

The Mandrake Root: How a 1518 Play Speaks of Today

Natasha Lardera (December 03, 2013)



The satirical play by the author of *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli performed at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò

“The plot is simple, it seems to be based on three novels by [Boccaccio](#) [2]: there is an old man

(Nicia) who wishes to have children, he’s married to a young beautiful woman (Lucrezia) and there is a young man (Calimacco) who wants to sleep with this same woman. The two men are also the two powers that ruled Florence, being the young the Medici. Florence is then quarreled between the two. [Machiavelli](#) [3], who was exiled by the Medici, writes his political comments between the lines of what appears to be just a satirical obscene comedy.”



Laura Caparrotti founder and artistic director of KIT, Kairos Italy Theater, thus describes the story of [The Mandrake Root](#) [4] (*La Mandragola*), a satirical play by the author of [The Prince](#) [5], Niccolò Machiavelli that will be performed by the company's young division, called YoungKIT, at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò on December 5th (Members Only) and on December 9th.

“In the past few years, I have started meeting more and more young Italian actors,” Laura explains, “They are all perfectly bilingual, they are full of passion, very professional and most of all very talented. They were so eager to work on Italian theater that I have decided to create YoungKIT. Kairos Italy Theater usually focuses on modern plays, at least plays written in the past 100 years. Yet, I noticed that the old, famous Italian theater texts, the ones of Commedia dell’Arte and of the Renaissance, for instance, were not staged very often. This material is studied extensively in the universities, but the theaters sees little of it... and often when such plays are presented, they are not so faithful to the way they were conceived.

I made this young group, then, the protagonist of our new series Italian Classics@KIT. We’ll be revisiting the Classics by staging them but also by studying, by reading about them and by discussing them with experts. We did this for *The Mandrake Root*, indeed Stefano Albertini, the director of Casa Italiana, where we are the theater company in residence, came to talk to us about Machiavelli.”

“Although the five-act comedy was published in 1524 and first performed in the carnival season of 1526, Machiavelli likely wrote *The Mandrake Root* in 1518 as a distraction from his bitterness at having been excluded from the diplomatic and political life of Florence following the 1512 reversion to Medici rule. Both contemporary and modern scholars read the play as an overt critique of the House of Medici; however, Machiavelli set the action in 1504 during the period of the Florentine Republic in order to express his frustrations without fear of censure.” [\(Wikipedia\)](#) [6]

“It was almost natural to choose *The Mandrake Root*,” Laura continues, “It is, I believe, the most famous play of the Renaissance and it is just a great play. It is funny, it is full of political comments, and also it is very theatrical. The characters all belong to the Commedia Dell’Arte tradition, and even to the earlier Atellane, the satirical theater form born in the Ancient Rome era.”

We asked the cast of young actors, Ilaria Ambrogi, Francesco Andolfi, Carlotta Brentan, Giulia Bisinella Francesco Meola and Irene Turri to tell us something about their characters.

Carlotta Brentan on Friar Timoteo

Timoteo is a corrupt, cynical and greedy friar whose sole interest in this world is his personal gain. Timoteo moves the plot along by agreeing to help Callimaco, the desperate lover, conquer the object of his desire, Lucrezia, through very questionable means. Friar Timoteo has absolutely no problem violating any religious or moral rules – such as persuading Lucrezia to commit adultery – just as long as he is paid enough for it. This type of character was actually a rather typical figure in the theatrical convention of Machiavelli’s times: plays abounded with cynical religious figures whose interests had nothing to do with salvation, but rather with money, sex, food – all the vices.

Working on this character has been a challenge for a number of reasons: not just because he’s a male figure, but also – and especially – because he is such a ‘type,’ a stock character. As an actor, encountering such roles can be difficult because we want to be faithful to the ‘type’ while also finding a deeper, more human connection to allow us to make the character believable and three-dimensional.

Ilaria Ambrogi on Madonna Lucrezia

When I first read the play, Lucrezia was the character that most intrigued me. Her turn around at the end of the story is so meaningful and connected to the point I think Machiavelli was trying to make. She is depicted as the most virtuous of all the characters throughout the play, and when she finally accepts to be part of the game and to gain all the benefits of it, it's easy to think of her as selfish and



opportunistic, but she is actually also very intelligent and practical. She seems able to adapt to her circumstances and do what is best not only for her but for everyone, without any "unnecessary" drama. She wins not because of her moral principles but because she surprises us with her smart and practical approach. Her turn around contributes to this unusual and comic happy ending but gives also a clear sense of Machiavelli's political and philosophical point of view.

Francesco Andolfi on Messer Nicia

Messer Nicia is the personification of the sentence "people are strange when you're a stranger". We know very little about his past but what we can tell for certain is that he is a misfit. Throughout the play he finds himself misled, confused, tricked but never realizing it: he constantly is resolved that everyone else is acting irrationally while he's the only one that can make sense out of it all.

Francesco Meola on Callimaco

Callimaco is a tempest of contrasting feelings, all declinations of love. Desperate pain, sweet lightness, impossible hopes and constant doubts. It is a character who is ready to move from Paris to Florence just to follow a dream. He is a wave in the ocean and I love him because he is all I would like to be for a woman for once.

Giulia Bisinella on Ligurio

From the latin verb *ligurare* (=to lick, but also to taste, to sample), Ligurio, cold and of direct and acute mind, masters the whole action like a great technician in tricks and traps. He's not the exact definition of a parasite, even though they refer to him as that, because his stomach is not the focus of his attention. He is a live wire, always in control and omniscient; the puppeteer, the director of the double deception in the play. And he enjoys every bit of it. Every successful effort, gives him pleasure. His past job as a marriage-broker gave him a certain playing-God obsession, and now he finds pleasure in controlling other people's lives. With great tact, though.

Irene Turri on Siro and Sostrata

I've been working on two completely different characters but both strictly related to the ground and their first instincts. It was like going all the way back to my roots to find inspiration.

"Needless to say, we are having so much fun," Laura concludes, "Not only because of the play itself, but also because it seems to speak about today's world. For each character we can name people in today's society. Actually, this is what we do all the time. Sometime we think that Machiavelli is talking about our government, our powerless men, our I'll-do-anything-for-money people. Being all Italians outside of Italy, the most impressive moment is when Nicia, the old man, says to Siro, the servant of Callimaco, the young lover, that he knows that living abroad is way better, because to live here - in his country, meaning Florence - you need to know people, you need to go to parties or funerals and see people... basically what he says is that in his country meritocracy doesn't exist, it's all about who you know. Unfortunately, this is still one of the reasons why people leave Italy. Machiavelli said it in 1518. That proves how actual is this play. And that is only one of the many things that stand out in The Mandrake Root. If you don't believe it, you need to come and see it."

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[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niccol%C3%B2_Machiavelli

[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mandrake_Root

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Prince

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mandrake