi, 2004). This was mainly based on the *Theatre of the Oppressed* and other theatrical methods: *ethnotheatre* or *ethnodrama* (Saldana, 1999, 2005; Mieniczakowski & Stephen, 2006), *documentary theatre* (Forsyth & Megson, 2009), *devised theatre* (Oddey, 1994), *site-specific performance* (Kaye, 2008)<sup>4</sup>.

### Figure 5

*Image theatre.*



<sup>3</sup> This research project was realised thanks to Guido Di Palma, Noemi Massari, Irene Scaturro, Cecilia Carponi at the SARAS Department. In addition, our colleagues Riccardo Silvi and Walter Balducci contributed to the video documentation of the project.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of the theatrical methods, we implemented within the framework of this artistic research, see Zoniou (2018) and Zoniou (2023b).

Our intervention was of an intensive format, lasting from March to October 2019. We organised workshops and presented interactive performances based on collective dramaturgy resulting from an anthropological-ethnographic research process. More specifically, our approach towards the reality under examination and artistic interaction with the latter followed the ethics and methodology of the hermeneutic research paradigm and, in particular, the trends of *critical participatory ethnography* (Carspecken, 1996) and *performance ethnography* (Dennis, 2009; Denzin, 2003), as well as *arts-based research* (Glesne, 2018, pp. 362-399)<sup>5</sup>. The theatre workshops involved 25 out of the approximately 450 residents of Spin Time; they were members of 11 out of the 25 ethnic groups as *social actors*. This process was documented in a film, entitled *Spin Time: Che fatica la democrazia! (Spin Time: What a trouble democracy is!)*, a dramatised participatory documentary film by the well-known Italian actress and director, Sabina Guzzanti – a film selected and screened in the Giornate degli Autori-Venetian Nights section of the Venice Film Festival in September 2021.<sup>6</sup>

## Figure 6

*Image theatre.*



Spin Time is a complex reality: those who join the community prompted by an urgent need to survive and find housing (the residents of the upper floors) co-exist with those who do so because they see Spin Time as a place of social struggle or are motivated by ideological or artistic inspiration (i.e., the users of the ground floor and basements). The “ones up” and the

<sup>5</sup> A beautiful example of recent research inspired by the same principles under the guidance of Canadian colleagues is outlined in Gallagher et al. (2020).

<sup>6</sup> See the film presentation at the 78th International Venice Film Festival 2021- Giornate degli autori 18th edition: [https://www.giornatedegliautori.com/film.asp?id=38&id\\_film=1553&lang=eng](https://www.giornatedegliautori.com/film.asp?id=38&id_film=1553&lang=eng)



“ones down” are two so different that they can hardly mix. Social conditions at Spin Time are conditions of plurality and multiculturalism, offering a truly wide range of languages, cultures, backgrounds, social circumstances, political choices, and stories and rendering this experience truly unique and exceptional. It is almost impossible to find similar conditions of heterogeneity anywhere else.

The research project in question went beyond the familiar implementation framework of a social theatre project with a group of vulnerable people, a group of immigrants, people struggling to get by, who more or less share the same background, the same culture or/and the same geographical area -a project aiming at inclusion.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to this approach and our initial expectations, our intervention involved an equal process of gradual identification of researchers-facilitators and students with citizens who strive to achieve a utopia of cultural and political co-existence, aspiring to operate along the principles of dialogue and equality and constantly threatened by fear, racial hatred, and bigotry. While attempting to intervene, we became part of a reality and its transformation process.<sup>8</sup>

The questions of residents and other members of Spin Time became our own research questions, too. Using participant observation of the reality under examination as a starting point, and experiencing our interaction with it, four questions for our artistic-social research emerged in the course of the process that had not occurred to us before our contact with the community, namely:

1. How can we give voice to people who have learned to keep quiet when faced with the dominant “culture of monologue”, which is so powerful that it prevails even in a potentially libertarian-democratic community?
2. How can we build communication bridges between people from the fields of arts, science and political action and those who fight for day-to-day survival without any similar previous experience?
3. Can theatricality become a tool for observing and analysing ourselves and the surrounding reality from a critical and distanced perspective so that the complexity of human co-existence and different aspects of reality can be treated in a creative rather than disruptive way?
4. Can theatre serve as a reflection tool of political imaginary for the members of a multicultural community by facilitating the process of continuous reinstitution?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For example, members of the United African Women’s Organization, a migrant women’s group in Athens, devised a forum theatre performance entitled *No to Racism from the Baby’s Cot!*, following a social theatre workshop that lasted eight months during 2011-2012. Shedding light on the lives of African women as citizens, the performance toured the neighbourhoods of Athens during a critical period of growing neo-Nazi movements, see Zoniou and Papadopoulou (2021) and Zoniou and Boemi (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Our first concern was to avoid the traps of folklore representation of the difference in intercultural theatre. See Zoniou (2024).

<sup>9</sup> That is, the community should be able to constantly invent new institutions and rules of self-

For the dramaturgical processing of these questions, we combined various theatrical techniques, arriving at collective decisions through a direct-democratic process, based on theatricality and the principles of critical pedagogy for adults and the concepts of *empowerment* and *ownership*.<sup>10</sup> In the next sections, I will outline an evolutionary process of *coscientisation*,<sup>11</sup> from a performance of oppression and *heteronomy* towards a gradual achievement of a theatricality of *autonomy*.<sup>12</sup>

### **First Phase of Artistic Research: Residents as Narrators and as Spect-Actors**

Our research project was divided into two phases. During the first phase, after the completion of a course at the university to prepare participating students, we, the outsiders of the reality of Spin Time, came into contact with the community, maintaining a strictly ethnographic approach.

The first phase of research aimed at establishing a dialogue with the residents of the building in order to understand their needs and desires through participant observation: it was a long process learning to listen, establishing personal contact and participating in the social, cultural and political aspects of their lives. We gave ourselves the time to get to know a complex reality in a systematic and in-depth manner. Consequently, our goal was to motivate residents to participate in the theatre workshops. However, the road ahead was not easy. We soon realised that placing a piece of paper on the notice board that read something like “Come join the TO workshop!” was pointless. A different system was required. There had been earlier attempts by other groups to convince the residents to participate in theatrical experiments; the call to “participate in theatre activities” held downstairs had received no response; therefore, this time we reversed the process and mentality, i.e., for the first time, the theatre would move to the higher floors and the apartments of building residents.

We organised the first public theatrical event in June 2019: we were going to present a performance that reflected at a dramaturgical level, the results of the first phase of our research at Spin Time. On 9 June 2019, a promenade and interactive performance entitled *Let's shed some light on us! (Facciamoci luce!)* was presented to the residents-spectators by students-actors. The performance wandered across the corridors and apartments-former offices on the different floors of the Spin Time building; initially the theatrical form was that of a *site-specific*

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management in response to the new needs of its members. A common concept in Castoriadis' thought.

<sup>10</sup> For the concept of *empowerment*, see McLaren (1989) and Sleeter (1991). For the concept of *ownership*, see Mavrocordatos (2009).

<sup>11</sup> A basic term used by Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal and the aim of their practice. It is a pedagogical process of developing critical consciousness of familiar social reality through learning and *praxis* (the term *praxis* involves informed action and reflection upon it), aimed at revealing the social structure of problems, social myths as well as the function of dominant ideology, see Freire (1998).

<sup>12</sup> I use the term *autonomy* according to the definition given by Cornelius Castoriadis, that is, as an imperative of imaginary self-institution, self-empowerment and legal-political self-determination, as opposed to the existing status of hetero-determination and *heteronomy*. See Castoriadis (1983, 1998).

*performance*, in a poetic reconstruction of everyday life within the building, using words taken from the stories narrated by the residents themselves, who were now spectators at this performance. The theatrical scenes presented were structured as open questions addressed to the audience, who gradually broke the ice, became an active audience, i.e., *spect-actors* (Boal, 2002), and was given the opportunity to provide answers in a dynamic, multi-dimensional, and dialogical way during the “forum”, i.e., the second, interactive part of the performance.

Justice or legality? We attempted to shed light on the darkness that had gathered in the preceding period due to propaganda against Spin Time: fake news, prejudiced statements, bigotry and politics of hatred and death. We investigated issues related to the housing emergency, the ethics of collective cohabitation and respect for differences.

### Figure 7

*A forum theatre performance as a collective decision-making process.*



The dramaturgy of this specific performance derived from a systematic process combining the method of research with a poetic-artistic perspective. Data collection for our research was realised through participant observation, numerous open-ended interviews, and accurate recording of workshop interventions, improvisations and concerns expressed by participants. The next step was data analysis based on the *grounded theory* rationale<sup>13</sup>: repeated ideas put

<sup>13</sup> In the research methodology called *grounded theory*, working hypotheses derive, “arise” inductively from analysing data and processing categories and are not pre-formulated, see Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) and Malagon et al. (2009). Note, however, that an artistic research paper, such as this one, primarily aims at delving into or/and proposing new performative forms rather than studying social phenomena; therefore, this research methodology was more useful in the first part of our research as a working method and mentality to assess the reality under observation rather than as a strict

forward by respondents were grouped into themes-broader categories for analysis, presenting the issues that had emerged as the most important for the residents themselves. In other words, the external university group tried not to impose their preconceived vision –expressed through pre-formulated working hypotheses– regarding the reality under observation, but, instead, form a vision by listening to the main concepts expressed by the participants, to reflect the narration back to the narrators, like a multiple and dynamic mirror of their own reality, in a spirit of respect and active listening. These categories of analysis gave rise to the initial theatrical scenes, following the dramaturgical principles of ethnodrama and forum theatre.<sup>14</sup> We identified hubs and mechanisms of oppression, protagonists and antagonists, and watched hope and expectations for a better life turn into conflict and defeat. Other scenes were created by following the rationale of devised theatre and site-specific performance developed as a dramaturgical response to stimuli arising from the space itself i.e., the place where people live their everyday lives, the corridors, the bathrooms, the ‘sentry box’ at the building entrance, the veranda, the kitchens, etc.

Indeed, this method of approaching the Spin Time community proved effective. Many people recognised their own words and their reality being translated into a symbolic and poetic language; they laughed, they experienced aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction and saw the possibilities of expressing issues deriving from their basic needs in this kind of theatre.

### **The Second Phase of Artistic Research: Residents as Actors**

After this first performance, in a moving general assembly of building users, many residents, survivors, people from a tough background of homelessness, persecution and addiction, having drawn inspiration from the performance about their lives and overcoming powerful cultural obstacles, decided, with the support of the entire community, to become active participants and join the theatre workshop to take place from June to October 2019, where they could talk, with no mediators, about the issues that concerned them. After all, the Theatre of the Oppressed is not presented by the non-oppressed to the oppressed, but by the oppressed to the oppressed!

The second phase of our intervention aimed at creating the conditions for realising the vision of rendering the Theatre of the Oppressed into a tool to serve reflecting on this complex reality. Through various theatrical techniques, we began to collect dramaturgical material in order to analyse the surrounding reality and the residents’ main issues of concern regarding their community; this was based on conventional TO dramaturgy outlining the tension between

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methodology for producing a social theory.

<sup>14</sup> “Forum theatre” is one of the most significant methods of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Other methods include “image theatre”, “invisible theatre”, “rainbow of desire”, “legislative theatre”, “newspaper theatre”, see Boal (2002). In this particular intervention, we combined all of the above TO methods.



two opposing and uneven poles, namely the Protagonist-Oppressed and the Antagonist-Opressor, watching the former's struggle against the power relationship with the latter.

### Figure 8

*Collective dramaturgy through games: "The image of the perfect Spin Time inhabitant".*



During the theatre workshop, as we delved into a critical reading of reality through *Image Theatre* (Boal, 2002) and trust was being built, it emerged that the majority of the oppression stories recounted by the participants using the various techniques hardly concerned the conflict between the outside and the inside world, as we had initially thought, but, mostly, focused on the power imbalance within Spin Time itself arising from ethnicity, sex, education, language, age, bodily integrity and similar factors. It was certainly confounding for our expectations. Despite hard, tangible efforts to overcome inequality within the community, most stories related tough intercultural relationships, abuse of power, invisible privileges and the unequal relationships between persons involved in political management -veteran members of social movements in the Italian capital- and building residents, usually people with no previous political action or experience. Once again, it emerged that, unless there are safety measures in place, once somebody is given the opportunity to exert power over someone else in collective management systems, issues of friction, conflict and abuse are bound to arise pretty soon. This establishment of power relations played a major role in the lives of residents because it was a decisive factor. For example, non-compliance with certain rules of the community and imposition of penalties could even lead to someone's expulsion from the

building, which, in effect, meant they had to go back living in the streets. Who decided about the severity of misconduct and the penalty to be imposed? What was their motive? How are alliances built? For the participants in the theatre workshop, this was the primary issue of oppression they wanted to investigate.

The first phase of the workshop involving the residents of the building on via Santa Croce aimed at alleviating tension and overcoming the initial distrust among members, who might have been fighting until recently at the meeting or the common kitchen about political matters or everyday problems. The theatre workshop operated as a safe and welcoming space, where everyone could 'expose' themselves without being judged and without hiding disagreements under the rug; instead, they were considered, their connection with broader social problems were recognised and there was a macro-level of analysis. Participants would often burst into tears of emotion during this process of gradually abandoning the social façade they had built in order to survive their difficult daily life.

### Figure 9

*Deconstructing power structures inside Spin Time community by its members through forum theatre performance.*



Various techniques, exercises, and games, drawn from different kinds of social theatre and TO,<sup>15</sup> enabled us to explore the following questions: Is there justice? What is injustice? Where does each person's responsibility lie? How do you communicate discomfort or

<sup>15</sup> The exercises that were used are described in detail in Zoniou (2023b).

gratitude? Who acts as an oppressor and why? How can we build a fair and functional community? How are rules set out and how do we react when they are broken?

Apart from the residents, many people affiliated with Spin Time, the “ones down”, contributed to this entire process: the members of the Spin Off theatre collective offered continuous support with organisational and artistic aspects; the wonderful musicians of the famous classical music orchestra of Spin Time, i.e., the Orchestra Notturna Clandestina, performed live the atmospheric music composed for the performance by maestro Enrico Melozzi; and comedian actress Sabina Guzzanti appeared as a guest star in the role of an oppressor, namely a journalist for a populist far-right newspaper, a part she knew very well, having also been a victim herself.

### Figure 10

*A dialogue between reality, its cinematic and theatrical reconstruction, and fiction. Sabina Guzzanti shoots her film Spin Time – Che fatica la democrazia!*



*Ci sono case che capitano! (There are houses that hap-pen!)* was the title of the main performance, which took place on the evening of 4 October 2019 at the Auditorium of the building on via Santa Croce in a public celebration of community: young and old, children and babies, men and women in their ‘Sunday best’ came from the seven floors and the ground floor and basements to anxiously watch the story of Anna (which they already knew, of course, since many of them attended rehearsals) and to intervene with proposals, taking her place on stage, battling oppression and offering solutions, but also taking, through the parts, a stand in front of their community.



### True Democracy and a Performance of Democracy

The Theatre of the Oppressed performative techniques constitute intellectual and aesthetic journeys for both actors and spectators (Ganguly, 2010), resulting in intellectual uplifting, as artists and non- artists, experts and non-experts, become *spect-actors* and learn from each other, *together*, through dialogue, through breaking the monologue culture in some kind of “transportation”, during which participants “are transported” only to return to themselves and their daily lives transformed (Schechner, 1984, 2002).

#### Figure 11

*Stage and film process for self-determination*



Our working hypothesis, which arose through the process that confounded our initial expectations, as already mentioned, was to provide the residents with the opportunity to move beyond merely complaining about the things that did not work in their community and the mentality of delegating power to leaders and change their situation through processing the proposals put forward during the workshop and the performance and using the theatrical space as a testing ground, a rehearsal venue for real life, so that they could regain their dignity and the strength necessary to deal with external attacks.

We suggested that theatre should be systematically used as a tool by the General Assembly of building users, with the theatre group processing all conflict issues and presenting them in the form of a forum/legislative theatre to the General Assembly as a way for finding solutions. The Quorate General Assembly took place the next day at the same place where



the performance had been presented. This perhaps concretely expressed the concept of Forum Theatre per Boal and even evoked the single-issue meetings of the Athenian Ecclesia of Demos, namely the Assembly of the People, after the dramatic contest of Great Dionysia. The Assembly commented on the events depicted in the performance and expressed their enthusiasm in an unprecedented atmosphere of unity. Its members affirmed that they would try to ensure the rules of procedure would gradually incorporate proposals for the community organisational review as they arose and would arise from future workshops and performances; this would lead to fairer, more democratic, and participatory self-management of the community. Immediately after that, the same General Assembly went on, with the familiar heated atmosphere and usual disputes and power games, onto complaints about the Comitato and the shifts, disputes over the violation of community rules, rave parties that provoked neighbours, fourth floor versus seventh floor, Eastern-Europeans versus Africans, Sonia, who had yet to pay her monthly contribution to the common expenses coffer, etc.

It is not a coincidence that ancient Greek drama came to cure human passions being born in the agonising process of self-determination of a people who, without kings, hierarchs or holy books, sought to decide for themselves while also having to face all the tension produced by the tragic human condition of dealing with a multidimensional truth (Castoriadis, 1983).

These initial performing activities were followed by others, accompanied by a desire to imagine, and perhaps establish, a new kind of institution in the community, which would allow for a theatrical investigation of any issue for discussion and even, at times, could substitute the endless tiresome assemblies that often reproduce the monologue culture. The residents' desire to continue experimenting using these means has been expressed in every way and was reignited after September 2021 by the screening of *Spin Time – Che fatica la democrazia!* viewed both at the building and at cinemas across Italy.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusions

In conclusion, starting from the Theatre of the Oppressed, we arrived at a proposal for a new hybrid theatrical form driven by the actual needs expressed, a theatrical form that could address the questions raised for the artistic research.<sup>17</sup> We arrived at devising a hybrid theatre, suspended between reality and potentiality, between heteronomy and autonomy, which attempts to examine and reinvent the rituals of democracy within specific performance spaces

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<sup>16</sup> This dialogue between reality, its cinematic and theatrical reconstruction, and fiction is commented on by many film critics, see for example Baffoni (2021).

<sup>17</sup> For us, the conclusions –the answers to the research questions and the discussion of the findings of this specific research, which follows the tradition of arts-based research (Glesne, 2018, pp. 362-399)– were the dramaturgy of the theatrical performances and the film directed by Sabina Guzzanti. The evaluation of the impact that these artistic products have on the community is ongoing.

appropriately designed. The essence of Athenian tragedy lies in the fact that politics acts itself out as a live performance before citizens, taking place in the exact same way (*speech* and *action*) as democratic politics experienced by Athenian citizens in their daily lives (Pigkou-Repousi, 2012). According to Castoriadis (2008), as well as other philosophers and scholars, ancient Greek tragedy constitutes a poetic reconstruction of the political issues and concerns faced by the citizens of democratic Athens on stage; it was born in a society founded on a continuous process of self-institution (Pefanis, 2012).

### Figure 13

#### Posters



Starting from the Theatre of the Oppressed, we tried to explore the political consequences of our aesthetic choices, on the one hand, and to break new ground for the aesthetic depiction of an imperative, on the other. We used the imaginary dramatisation of a different political and social structure, inspired by the Athenian city-state, the Agora (Forum) and the Ecclesia of Demos and invented a theatricality of self-determination and autonomy. Choosing the term in its ancient Greek sense, we could, perhaps, call this ongoing theatrical process *theatre of autonomy*.

We sought to give voice to people who are shaped within a culture of monologue created by the media, political parties, religion, employment, family, and politics as well as movements. Our work sought to help these people grow intellectually, break free from passivity, transcend

hetero-determination and acquire emotional and spiritual strength; we aspired to reconstruct oppression and heteronomy in order to understand and overcome them.

We attempted to enact new political rituals, to create a culture of dialogue, a truly democratic and participatory space, a theatrical community that reflects and is transformed by mobilising the collective wisdom of people. These rituals were born inside a specific space but could inspire new architectural projects of newly built or renovated spaces appropriately designed for performing democracy.

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