

Vecchio Fango

An Introduction to the “Theater of the Senses”

Gabriele Poole

Introduction

The theater of the senses is a genre originally developed by the Colombian theater director and anthropologist Enrique Vargas. After studying and working in Colombia, Vargas moved to the United States, where in 1966 he began collaborating with the La Mama theater and founded the street theater company Gut Theater, winning the first prize at the Theater Festival of the 1967 international Expo in Canada (see Kent 1967). After moving to Europe for a few years, he returned to Colombia, working for many years with the Universidad Nacional de Colombia as an anthropologist, studying the rituals and games of Amazon Indians. His first play in the style of the theater of the senses was *El Hilo de Arianna*, which he presented at the national theater festival in Bogotá in 1992 with the newly founded company Teatro de Los Sentidos, winning the first prize. The success led to numerous invitations to festivals in Europe and, in 1994, Vargas and his company brought the play to Spain, Great Britain and France. The company never returned to Colombia, settling near Madrid first and later in Barcelona, where in 2008 the town gave it company the use of the historical building of the “Polverin”, the ancient gunpowder factory of the castle, which functions as a theater and theater school. Through the years, Vargas has staged his plays throughout the world, receiving several awards (see “Teatro de Los Sentidos” n.d.). Vargas’s plays are often accompanied by workshops leading to the involvement

of local actors in the plays themselves. Over the years, this has led to the development of a number of companies working in this genre, which are in contact and often collaborate with the Teatro de los Sentidos - Barcelona. The best known is Il Funaro, a cultural association, theater company and school based in Pistoia, which functions, among other things, as the Italian section of the Teatro de los Sentidos, performing Vargas’s plays and where Vargas himself holds regular seminars and practical workshops. Another spin-off of the Teatro de los Sentidos is the company “TdS Rosa Pristina”, founded in 2009 in Naples by a group of actors, all of who had worked in plays and workshops organized by Vargas in Italy and in Spain. The company has produced a number of plays, winning the Fringe2Fringe Napoli Festival award in 2012 and presenting plays in three later editions of the Napoli Teatro Festival (see “Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina” n.d.). At the 2016 edition of the festival, the company staged the play *Vecchio Fango*, discussed in the present article. There are of course many artists working with various forms of what we can loosely term sensorial theater or sensorial performing art that have no direct relation with Vargas and the work of the Teatro de Los Sentidos. Working with blind artists, ex-journalist Andreas Heinecke has elaborated *Dialog in the Dark* a form of sensorial performance in which visitors explore rooms in complete darkness. Over the years he has won several awards, and established both permanent and temporary *Dialog in the Dark* venues throughout the world (see Heinecke 2009). In Norway, in 2009, the Blind Theater Project set up a sensorial performance entitled *Blind Theatre* in which participants were first blindfolded and then dressed in an electronic, computer-controlled bodysuit thanks to which they experienced, through touch and hearing, five different stories, each one associated with a different woman character (see “The Blind Theater” 2010). A highly successful and innovative Italian theater company, some of whose plays bear many resemblances to that of the Teatro de los Sentidos, is the Teatro del Lemming, directed by Massimo Munaro (see note 1 and 11).

On a personal note

Since 2010, I had become interested in the theater of the senses as a genre and had begun reading the little that was published on it. Like many academics interested in theater, I had a repressed yearning to go from critic to artist, even if in the humblest of terms, and had had a few amateur experiences as actor and director. Therefore, besides attending various performances, I was very happy to participate in a number of workshops organized by the Teatro de los Sentidos, in Barcelona, and by the TdS - Rosa Pristina, where my sister Susanna works as director and actress. In 2016, Rosa Pristina's play *Vecchio Fango* was selected for the 2016 Napoli Teatro Festival. I had given some minor contribution to the elaboration of the play in the final months of its development and was asked to participate also as an actor. It ran from June 28 to July 14, and happily for us was favorably received by the critics. More important, after the first few days we played to a full house almost every night, totaling 500 spectators out of 630 available seats (see Baffi 2016; Bonadies 2016; Di Tommaso 2016; Santini 2016). When I decided to write an article on the theater of the senses and began researching the topic, I realized that there was no published script of a play by Vargas,¹ so that it was difficult for someone who had not seen a play to get a detailed idea of what such a play could be like and follow a critical discussion. There were many good reviews, but of course the details they offered were limited both for reasons of space and because the purpose of a review is to help readers decide if they want to see the play, not to spoil the fun by detailing in advance everything that happens. There was also a highly suggestive video of the play *Oraculos* (Oracoli, 2013), which, though very useful to get a sense of some aspects of Vargas's theater, was not intended to document the play in detail, besides being, for obvious reasons, mostly limited to the scenes in the play in which the spectators could actually see what was happening. For this reason, I decided to include in the present article a detailed script of *Vecchio Fango* that could serve as a starting point for an introduction to the poetics of sensorial theater. While I had some obvious qualms about writing on a play I had been directly involved in and, as if that was not enough, directed by my sister, it was the only play of which I could easily be granted permission to print the script. Also, having worked with the company, it was easy to contact the members and gain their help in reconstructing the scenes in detail as well as accessing preparatory material. So here it is. The script of the play is followed by a close reading of the play itself and a more general discussion of the formal characteristics of the theater of the senses.



Vecchio Fango – The script of the play

The play takes place outside and inside the medieval church of Donna Regina in Naples.²

The Starter

The play begins after dark. The Traveler, a woman, arrives at a designated hour.³ It is dark. She is standing with other people at the beginning of the alley that goes alongside the wall of the church. Half-way along the alley a black sheet is hung, blocking the sight. Every four minutes, the “starter”, accompanies one of the spectators towards the sheet, raises it and lets the person in. Her turn has arrived.



Fig. 1 *The Traveler*. Play *Vecchio Fango*. “Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina”, Napoli. 2016. (Photo by R. Esposito).

The Starter takes her arm and they slowly walk towards the sheet. A light projects their shadows in front of them.⁴ When they arrive at the sheet, the starter opens an aperture in the middle and lets her in.

The Gatekeeper

Beyond the sheet, the Traveler sees a man leaning against the wall, dressed somewhat like an Italian nineteenth-century peasant, with

brown trousers, an old-fashioned white linen shirt, and a waistcoat. «Good evening...», he says. «Would you mind waiting here a little? We're running a bit late... only a couple of minutes», he adds speaking in Italian, but with a strong Neapolitan accent.⁵ «Sure», she replies, though she can't help thinking this lack of organization does not bode well. But the evening air wafts pleasantly, and she relaxes, looking at the ancient walls of yellow tuff of the church and the windows opening in the building on the opposite side. About ten meters ahead, she spots an open cupboard with a few lit candles and a table in front of it. She is about to go check it out when the man asks her whether she has seen any other plays in the Festival. They chat. He asks her where she is from, what she does in life, the usual stuff. A bit nosy, but polite and anyways there isn't much to do. She tells him she works as a journalist and is also an occasional actress. He asks her whether it is difficult to play the part of someone else, and she patiently explains something about acting. She asks him if he has seen the play. «Oh no... I don't go in... my job is to wait here».



Fig. 2 *The Gate-Keeper*. Play Vecchio Fango. “Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina”, Napoli. 2016. (Photo by R. Esposito).

After a couple of minutes, the man becomes impatient. He grumbles that no one has shown up and that this is no way to run a show, and offers to let the Traveler in himself. He leads her to the table. On the cupboard, on the top shelf, lit with candles, the Traveler notices three bottles with different shapes and content of different colors: blue, green, red. The man looks pensively at the Traveler and

says: «You can't just go in, you know...». He then asks her if she has trouble keeping her eyes shut. Somewhat perplexed she answers: «Not really...». «Ok, then... could you close your eyes for me and open them only when I tell you?». The Traveler realizes the play has begun, in fact it begun some time ago. She smiles patiently and closes her eyes. There is a pause. She can hear the faint sounds of the city. After a few seconds the voice comes back. But it sounds different, the tone is lower and it has completely lost the Neapolitan accent: «I've only three things left: something strong, something sweet, and something plain; and *you*, what is it *you* want?» She's not sure about the sweet, and she's not ready for hard liquor. «Something plain», she replies. She hears the sound of a glass set on the table and a liquid being poured. «Here you go», the voice says. She gropes blindly for the glass but there is nothing on the table. She smells something. «Is it basil?» she asks. No reply but after a few seconds she feels a hand gently taking hold of her right hand. She is guided further along the alley, they turn left and take a few steps. From behind the voice whispers she can now open her eyes.

The Artisan

She finds herself in the cloister of the church. A few paces in front of her, a young woman is seated at a table, wearing a simple beige linen dress. On the table is a little village made of clay, part of it set on a tray, with small houses enclosed by a wall and an arched entrance.



Fig. 3 *The Artisan*. Play Vecchio Fango. “Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina”, Napoli. 2016. (Photo by R. Esposito).



Fig. 4 *The Artisan*. Play Vecchio Fango. “Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina”, Napoli. 2016. (Photo by R. Esposito).

The Artisan is modeling little clay figures. After a while, the Artisan gestures towards the seat in front of her. When she sits she offers her a piece of clay. “Who are you?” she asks in Italian. The Traveler tells her her name, the woman continues to look at her for a moment then resumes modeling little things without commenting. The Traveler also begins playing with the clay, modeling it into a little woman with a funny hat. When she is done, the Artisan asks her «Where are you?» and gestures to the village. After thinking for a moment, the Traveler places her composition next to the entrance. The Artisan then asks the third question: «Where are you going?». She lifts the tray with the village placing a small metal ball near the entrance. She moves the tray guiding it along the streets. The ball stops next to a little house on the opposite side of the village. After studying the result for a few seconds, the Artisan sets down the tray and slowly covers the village with a black cloth. She gets up and disappears behind the Traveler. A blindfold slowly covers the Traveler’s eyes. A hand takes her hand, she gets up, she is led around a corner and left there alone.

The Old Woman

Standing in the corridor, blindfolded, the Traveler hears the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. Someone pats her on the cheek and an old-woman’s voice murmurs: «You’re here little one», in Neapolitan. The woman takes her by the hand and leads her away. She seems to be stooping and her hand shakes lightly. They stop. The Traveler hears the sound of boiling water and smells something cooking. The woman mutters «one», in Neapolitan. She takes the Traveler’s hand and places something in it. Little leaves. They smell of laurel. «One», she repeats. The Traveler throws the leaves in the cauldron. «Good», says the woman. Then she mut-

ters «two». The Traveler puts two pinches of something that smells like cinnamon in the cauldron. «Three». This time it feels like salt. A long wooden spoon is placed in her hand. She stirs the content in what seems to be a large cauldron but the Old Woman is not happy, she grumbles something, seizes her wrist and shows her how to stir properly. When they’re done, the Old Woman gently touches her on the front, shoulder, and chest, saying «health, fortune, love». She motions her away.

The Tomboy

As the Traveler fumbles in the dark, she hears someone approaching and whispering in Neapolitan in a young woman’s voice: «If we have to do it, we have to do it now!». She is taken under her arm and led in the dark. The body of the woman alongside her feels slender and she seems to be wearing overalls. They stop and the voice whispers (in Neapolitan): «Find it! It’s here...!» She begins exploring what seems like a window ledge of rough stone. «Forward», «left, left», «right», the voice directs her. She finds something. It feels like a rolled-up cigarette. «Who’s gonna light it? You or me?», the voice asks. The Traveler is amused, how is she supposed to light it if she can’t see anything? «You light it». The young woman takes the cigarette from her hand and there is the sound of a lighter. But then she exclaims «The Old Woman!» and hurries her away. They stop at what seems to be a door. The Tomboy says: «What are we gonna do, we gonna go in there or what? ...I... I’m not sure I’m going». The Traveler is thinking she would like to know where she is to go before she decides but the young woman insists, «Who goes first? Me? No, no, you go ...», and then leaves her.

The Sad One

Entering the room the Traveler hears the sound of Neapolitan “neomelodic” music (a modern sentimental genre popular among the working class). Then a click of heels. Something brushes against her: it feels like a silk gown. A hand takes her hand and guides her to a bed where she sits

down. She feels the bed sink as another person sits down at some distance from her. Over the music she begins hearing other sounds and voices. It seems like a party, a recording of a party, but the sounds are confused and distorted and the words “grandfather” and “uncle” are obsessively repeated. She feels the person getting closer and closer, an arm against her arm and then a head resting on her shoulder. The body against her feels bulky and strong, and there is a hint of a beard on the cheek: a man in woman’s clothes.⁶ She is a bit uneasy, but the man seems to be looking only for comfort.⁷ With his head on her shoulder he begins singing in a high-pitched, hesitant voice, *Maruzzella*, a melancholic Neapolitan song about lost love. There are long pauses between one line and the other, as if he is thinking about something else, reminiscing. After a minute he stops singing. She feels him getting up, she is taken by the hand and left in front of what feels like a wardrobe full of women’s clothes.

The Fallen Woman

The Traveler touches the clothes which smell heavily of a flowery perfume. Something brushes against the back of her hand. She touches it: it’s a scarf. But the scarf seems to have a will of its own: it continues to move, teasing her. Then it wraps itself around her wrist and begins gently pulling her forward, into the wardrobe, through the clothes, and out on the other side. It continues pulling, there is a second forest of clothes, with a different perfume, and she emerges again on the other side. The scarf unwraps and she feels a small hand touching her hand for a moment. A slight rattle of pearls and a necklace is placed around her neck. The necklace pulls her forward a bit and she realizes the other end must be still around the neck of the person in front of her. A voice of a young woman begins whispering a story in Neapolitan, in a confidential, allusive tone as the pearls continue to rattle now and then in the background: «The first one I met said to me: ‘come here baby, let me kiss you.’ The second one said: ‘If you come with me I’ll leave my wife.’ The third was the most handsome. The fourth... ha... . The fifth..., the sixth.... The seventh and the eighth were two brothers. The ninth... the tenth...». As she tells the story, the Traveler feels the woman getting closer and closer, pressing her body against her, a body that feels plump and feminine.⁸ At the end of the story, the voice asks the Traveler: «And you, what is it you want ... a kiss?»⁹ «Why not?» thinks the Traveler after hesitating a second: «Yes». She feels the small woman rising on tiptoe and kissing her tenderly behind the ear. She is then taken her under her arm and walked through a door. Her hand is placed over a thick rope and the voice tells her in Neapolitan: «Go... this is yours... don’t lose it».

The Rope

Although blindfolded, the Traveler can feel from the sounds and the draft that she is in a much larger space, perhaps the nave of the church. She begins to follow the rope which hangs horizontally from posters and changes direction now and then. She hears sounds: music, voices, a train arriving and leaving. The sounds seem to come from different directions and to change as she moves along. At one point her hand hits something that tinkles. She feels it, it’s a little bell. The rope ends. She stops. After a while she feels a hand taking hold of her hand. She is led away through a door.

The Photographer

«There is chair», a man’s voice mutters, in a broken Italian with a Slavic accent. She gropes blindly, finds the chair and sits. A constant buzzing sound is heard. The voice continues, in vaguely amused tone, touching the blindfold: «No need this..., take off, take off». The Traveler takes it off, happy to be finally able to see. But the room is completely dark. «Great», she thinks. «You came here to see yourself?», the voice asks. After a few seconds a little light bulb turns on and she sees the silhouette of the Photographer standing in front of it. He moves to a table and turns on another bulb, a red one, gradually increasing the light. He is a slender man, with brown beard and curly hair, wearing black pants and shirt, a white waistcoat and dark sunglasses.



Fig. 5 *The Photographer*. Play Vecchio Fango. “Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina”, Napoli. 2016. (Foto di G. Poole).

Black and white photos and films, which the Photographer arranges, are hung up to dry. He moves about staring into the void, not looking at what his hands are doing, groping like a blind man. On the table there is something covered by a cloth. He brings it over to the Traveler and very slowly pulls the cloth away revealing a small metal box with glass sides, inside which a white rectangle of photographic paper can be seen. «Stay still», he says and presses something. The box goes «click». He takes the exposed paper and places it into a bowl moving it about with a pair of pincers. After a few seconds an image begins to appear. He takes it out with the pincers and places it into another bowl, then he dries it and hands it over to the Traveler, so that she can see it. It is a black and white photo of a person in a traditional country setting. When the Traveler Finished looking at it, the Photographer places the photo inside an envelope attached to a ribbon, and hangs the ribbon around the neck of the Traveler. «Can go now», he says. The Traveler gets up and turns towards the door. «Wait!» he says. He finds his way to her, gropes for the blindfold: «Put on... better put on», he says. Then he guides her towards the door.

The Doctor

«Finally!» a man's voice exclaims. The man takes her by the arm and lead her forward. He seems to be rather tall. As they slowly walk, she hears the tic-tac of a watch at a very slow rhythm. She bumps into something. She touches it, it feels like a stretcher. She sits on it. The man behind her places what feels like a stetoscope on her back. He must be a doctor of sorts. As he examines her, metallic noises are heard, over the ticking of the watch. «What a racket!», the man exclaims, sounding almost annoyed. It's like the noises were coming from inside her, and she laughs. The hands guide her, making her lie down on the stretcher, and the man begins examining her head. The sounds of voices is heard. They are a mostly indistinct but she grasps bits she thinks she heard during her journey: «something plain...», «fourth...», «if we gotta

do it we gotta do it now...», «fifth...».

«God, they like to talk!» the Doctor exclaims. The stretcher begins to move, the tic-tac continues but seems to be slowing down, the stretcher continues to move, it seems to be going on. The tic-tac is going slower and slower, and so is the stretcher. The watch stops. The stretcher stops. She is alone in the dark. She wonders if she's supposed to be dead and the play is over. But it's late in the evening, she is tired and it's nice to be able to rest in the dark for a while knowing that she will be taken care of.

The Spirit

After some time, she feels two soft hands lightly touching her hands. The hands grab her more firmly, then slowly help her up. She hears the sound of water pouring and then feels water sprinkled over her hands. From where she is standing she can feel a current of fresh air wafting over her face. The hands return and guide her through a door. She seems to be emerging in a garden of sorts: she feels leaves brushing against her as she walks, guided by a gentle pressure on her arm. A woman's voice next to her begins to sing a melancholic melody, in a language that does not sound foreign to her Italian ear yet which she cannot pin down: «*damunt de tu, nomès de floren...*».

She touches the leaves. Smell of tangerines, smell of laurel. The song stops. They stop. From behind her, the blindfold is undone. She is standing in front of an arch through which she can see another small garden lit by candles in the night, surrounded by high walls with leaves strewn along the path. From behind her the woman appears, dressed in a long beige gown, her face covered by a veil. She stands by the arch and looks at her. Slowly, she lifts the veil to show a smiling face. Then she lowers it again and moves aside and the Traveler walks through the arch.

The Vestal

The Traveler goes down a few steps into the garden. She hears birds chirping. She turns to look back but the woman is gone. She is alone. In front and to the right the way is blocked by high walls but on the left the wall curves, perhaps following the contour of the church's apse. She slowly walks in that direction.

Around the bend, she sees something that looks like a wooden altar with candles set up against the curving wall of the church on the left. In front of the altar a woman is standing, her head covered by a shawl. She seems to be arranging the altar: lighting candles, moving little objects around. She sees her and comes towards her smiling, embracing her af-



Fig. 6 *The Spirit*. Play Vecchio Fango. "Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina", Napoli. 2016. (Foto di G. Poole).



Fig. 7 *The Vestal*. Play Vecchio Fango. “Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina”, Napoli. 2016. (Photo by R. Esposito).

fectionately, as if she had been waiting for her. She is taken to the altar. There are about ten niches or so, containing photos, candles, small plates. The woman resumes her work, placing little nuts on the plates, lighting the candles that have gone out. She offers her a dish with nuts and they work together, in silence. After a while the woman gets up, whispering that she will come back for her in a minute and leaves. The Traveler continues to play with the altar, placing nuts inside the tiny dishes in the niches. She dares light a candle that has gone out. Inside the niches she sees tiny objects: bottles in one, a necklace in another, a tiny wooden spoon, a camera. In one of the niches there is a little mirror, in which she sees her own reflection. After a while she realizes the woman is standing again next to her. She gets up and they proceed along the curving wall.

The Decompression Room

Around the corner, there are two benches and a little table with pencils and sheets of paper. The garden is sealed by a high fence covered with a green canvas. The woman tells her she can stay as long as she wants, and if she feels like it, she can write or draw something about her experience. She shows her a gate and tells her that when she is done she can exit from there. The Traveler writes something on a sheet of paper about what she felt, what the journey meant to her. After a while another Traveler arrives, a man, accompanied by the woman. They wave, but are not sure they should talk so they don't. After a few minutes, she gets up and goes through the gate, and finds herself once again at the beginning of the alley where her friends are waiting for her.



Fig. 8 *The Decompression Room*. Play *Vecchio Fango*. "Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina", Napoli. 2016. (Photo by R. Esposito).

Vecchio Fango - A close reading¹⁰

Theme 1: Small town

Several themes interweave in the play, some of them forming the basis for loose plot lines. One general theme is the idea of the labyrinth as a gallery of borderline characters who inhabit a small town in Southern Italy. In the notes to the play, the director explains she was striving for «... an image of what life is like in a very small town.... The inhabitants know everything about everyone and some... become "characters", leaving a trace in our imagination» (*"Il Vecchio Fango"* 2016, *trans. mine*). The image of the village appears explicitly in the scene of the Artisan, in which the Traveler sees the tray with the little houses and the arched entrance in which she must find her place. Some characters, like the Artisan, the Spirit and the Vestal, are more symbolical, otherworldly figures, as is the Gatekeeper, after the Traveler has closed his eyes. Chronologically they are positioned at the beginning or end of the journey and physically they are located in open spaces (the alley, the courtyard, the garden), in which the Traveler can see, different from the dark enclosed spaces of the village proper. The Artisan and the Vestal in particular have a metatextual function, offering verbal and non-verbal clues on the journey the Traveler is about to take and has taken. They are also distinguished from other characters by the fact they speak Italian rather than Neapolitan (the Spirit does not speak at all). Inside the building, instead, where the Traveler is blindfolded, the first four characters she meets are all more locally connoted by the use of Neapolitan dialect, and by the fact that they are to some extent typical figures in Neapolitan popular culture: the old-woman cooking her mysterious broth; the bored adolescent looking for excitement; the transvestite (transvestites, known as "femminielli", are highly visible figures in Neapolitan popular culture, though they tend to be more of a drag queen than the one in *Vecchio Fango*), the fallen woman. The Doctor, who also speaks a few words in Neapolitan, is of course another typical small town figure, while the Photographer, with his ungrammatical Italian and marked Slavic accent, could be a first-generation immigrant, a common recent addition. On the other hand, both the Photographer and the Doctor have also a less picturesque and more mystical side, performing symbolically charged and metatextually significant functions, like the ones of the Artisan, the Spirit or the Vestal, as we shall see in the following paragraphs.

Theme 2: A life

A second theme, which also gives rise to a loose subplot, is that of the journey in the labyrinth as a chronological journey through the life of the Traveler herself, from childhood to old age, through a series of defining experiences. Like the theme of the village, this theme too is anticipated in the encounter with the Artisan («Where are you going?») and begins in the third scene, where the Traveler meets the Old Woman and takes the role of child or young girl, assisting her in the cooking of the soup. The following three scenes are connected by the idea of transgression and initiation, rituals of passage into adulthood: the Tomboy's opening phrase («If we gotta do it we gotta do it now») may be taken as a blunt sexual overture, but any expectation in this sense is sidestepped as the Traveler is invited to engage in a game. When she finds the rolled-up cigarette, the sentence is clarified as an invitation to another typical adolescent ritual of passage: the forbidden cigarette (a joint?). The pattern repeats itself in the meeting with the Sad One, the initial sexual innuendos are displaced by a depressingly melancholic mood and hints to experiences of childhood abuse, in what is potentially the most disturbing moment in the play.¹¹ Notwithstanding the superficial similarities, the atmosphere of the meeting with the Fallen Woman in the next scene is quite different. It begins with the fairy-tale experience of being magically pulled by the scarf through the wardrobe. The sensual atmosphere created by the interaction with the performed clothes gradually increases as the link with the other presence becomes progressively more intimate: first the scarf, then the shared necklace and finally the physical contact with the curvaceous body of the Fallen Woman. As the contacts grows more intimate a playful note is provided by the litany of husbands, accompanied by the noise of the necklace (an ironic reference to the rosary). The kiss, which may be affectionate or sensual, depending on the situation, seals the encounter. The Rope scene is also tied to the theme of the lifetime, providing the sense of a progression, of a route, of personal destiny, possibly evoking the thread of life that assigned by the Fates. It is also a moment of transition from the more picturesque initiation experiences to a more pensive and mature atmosphere. The meeting with the Photographer conveys, in ironic or even clownesque ways (the funny clothes, the broken Italian), the idea of self-discovery, of a moment of reckoning, as already mentioned. The Doctor scene also represents a moment of recollection in tranquillity: the voices in the Traveler's head echo her past experiences («if we have to do it we have to do it now», etc.), the significant encounters in her life. There are allusions to aging, sickness and perhaps death, but these depressing connotations are offset to some extent by surreal comical elements,



like the clanking noises when he auscults the lungs, and by the peacefulness of the setting. The encounter with the Spirit marks a transition to a different condition, a rebirth, which is followed by a moment of reflection on the past in front of the Altar, a reflection on the life the Traveler has experienced, followed by the return to the outer world. Exiting from the labyrinth, the Traveler finds herself in the same spot she started from, as if awakening from a dream.

Theme 3: The journey into the underworld

Another archetypal theme, to some extent intrinsic to the form of the labyrinth, is that of the journey in the underworld, a theme that also translates into a loose subplot and in some cases overlaps with that of the labyrinth as the life of the Traveler. In the first scene, the Gatekeeper is the figure that mediates the transition from the real world into the underworld. He is part of the world of the Traveler, somebody working for the Festival waiting for all this to be over, but then turns into a Charon figure, the person who is to ferry her to the other side. Before entering, however, the Traveler has to play a game, to undergo a little test, keeping her eyes shut and resisting the temptation to look back. And she must choose her destiny, though what she will get is not necessarily what she expects. The theme is reinforced in the following scene. The clay village functions as a *mise-en-abime* of the play, showing the Traveler the way from where she is to where she must go. It also associates the physical journey to the inner journey of self-discovery («Who are you?» the Artisan asks and the answer is left to the Traveler). The transition to a different world, the world of shadows, is marked by the dark cloth covering the village, paralleled by the blindfold covering her eyes. There follow a series of encounters, after which she arrives at the rope scene. The rope shows her the path, *her* path («This is yours... don't lose it», the Fallen Woman tells her). It is a path through the underworld. Perhaps also a path out of the underworld, Ariadne's thread showing the way out of the labyrinth. «You came here to see yourself?» the Photographer asks the Traveler in the next scene. The journey

means seeing oneself, and the metaphorical import of the idea of *seeing* is stressed by the fact that the person who helps her see is in fact blind and that blindness is a condition the Traveler must accept in order to see.

While the Doctor scene marks the final stage of the descent into the underworld, it is soon followed by a moment of rebirth, symbolized by the water the Spirit sprinkles over the Traveler's hands. The Traveler begins her return to the world as she emerges into the garden. The return is symbolically evoked also by the Spirit raising her veil, a counterpoint to the cloth covering the village in the second scene. The Spirit of course cannot follow the Traveler and the veil redescends but the Traveler is free to proceed on her own through the arch, into the next garden. In front of the altar the Vestal takes care of the memories of past ones. Perhaps the Traveler will recognize in the shrines, next to the photos, the signs of the characters she met in her journey: bottles for the Gatekeeper, the spoon for the Old Woman, the camera for the Photographer, pearls for the Fallen Woman. In one of the shrines, a little mirror. In contemplating her image the Traveler can now finally see herself. She sees she has a place in the altar. Perhaps, she also has a place in the world she has travelled through.

The Theater of the Senses

The structure of *Vecchio Fango* is fairly typical of the theater of the senses and in particular of the form of the 'laberinto', or 'labyrinth', elaborated by Vargas in his first three plays (the other form being the 'obra' or 'work', in which a group of travelers moves together from one scene to the next). As evident from the script, the structure of this type of theater differs from more traditional forms in numerous ways, such as the role of senses other than sight and hearing, the role of the spectators and their relation with the actors. These differences can be schematized as following (table 1).

When asked about how he came up with the theater of the senses, Vargas usually mentions his fascinations with role-play and games (the latter element recurring only in the scene of the Artisan but often prominent in Vargas's plays) or his studies on the relations between myth and rituals among Amazonians (see Pagliaro 2016:

76). He also has a favorite story about how he used to hide under coffee plants whose leaves surrounded him like a little hut and move from one plant to the other in maze-like routes to prevent his older brother from finding him, a memory that resurfaces in his fascination with the labyrinth form.¹²

	TRADITIONAL THEATER	THEATER OF THE SENSES
Spectator to character relation	All spectators experience simultaneously the scenes, with all-to-one and all-to-many relations with the characters in the scenes	A single traveler (or a small group, in the <i>obra</i>) experiences one scene at a time, with a one-to-one relation with the character in the scene (or, less commonly, one-to-many).
Distance from the setting	Spectators are physically distant from the setting	Travelers are close to the setting
Relation between spectators and the story	Spectators are not part of the story. They experience the story, the characters and their interactions from an external perspective.	Travelers are part of the story and directly interact with the characters and the setting. Each spectator functions as the main character in the story serving as the common thread among the various scenes.
Change of setting	Spectators remain in the same place. Physically the setting changes through modifications in scenery, lighting etc., usually from one act to the other.	The traveler physically move along an established route. The setting changes when traveler move from one area to the next one.
Change of scene	The scene, in the technical sense of the term, changes with the entrance / exit of characters or when the setting changes.	The scene changes when the traveler moves from one area to the other. Setting and character usually change together
Senses involved	The play is experienced through senses that work well from a distance: sight, hearing.	Travelers also use senses that work well at close range: smell, taste, and touch.
Role of sight	Spectators use sight throughout the play, with few exceptions.	Sight is often deliberately excluded or limited to focus the traveler's attention on other senses.
Verbal	Verbal communication is prominent;	Verbal communication is not as prominent;

In general, it is difficult to relate the genre of the theater of the senses to other strictly theatrical forms. Some parallels can be drawn between the structure of the labyrinth and the *stationen-drama* or "station drama", elaborated by August Strindberg in the early twentieth-century, in which a central character, what Peter Szondi calls the "epic I" (see Szondi 1956), moves from one place to the other (the word *station* being a reference to the stations of the Via Crucis), encountering a series of characters who in many ways are projections of the character's own consciousness, a journey that is also a reflection on the past and on the self. The genre mixes realistic and surreal elements, the causal relations between the events are tenuous, and the events are connected mostly through thematic associations and contrasts. In many ways the

world of the station drama is that of the dream more than reality (see Törnqvist 1982). Some of these elements recur also in Vargas's plays, with the crucial difference of course that the main character is the spectator himself and that the movement from one place to the other is not solely fictional. On the other hand, verbal communication, which is dominant in Strindberg's station dramas, has a much more limited scope. In line with this, the oneiric, mysterious quality of the experiences is much more marked in the theater of the senses: things, thoughts, emotions are hinted at more than explained, and the characters a very lightly sketched; for the most, they remain mysterious figures who act on the travellers while revealing little of themselves.¹³ In general, it is to performance arts more than traditional theater that one must turn to find any antecedent to Vargas's theater of the senses. Already in 1988, for example, Andreas Heinecke had set up in Frankfurt the performance entitled *Dialog in the Dark*, mentioned in the introduction, in which visitors moved in utter darkness from one room to the other, using senses other than sight to explore the environment. Going further back in time, a seminal development which anticipates some aspects of sensorial theater in general, was the form of the "happening", in which artists interact with the public performing a series of scripted events, while retaining some room for improvisation (see Wardrop-Fruin and Montfort 2003). The form was first codified in the 1950s by Alan Kaprow who himself "constructed" several happenings. In particular, it is possible that his happening *Eat*, performed in New York in 1964, may have had a more direct influence on Vargas. In the performance, set up in the caves of an old brewery in the Bronx, «[...] 'visitors' entered through an old door, and walked down a dark, narrow corridor [...] In a small cave, entered only by climbing a ladder, a performer cut, salted and distributed boiled potatoes. In a log hut, bread and jam were served. Bread was stuffed between the logs. The visitors could eat and drink at random for an hour. There was no dialogue other than that used in the interaction of the visitors with the performers» (Botting 1972:15). Many elements of the the-

ater of the senses are anticipated here: the physical involvement of the visitors, the verbal and non-verbal interaction between visitors and performers, the darkness, the labyrinthine sequence of spaces, the use of senses other than sight and hearing. In 1964, Vargas was still studying in Michigan, but he arrived in New York shortly thereafter, where he got involved in avant-garde theater, and it is possible he may have at least heard about the performance.

Be as it may, a number of excellent works have been produced in this style and, from a formal perspective, the theater of the senses, and sensorial theater in general, is a highly innovative and effective artistic genre, capable of offering powerful, immersive experiences to the public, and also lending itself to a wide range of variations and combinations with other forms of theater and performing arts. As such it is undoubtedly an exciting and promising development in twentyfirst-century art.

Bibliography

- Bunbury, Stephanie, "Echo of the Shadow' Creator Enrique Vargas on Theatre as a Mystical Game", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23/09/ 2016, www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/echo-of-the-shadowlands-creator-enrique-vargas-on-theatre-as-a-mystical-game-20160920-grkto8.html, Web (last accessed 12/03/2017).
- Baffi, Giulio, "Il Vecchio Fango e Il Teatro Dei Sensi Nella Piazzetta Della Chiesa Di Donna Regina». *Repubblica.it*, 11/07/2016, napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/07/11/news/_il_vecchio_fango_e_il_teatro_dei_sensi_nella_piazzetta_della_chiesa_di_donna_regina-143841197, Web (last accessed 02/05/2017).
- Bonadies, Irene, "Il Vecchio Fango, Ovvero Lasciarsi Trasportare Consapevolmente Nel Presente", *Quarta Parete*, 7/07/2016, www.quartaparetepress.it/2016/07/07/il-vecchio-fango-ovvero-lasciarsi-trasportare-consapevolmente-nel-presente, Web, (last accessed 02/03/ 2017).
- Botting, Gary. 1972. "Happenings". *The Theatre of Protest in America*. Edmonton: Harden House.
- Bunbury, Stephanie, "Echo of the Shadow' Creator Enrique Vargas on Theatre as a Mystical Game». *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23/09/2016, www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/echo-of-the-shadowlands-creator-enrique-vargas-on-theatre-as-a-mystical-game-20160920-grkto8.html, Web (last accessed 12/03/2017).
- Di Tommaso, Luca, "IL VECCHIO FANGO@MUSEO DIOCESANO: Esplorare Il Mondo Ad Occhi Chiusi", *Gufetto - L'Altro Magazine*, 01/07/2016, www.gufetto.press/index.php?page=visualizza_articolo&id=869, Web, (last accessed 02/05/2017).
- "Enrique Vargas", N.d, *Teatro De Los Sentidos*, www.teatrodelossentidos.com/enrique-vargas, Web (last accessed 12/03/2017).
- Heinecke, Andreas, "Dialogue in the Dark", *Creating Change. Innovations in the World of Disability*, Philip Earl Steele, Anna

- Obem, Dorta Starzyńska, eds. Warschau, 2009, Ashoka: pp. 46–51.
- “Il Vecchio Fango”, *Napoli Teatro Festival Italia*, 20/06/2016, www.napoliteatrotfestival.it/edizione-2016/il-vecchio-fango, Web (last accessed 01/03/2017).
- Macedonio, Marzia, “Il viaggio di Enrique Vargas”, *Saperi di confine*, ed. by Gennaro Colangelo, Roma: Bulzoni, 2009.
- Macedonio, Marzia, *Cosa deve fare Napoli per rimanere in equilibrio sopra un uovo: Uno spettacolo di Enrique Vargas*, Tesi di laurea triennale, Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere, Istituto Universitario Orientale, 2012.
- “La Mama E.t.c. Archives”, *La MaMa ETC*, www.lamama.org/archives/year_lists/1967page.htm, Web (last accessed 12/03/2017).
- Margiotta, Salvatore, Recorded telephone interview, 06/03/2017.
- Munaro, Massimo, 2010, *Edipo: Tragedia dei sensi per un solo spettatore*, Corazzano (Italy): Teatrino dei Fondi.
- Kent, Leticia, *The Gut Theatre is in the Street*, «The Village Voice», 17/08/1967.
- “Oracoli”, 2013, *Il Funaro*, YouTube, 28/02/2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpilv5NqqcY, Web (last accessed 30/03/2017).
- Pagliaro, Maria, *Todo ya está aquí aunque no se vea. Enrique Vargas y el Teatro de los Sentidos*. Barcelona: Corre la Voz, 2016.
- Pasolini, Pierpaolo. “La terra di lavoro”. *Le ceneri di Gramsci*. Milano: Garzanti, 2015.
- Santini, Roberto, “L’Anima Di Questa Terra è Il Vecchio Fango”, Teatro.it, 03/07/2016, www.teatro.it/recensioni/lanima-di-questa-terra-e-il-vecchio-fango, Web (last accessed 02/03/2017).
- Szondy, Peter, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1956
- “The Blind Theater”, *The Blind Theater Project*, WordPress.com, 12/09/2010, blindtheater.wordpress.com, Web (last accessed 03/03/2017).
- “Teatro dei Sensi Rosa Pristina”. *TdS Rosa Pristina*. <http://www.rosapristinateatro.it>, Web, (last accessed 20/04/2017).
- “Teatro de los Sentidos”, Facebook.com. <https://www.facebook.com/pg/teatrodellosentidos>, Web, (last accessed 20/04/2017).
- Torres, Nelson Jara, Telephone interview, 04/05/2017.
- Törnqvist, Egil, *Strindbergian Dramaturgy: Themes and Structures*, Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1982.

Notes

- 1 Enrique Vargas often writes detailed “libretti” for

his plays but so far he has not published them. A detailed description, though not a script, of Vargas’s 2008 play *Cosa deve fare Napoli per rimanere in equilibrio sopra un uovo* is found in an article by Marzia Macedonio (2009) as well as in her excellent B.A. thesis (2012), which also discusses the Teatro de los Sentidos more at length. Massimo Munaro’s stimulating *Edipo* (2010) contains a detailed description and a discussion of his play *Edipo re*. While Munaro developed his work independently, the play is mindful in many ways of Vargas’s work (see note 11) and his book is therefore another useful source for getting a sense of this particular form of sensorial theater.

2 The play was directed by Susanna Poole and collectively developed by the members of the company, who also acted in its debut performance: Lidia Arias, Rosaria Bisceglia, Sofia Campanile, Roberta Di Domenico De Caro, Davide Giacobbe, Eleonora Longobardi, Salvatore Margiotta, Carlo Melito, Gabriele Poole, Susanna Poole, Cinzia Romanucci, along with Giuseppe Barbato (set design), Ciro Cozzolino (lights), Davide D’Alò (sounds), Selvaggia Filippini (costumes), Nelson Jara Torres (scents). I take this opportunity to thank all of them for their support in the writing of this article and for helping me reconstruct the script of the play. I am particularly grateful to Marzia Macedonio and Salvatore Margiotta for their crucial help in researching the bibliography. I also wish to thank, along with Salvatore, Rosaria Bisceglie and Davide Giacobbe for their insightful advice on the script. My greatest debt is to Susanna Poole, the person that first got me interested in the theater of the senses, who read the draft of the article and provided many helpful suggestions and stimulating critical insights.

3 In keeping with a convention of the theater of the senses, spectators are called “travelers”. In order to convey a sense of a play in which spectators are actively involved, the present script is written from the perspective of an hypothetical spectator, referred to as the Traveler. Her reactions are of course hypothetical, but they are based on feedbacks provided by actual spectators. The script therefore differs from a traditional script but on the other hand so does the play.

4 All photos by Roberto Esposito (www.bubuphoto-grapher.com). I take the opportunity to thank him for kindly giving us permission to use them.

5 In the play some of the characters spoke in Italian, some spoke in Neapolitan dialect and some interjected dialect in their Italian, a common practice in Naples, even among those who have a perfect command of Italian. I have signaled the changes in the script and used colloquial (American) English to convey some of the immediacy of the dialect.

6 While this was the most common scenario, some travelers did not realize the actor was a man.

7 This is one possible scenario. In the play, the actor would limit or avoid altogether physical contact if the Traveler seemed too uncomfortable.

8 In this case too, the degree of physical contact depended on the situation and the response of the Traveler.

9 In a variant, the Fallen Woman asks the traveler, “And you? How about you? Where do you want to be kissed?», after which the traveler was humored, within reason.

10 The title of the play, meaning “old mud”, comes from a line in Pierpaolo Pasolini’s poem “Terra di Lavoro”, which talks about the poor country region north of Naples: “The light that falls on these souls / is still that of the old South / the soul of this earth is the old mud” (Pasolini 1957 *Le ceneri di Gramsci*, trans. mine).

11 In an interview, Salvatore Margiotta, who played the Sad One, told me he met with “both great pity and great repulse” (Margiotta 2017). Contrary to his expectations, men seemed to be generally more at ease in the scene, and usually dealt with the awkward physical contact with benevolent irony.

12 This was one of the many captivating anecdotes told by Vargas during the 2010 workshop I participated in. See also the interview with Stephanie Burbury (2016).

13 At first glance it might seem that another influence on Vargas may have been the work of the Teatro del Lemming, led by Massimo Munaro. In Munaro’s *Edipo re. Tragedia dei sensi per un solo spettatore* first staged in Rovigo, Italy, in 1997, the spectator experienced the performance individually, she or he was blindfolded at the start, told s/he was in fact Oedipus, and followed a prescribed route interacting with the actors on a one-to-one or one-to-many basis, using senses other than sight. In his similarly titled book on the play, published in 2010 after a long gestation, Munaro describes his *Edipo* as “an unprecedented experiment, not only for us, but, for what we knew, for the entire history of theater” (Munaro 2010: 18; *trans. mine*). In reality, however, Vargas had already staged *Hilo de Arianna* and *Oraculos*, so any influence must have been the other way around. *Oraculos*, in particular, had been staged in Italy in 1995 in Arcidosso, Tuscany. While Vargas had not used the blindfold in those two plays he did use it extensively in the workshops that accompanied them (see Torres 2017), though in *Edipo re* it acquires a new prominence that goes beyond its technical function, materially and symbolically reinforcing the central theme of the play. Vargas’s two earlier plays also had a classical Greek theme, like Munaro’s *Edipo*, and even the name of Vargas’s company is echoed by the complete title of Munaro’s play. Given such close similarities, it seems unlikely that there was not at least some kind of indirect and possibly forgotten influence. These similarities do not of course detract anything from the quality of Munaro’s play, attested by the enthusiastic reception by public and critics alike and the numerous awards received.

