

Motus and Me: In Appreciation of the Italian Theatre Group Motus



I first heard of Motus in 2000 or 2001 when Hanon Reznikov, Judith Malina, and I drove down the Apennine hills from our residency in Rocchetta Ligure (1999 – 2004) to see a new avant-garde group named Motus perform on a pier in the middle of the harbor in Genoa. It was one of their productions from the *ROOMS* project, *Twin Rooms*. It was a very windy blustery night with the threat of rain. The large set consisted of many rooms, which the viewer saw through. I later heard from Daniela Nicolò and Enrico Casagrande, the two founders and directors of Motus, that not long after *ROOMS*, they decided to do away with big sets and become a lean and mean group. All the scenography would be in the computers and video projectors, in the lights. That night in Genoa I had little idea that my future would come to be so intertwined with Motus.

We next saw Motus in New York at the Under The Radar festival at the Public Theater in 2011. We were invited to one of Motus' *Antigone* trilogy, (*Antigone*) *Contest #2 – Too Late*. We sat with the audience on one of the Public's stages. The house seats were empty. At one point they were the backdrop as Creon, played by Vladimir Aleksic, tumbled helplessly down them toward the stage. *Antigone* was played by the feral Silvia Calderoni, barking like a dog, assaulting Creon, her nemesis. At one point she overturned a table, almost the only prop on the bare stage. Judith and I were shocked or perhaps surprised to see pinned to the underside of the table the Living Theatre poster of Judith screaming as *Antigone*, which appeared all over Italy between 1979 and 1981 when the Living Theatre revived its version of *Antigone*.

The production had made a great impression on Nicolò and Casagrande. In fact, in those years they had taken a workshop with Living Theatre members Stephan Schulberg and Maria Nora. We met the Motus company after the show and they came to our Clinton St. Theater to see Judith's production of *Korach*. How impressed we were with Silvia Calderoni, a veritable charismatic actor force. Calderoni had come to Motus in 2005 as a dancer. Nicolò and Casagrande discovered she had a voice. She has anchored all the Motus shows ever since.

Nowadays, the Motus shows are very stripped down, with a dearth of large constructed sets. They are the environment they find, with sophisticated lighting, video projections, sound, and computer effects. Technicians Andrea Comandini and Alessio Spirli, among others, create a web of atmosphere, assisted also by Nicolò and Casagrande at the tech booth/tables.

Founded in 1991, Motus has produced over fifty productions. They are backed by a production staff based in Santarcangelo di Romagna (Rimini). Elisa Bartolucci, Valentina Zangari, Lisa Gilardino, and until recently, the late Sandra Angelini, do all the administrative work, production organization, promotion, tour planning, and publication work, freeing Nicolò, Casagrande, and Calderoni to concentrate on the performance. Workshops are organized, residencies undertaken. Books and DVD's are produced. Motus is a veritable factory of production in Emilia-Romagna on the Adriatic Coast. Santarcangelo is also home to a yearly theatre festival which Motus directed in 2010.

The material of Motus may refer to Greek classics, or Genet, or Pasolini, or Shakespeare, but the meat of their work is the here and now: the riots in Greece, the migrants and their escape from wars, the kids in the urban jungles, the graffiti, the hip hop music, all the music, the motorcycle helmets, the hoodies, the skate boards, the fires set alight in protest, the dreams of the hippies, the transgendered sexual liberations, the domination of the global economic and military forces. Motus now travels everywhere, from Italy and Western Europe, to the US and Brazil, to Australia and Taiwan. And to Russia. Recently a performance of *MDLSX*, their most recent creation, was performed for one night only in Moscow. As preplanned by the producer, the company performed for an invited audience of 500 and left the country the next day. *MDLSX* would never have passed the censors.



Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò's *MDLSX*. Photo: Simone Stanislai.

In 2011, Judith Malina and I next encountered Motus when Brad Burgess, Judith's assistant received a suggestion from Motus via email. Would we be interested in collaborating on a theatrical interview between Judith and Silvia as a production? Brad asked me what I thought. I said, "Oh, yes!" Judith leapt at the idea of working one on one with the indomitable Calderoni. So it came to pass that that in June, Nicolò, Casagrande, and Silvia came to workshop with Judith and me for a week. Judith and Silvia went over Judith's life, her anarchism, her pacifism, her work on Brecht and Artaud, her *Antigone* and Silvia's, study of productions such as *The Brig*, *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*, *Paradise Now*, audience participation, and more. Daniela and Enrico took constant notes and filmed everything. The resulting production realized at Santarcangelo in July 2011 incorporated all these strands, as Judith sat at a table and Silvia acted out with fierce energy the elements. Brad and I had small supporting duties, especially as witnesses to this dialogue between two actresses across different generations. At the end, the only time Judith stood up, she and Silvia exhorted the audience in a collective scream to "break down the walls." The walls did not fall, so they implored the audience with good humor, and humor was always present, in spite of the Artaudian pain, to do it again! Big scream. Black out. The release of applause. And then we asked the audience to descend to the stage and with a hundred magic markers to leave messages about the play, about the issues, on the cardboard floor of the set, on which Silvia had already made marks. In every place the audience enthusiastically came on stage in a moment of creation, leaving an instant diary of graffiti of resistance and joy. *The Plot Is The Revolution*, as it was called, taking a line from *Paradise Now*, toured Italy several times and also went to Paris, Geneva, and New York. Belying a bit Motus'

effort to not have big sets, we did move around a lot of cardboard flooring. Sometimes the great message board would be moved outside the theatre to become a magic carpet of art in the city for a few hours.

In 2012 Motus brought *Alexis. A Greek Tragedy* to New York. Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* called it “raw and resonant” (5 January 2012). In fact, Brantley has written nothing but raves of the four Motus shows he’s reviewed. In reviewing *Nella Tempesta* in 2014, he wrote that “Motus...is the most truly revolutionary troupe in town” (12 December 2014). Friends of Motus were elated, but pleasantly surprised that Brantley had been so swept away by the group’s alchemy. *Alexis* focuses on the tragedy of the death of a young fifteen year-old boy killed by police in a demonstration in Athens. His death then sparked more protests. Motus explores in a kind of successor to their *Antigone* Trilogy the dilemma of the artist in confrontation with the reality of politics and struggle. Motus takes us on a revealing voyage through the protests with film shot by the group. Nicolò, Casagrande, and Calderoni are always filming everywhere. They had in depth residencies in Greece. Greek actress, Alexia Sarantopoulou, guides Silvia and the audience through the events. Silvia manipulates a video projector all around the performance space, placing the audience in the demonstrations and also on the lonely goat trails so emblematic of Greece and its myths. The action takes place on a blood red rubber floor. Lights glow in the audience’s eyes, at times all in red. Sometimes the projections are live shots of the actors and of the audience. There are dialogues between the characters in *Antigone*; what does the death of Polynices mean? To us? Now? And never ones to miss a coup de theatre, Motus sets a table on fire, a three or four foot burning pyre. A nightmare for firemen on duty in any theatre. But done with permission. The fire slowly burns itself out—fire powder on a wide secure metal surface. At the end of the play Silvia turns the camera on the projector console on the audience itself, as she jumps into the picture. The answer, in other words, is in you, in all of us.

Nella Tempesta, which came to New York in 2014, is based on *The Tempest*. Silvia is Ariel. She, Caliban, and the other actors navigate a world of migrants across a sea of blankets. The audience is asked ahead of time to bring a donation of a blanket. The blankets, after serving as the set, are given to relief agencies. We learn of one actor’s disjointed youth in Albania. We see scenes of migrants protesting in Italy. We see Silvia with a large tree branch in the New York subway. Hurricane Sandy and its displacements are mentioned. Motus happened to be in New York during Sandy. Prospero is a machine, an incredibly versatile light projector down stage right. Used in stadium shows, I imagine, this projector can turn in any direction, project many patterns and colors. It is operated by a technician at the tech table. It seems to have a mind of its own. Near the end of the play Ariel/Silvia names it for what it is, the numbers on its side, and flips the switch. Prospero is overthrown. Ariel and Caliban are free and so are we, to make the change.

I add that in almost all the plays there are supertitles. They form part of the scenery, the urban protest jungle. Motus even uses the English supertitles in Italy. The world is global. And often there is loud glorious music, for example from the Doors in *Nella Tempesta* (“Riders on the Storm”), or Gil Scott-Heron in *The Plot Is The Revolution* (“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”).

Which brings us to *MDLSX*, Motus’ most recent creation. It is a one woman show with Calderoni. Although, again the trio of technicians are always active. One for supertitles (usually Nicolò), one for sound effects (Casagrande), controlling volume and special distortions, and one for audio visual (Spirli). Lights are divided between Spirli and Nicolò. In all the performances I have seen I have never once seen a lighting mistake, sound glitch, or a film misfire. Such is the supreme importance of a smooth ride with

Motus. The trance holds.

MDLSX has three levels of narration. There is the part based on elements from Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex*. There is the part based on Silvia Calderoni's own life growing up and becoming a radical theatre performer. And there is the part based on Calderoni's second career as a DJ.

The elements from Eugenides' novel are the parameters of the story of the protagonist, Calliope/Cal. A girl grows up as a tomboy. Eventually her parents take her to a specialist for a medical exam. After spying into the folder in the doctor's office on her condition, she goes to the library to look up the terms and discovers she is a hermaphrodite, a eunuch, a monster. She runs away, dresses as a boy, hitchhikes across the country, gets into trouble, works in a sex show, ends up arrested, and calls home. She is received back into the family. Her mother says, "I liked you better the way you were." She replies, "But this is who I always was." Left out of *MDLSX* are the brilliant set pieces of the novel about the Symrna Massacre, the 1967 Detroit riots, and the Greek immigrant drama. Motus was very nervous when Eugenides came in from New Jersey to see the play. He liked it very much, to their great relief.



Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò's *MDLSX*. Photo: Alessandro Sala-Cesura.

The second level of the play is Silvia's growing up as a tomboy and evolving into a dynamic lesbian performance artist. This part is greatly aided by the fact that Calderoni's mother took many home movies during her childhood and teen years. In fact, Nicolò and Casagrande knew from the beginning that they had the beginning and the end of the play with two of these films. On the circular screen upstage left where all the audiovisual items appear we see before the action starts a film of Silvia in a karaoke show as a twelve year old. She sings Gianni Morandi's "C'era Un Ragazzo Che Come Me" (There Was a Boy Like Me). Joan Baez made a cover of this song which tells of listening to the Beatles and the Rolling

Stones. Twelve year old Silvia sings with all the confidence of a natural born star. The final film shows an even younger Silvia with a shaved head, dancing delightfully with her dad to a REM song. In other words, Silvia's parents embraced her and her uniqueness – the message of *MDLSX*: embrace your sexual uniqueness and truth.

Our third level in *MDLSX* is Silvia's passion as a DJ. She often DJ's when not performing in Motus plays. *MDLSX* has a framework of twenty-one tracks of contemporary music. On the upper right rear wall, along with the ubiquitous supertitles (which are projected, even in Italy in English, as a scenographic feature) also appear the number of each track with the song title and the artist. Full disclosure, as it were. The tracks are not always played to their full length. Calderoni starts and stops them with a computer on the wide prop table which covers the rear of the stage, sometimes with an assist from the tech crew.

Now I will describe the play's action. The reader might want to use YouTube to get the feel of each music track, or not.

The set with its circular screen upstage left and the supertitles and the musical track titles upstage left is completed with a stage-wide prop table for wigs, costumes, two lap tops, an iPhone on a small stand, and small props such as flash light items. Calderoni can stand facing upstage at the prop table and be filmed by the iPhone which then projects the recording of her facing the audience on the circular screen. Wifi in the house.

After the karaoke film of "C'era Un Ragazzo Che Come Me", we get track number one: "Despair" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. The scene of the adolescent becoming aware of hormonal changes transforms into the wild DJ with hairspray. Silvia dances with the iPhone tripod. Her pants come off as she jumps repeatedly. Liberation. Don't despair!

Track two: "Step," by Vampire Weekend. This happy lesson song—"I can't do it alone", "What you on about?", "I feel it in my bones"—supports Silvia's monologue about words being insufficient, the mirror of old age, the girl who's always been taken for a boy, beauty always being a little monstrous, many parts, many halves, the beats, yes—I'm good here.

Track #3: "Every Day," by Buddy Holly. Back to the past. The home movies return. There's a medical subject and a doctor. There's bullshit. There's the fifteen-year-old Silvia. She just wants to play the Smiths. No priests! Apollo and Dionysus.

Track #4: "One Hit," by The Knife. This song feels like relentless pain. Here we get naked exhibitionism, no breasts, no menstruation. This teen girl is beset with troubles.

Track #5: "River," by Ibeyi. This trance soul song sung by two women exhorts, "Come to the river, wash my soul, let the river take them, drown them." Silvia is beset by the bra, the bra which holds almost nothing, by the make of Miss Olga. There are more home movies of the thirteen year old. Hierarchies, locker rooms, classmates. Silvia was different.

Track #6: "In The Room Where You Sleep," by Dead Man's Bones. A spooky menacing song: "You better hide/You better run/I saw something". Silvia dances now with a bra stuffed with clothes and a wig.

There's a growth explosion. Pubic hair which can finally be combed. We devolve into a psychedelic dance with a tiny lamp which projects all over the room, but still she's hiding.

Track #7: "Coin Operated Boy," by The Dresden Dolls. "Automatic joy/Who could ask for more?/And I'll never be alone/Can you extract me from my plastic fantasy?/I want a.../I want a...". The mechanical marching song propels Silvia into a burlesque with more wigs, more home movies. It climaxes when downstage she reads a contract of sexual freedom. Freedom for the asshole. Freedom for the worker of the ass. I can. I can. A litany of freedom.

Track #8: "This Is Not A Song," by Rodriguez creates the atmosphere for social problems, conflicts in our Silvia/Calliope/Cal story: "You're not like all the rest/Establishment blues/ The system's gonna fall." The protagonist is undergoing transformation, in her family and with her brother who is doing a lot of LSD. There's a father/daughter/son talk. The father runs restaurants; how's the relationship between boss and workers? Are they plantations? On LSD the son sees a chicken fly off the table. Tourism is just another form of colonialism. My brother was against our living room. Elements of the Eugenides novel float in, the teen rebellion.

Track #9: "Witches! Witches! Rest Now In Fire," by Get Well Soon. "They want to burn in hell, because of your magic spell." This is a lush ballad, a disco dream. Silvia dissolves into the large triangle of silver material which has been the floor of the performance space. As she slowly pulls the material around in an orgy of abandon, the whole room becomes a disco ball of colored light.



Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò's *MDLSX*. Photo: Motus.

Track #10: “Honey Bunny,” by Vincent Gallo. Gallo’s reflection; the questioning ballad is a sound track for an abrupt change. From ecstasy to reflection. On the circular screen begins a beautiful sequence of flowers budding in slow motion. Some of the meditations from Silvia: We? What we? Impossible me. Impossible we. What is us, women, lesbian, trans, workers, neither man nor woman. White, Black. Dog, plant. All witches, Leninists, disarm the state. “That Obscure Object of Desire” by Bunuel: the man with the sack. What’s that obscure object between my legs? My private springtime. No reason to ask questions.

We then hear an interview of Paul B. Preciado by Alejandro Jodorowsky. Define queer philosophy. Fag philosophy. Take the insult and send it back. Plastic spaces. Gender. Hetero/homo control.

Then Calliope/Cal says she was born twice: in 1960 as a girl, in 1974 as a boy. Like Tiresias, first as one thing, than as another.

Track #12: “Nancy Boy,” by Placebo. (Track #11 was a loop of “Honey Bunny” in the previous scene). During this explosive raucous punk rock anthem, Silvia runs to the front of the stage and sets up a small laser light. She unrolls a long cord of plastic tubing straight upstage. She sprays it with phosphorescence. She lies almost naked under it. At the climaxes of Placebo’s song she lifts her pelvis and the cord flashes with the laser light. A corny, kitschy, delightful celebration of sex and orgasm. Placebo’s words: “It all breaks down at the role reversal/ Got the muse in my head/ She’s universal—She’s coming over me.”

Track #13: “Formidable,” by Stromae. Afro-Belgian artist Stromae’s lament—“You were wonderful. I was so pathetic”—is the background for the scene of the medical exam Calliope/Cal must undergo. There is a close up of Silvia’s naked vagina on the iPhone projection on the circular screen. Provocative, it does not seem shocking, but truthful. Silva puts on boxers. The medical exam, science, gender assignment: either she’s a boy or a girl. She searches into the camera lens. She puts on an ear ring. She looks at her file while the doctor and her parents are out of sight.

Track #14: “Galapagos,” by Smashing Pumpkins. The song is an anthem, meditative, enveloping, a lullaby. Some of the lyrics: “Ain’t it funny how we pretend we’re still a child—and rescue me from me and all that I believe—I won’t deny the pain, I won’t deny the change—Too late to look back now; I am changing.” Calliope discovers her file. She is faced center stage on top of a suitcase with the definitions in the library. Will it be surgery? Sexual pleasure is relative to having a social position, which is more important. Sexual abnormalities, monster, eunuch, hermaphrodite, shame; with an old style microphone Silvia emotes a climax of definitions, condemnations. Pause. Many parts, many halves. There is the decision to abandon, to run away to transvestivities.

Track #15: “Up Past The Nursury,” by Suuns from Canada. This throbbing song asks “Can’t you, can’t you, can’t you get it in, take it in; you can change the way it is.” Which is exactly what our protagonist does. Macho, shit, haircut, learn to be a boy; how to defect to the other side. Short hair. In the round screen we see a Silvia looking strangely like a young Justin Bieber, with very blond hair.

Track #16: “Road To Nowhere,” by Talking Heads. This famous song from 1985—“The road to paradise, here we go”—finds Silvia/Cal hitch-hiking on the suitcase down front with a false thumb. Normality isn’t

normal.



Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò's *MDLSX*. Photo: Motus.

Track #17: “Open Up Your Eyes,” by Unkle, featuring Abel Ferrara. “Why are you crying, open up your eyes.” A reality ballad. Cal is on the road. He must conform, no scandal. He meets a trucker of course, who on the ride muses on the celestial, the Indians.

Track #18: “Kelly Watch The Stars,” by Air. A driving techno melody, almost completely wordless, except for that title, barely discernible. Silvia/Cal manipulates the triangular silvery floor covering. There is wonder, beauty on the road, but also dirt, many cars, smelly bathrooms. The men stink like horses. There’s a motel. There’s the cowboy—Silvia—jumping on the mattress in the film on the screen.

Track #19: “Lola,” by Krisma. This Italian group recorded in 1977 this seductive ballad of a temptress. Here Cal, in another transformation, is picked up by an older man: “Are you a trans? I’m in the business. I can help you out. What are you?”

Track #20: “Human Fly,” by The Cramps. A 1977 (also) psychedelic rant. Here Silvia dons a moustache and a beard. She holds up another proclamation and rants Preciado’s text: We are faggots, migrants, the suffering, the handicapped, the old, an army of lovers, the furious diaspora. Don’t laugh! We are like this!

There is a lighting change. And then after the rant, Silvia begins to describe a myth of ancient Greece: Salmacis, the Hermaphrodite myth, half man, half woman. Cal gets a job, in desperation, from the man who offered to help. An Octopussy, underwater for club clients in a peep show. Silvia/Cal methodically puts on a large mermaid costume. Silvia is in the large tail from waist down, lying center stage, smiling, enjoying us enjoying looking at her. The big smile.

Track #21: “A Real Hero”, Electric Youth. Once again we enter into the total disco world with this seductive erotic ballad—“A real human being, and a real hero.” Kitsch beauty, let go. Hearing this song for the first time, I was very taken. Later, unfortunately, I saw it sold to Chrysler to use in a car ad. In any case, Cal is our mermaid in a sex show, in order to survive on the road. Dreaming of all the dreams, of metamorphosis. On the screen, we see Silvia as Kaspar Hauser from a film she made recently with Vincent Gallo. Cal speaks of the co-workers, Carmen and Zora. Sexually diverse fellow workers, intersexual, open-ended itinerary. Jesus was wandering around too. Oblivion makes the client less visible. I opened my eyes underwater. Looking at the audience in triumph.

But Cal is arrested. You have one call home. Luckily, her LSD brother answers. And those final words on being welcomed home, by her father: “It would’ve been easier if you’d stayed the way you were.” And the reply, “I was always this way.”

Track #22: “Imitation of Life,” by REM. From 2001: “Come on, come on; No one can see you try. I’m not afraid. No one can see me cry.” On the screen we see sixteen-year-old Silvia dancing with her father in the kitchen. Exhausted in each other’s arms, they collapse. Her father coughs. Silvia is out of sight and the stage goes dark, until the applause. When I saw the show several times at LaMaMa in 2016, theatre-goers leapt to their feet, some in tears. All of Silvia’s recitation was in Italian, but in the flurry of supertitles, wigs, costumes, lights, impersonations, declarations, DJ music world, Italian seemed the least of it, but then it was also the beautiful part of this chameleon performer’s gift to you. The dancer who speaks, and how. Ben Brantley in a review termed her a “grass snake” in her amazing transformations (10 January 2016). Now Motus tours Italy and the world. And secretly to Moscow. Lean and mean.

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