

PART IV

PERFORMERS

BICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES: INTERVIEWS WITH ITALO-AUSTRALIAN ACTRESSES

What is presented here is a montage constructed from sections of interviews with (in alphabetical order) Rose Clemente, Eva Di Cesare, Laura Lattuada, Lucia Mastrantone, Dina Panozzo and Peta Toppano after they had completed a four-week season of *Love and Magic in Mamma's Kitchen* directed by Teresa Crea. Performances took place at the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney in October 1991.

All performers, with the exception of Rose Clemente, were interviewed within several weeks of the end of the show. Interviews were held separately, except for the one with Laura Lattuada and Lucia Mastrantone with whom I spoke together simply because it turned out that way and not for any particular reason. The fact that this was a triologue will show in how I have fitted the pieces together.

A whole host of circumstances prevented me from catching up with Rose Clemente until early January 1993. Thus my interview with her is like a retrospective gazing upon an experience that the other performers discussed *sur le vif*, while it was still more or less a part of their present. Because it looks backwards, time having ripened some of the thoughts we share in it, I use this interview as something of a coda, as the last fragment in a collage that by its very nature cannot have a conclusion. I hope to have captured its inconclusive quality by splicing the interviews and grouping voices around particular issues. The material, then, does not follow the chronological line of the interviews as such. The exception is my interview with Rose Clemente whose linear development I have kept. However, it is not presented in its entirety, any more than are the other reflections given with such generosity by all. I thank these remarkable actresses for their time and energy.

One performer from *Love and Magic* is missing from this montage. She is Teresa Haremza, a beautiful, immensely gifted Polish singer who was

the only non-Italo-Australian in the cast. Although she was not part of the Italo-Australian group of special interest to my research, I would like to have heard her thoughts, the thoughts of an “outsider” in relation to the group of Italo-Australian performers with whom she was working. Once again, as in the case of Rose Clemente, circumstances prevented us from meeting, only in Teresa Haremza’s case far more dramatic obstacles were involved.

The last two essays on spectators in this volume give a summary of *Love and Magic* and some brief indications as to how it was directed and performed. Consequently, there is no need to repeat them here. What I would like to point out, however, is that this montage does not concentrate on the production’s artistic processes as created by its performers, but focuses on the issues raised by the very existence of the production itself. These issues address the many concerns that link essay to essay and run like a filigree right through the book. At its heart is the premise that theatre is an art as well as and because it is a cultural practice, that is, an activity exercised in a particular social context whose values, fantasies, dreams and fears permeate it, making the theatre a *caisse de résonance*, a sound chamber, like no other inhabited collectively.

Maria Shevtsova: Do you see yourself as an Italo-Australian actress?

Laura Lattuada: When I see another Italo-Australian actor, I find myself saying, “Yes I am an Italo-Australian actor, yes I do that as well, I work in both languages, I am bilingual”; but then when I am talking to Anglos, I just call myself an actor because I resent the fact that they put me in a box - you just do community theatre and it’s just about your nationality. That’s not just what I want to be. I suppose that’s what the market is for me because I’ve been stereotyped in some ways as being just an Italian, because of my face, the way I look, and so on. But I’d rather just call myself an actor.

MS: Tell me, have you had any difficulties in getting jobs in - let’s call it for the moment crudely - “Anglo” theatre?

Lucia Mastrantone: Yes, in mainstream theatre.

MS: Why? What is being said to you?

LM: First of all, the funniest experience that happened was with an agent. I walked into an agent. She looked at me and said, "Lucia Mastrantone, you don't look Italian", and she smiled at me. It was almost like "Maybe we could use you because you don't look Italian". I thought "Fine". She still didn't take me on. Whenever I've worked with mainstream companies, it's tokenistic, it's the exotic thing. It's hard for me to get work in mainstream that does not require an exotic aspect to the show. So therefore it is really limited what people put me in and the amount of work I get.

MS: Does this stereotyping you just mentioned have to do with the fact that you've done five shows with Doppio Teatro and that has somehow marked you as a Doppio actress?

LM: Absolutely, that's the backlash of what's happened because I believed so much in Doppio. I've wanted to work with them and they've taught me a lot. They've made me really proud and made me think "No, I don't want to assimilate; no, this is my style". And yet, because I've been working with them ever since I left drama school, everyone has been saying "No, we won't use Lucia because she's with Doppio. She's a Doppio Teatro actor". There is a backlash that has affected my other roles.

MS: You went to Doppio because you were interested in acting rather than because you were an Italo-Australian actress. What Doppio was doing happened to be part of your culture, so you clicked in very easily. Do you think that Doppio ought to be characterized as Italo-Australian theatre? It's a bilingual theatre, so what do you do with a label that is causing difficulties?

LM: Doppio actually started as a bilingual company. The Italians have been its dominant actors. Because Teresa Crea is Italian, it has actually evolved into an Italian theatre company. But Doppio Teatro means dual theatre in any other language as well. There have been Greek people. There was a German in there at one stage, but they all worked in Italian. The plays were worked in Italian. At times they went into Greek. This was right at the beginning. But Italian has become dominant.

MS: Would you describe Doppio as a community theatre?

LM: Yes I would. In its first stage and even up to about three years ago, it was a community theatre.

MS: In what way?

LM: They'd go to clubs, just like people in the Italian community who go to places rather than get people to come to them. They'd go to schools. Now Teresa wants to educate and sensitize her audience to the fact that you've got to pay for entertainment. You've got to go to the theatre. You've got to make the effort to support this part of your culture. A lot of migrants actually don't go to the theatre very much and she's trying to bring them out of their clubs, out of their houses, out of their schools to the theatre. It's a physical transition.

MS: Do you think this might also be a way of bringing them out, of making them more visible to the community at large, of integrating them into the public generally and, at the same time, educating them to the theatre as an art form?

LM: Yes, and also the fact that they have to pay for something that's not food, like at a "ballo", when you go to the ball. They always ask, when there are ticket prices that say \$16, "Do we get food with this? Do we drink?" You say "No, just theatre", and they think "I don't know". The fact that they have to pay more than two dollars to go and be entertained, and to put that back into the migrants' minds. In Italy, they always go out for coffee. They go to the theatre. They go and see the opera. Whereas here, because their soul hasn't been nourished for so long, all they think of is work and eating. I know I'm generalizing, but I'm thinking more of the people who came out very young and have just been working.

MS: Do you think that the performance style of Doppio, from a cultural point of view, is specifically Italian rather than Anglo? How would you actually discuss this great gesturality, the mimicry, the movement in space, the physicality of the acting?

LM: It's definitely got the hand [mano] of the director, who is Italian. Because she would go with what the actors feel and the actors, because they're Italian, express themselves gesturally a lot. And it's also to make people who aren't Italian understand. I don't know if it's Italian. I think it's something that we've created here in Australia. It's something Italo-Australian more than Italian.

MS: My feeling about it is that it has to be big in performance and that it has to be extremely clearly articulated physically, because the gestures

and the movements supplement the language that might be missed by some of the audience. They've got to understand through other means, means that are not verbal.

LM: Yes, by visual means and other senses, like hearing, like the rhythm of language.

MS: How do you feel about switching languages all the time?

LM: It's very natural for me. I do it at home all the time because, first of all, my Italian is a dialect. I swap all the time. Even sitting at the dinner table: "Ma, passa me lo burro, passa me lo knife". It's the way I actually speak. It's a real bastardized Italian. It's a real bastardized Neapolitan dialect, if anything. Like "Passa me lo knife", and things like that.

MS: So there is no strain on you and your concentration. What about you, Laura?

LL: The same, basically. We do it in real life. We do it in the car going to work, in the car going home. I think that's what makes it an Italo-Australian piece, the combination or the marriage of the two. I personally think there should be more of it.

MS: Of this kind of theatre?

LL: Absolutely. More of this kind of theatre. And more of the Italian going in and out of *Love and Magic*. I get into a dilemma about whether the use of Italian in this production is token. Because a lot of it repeated stuff that we had already said in English rather than allowing a character to represent a reality. A reality is someone like me and Lucia, sitting in the car going to work, and speaking in Italian and English. That's a reality. You don't get that on stage with the characters. You actually get the repetition of a particular English phrase in Italian so as to cater for the Anglo crowd. So I have a problem with that: Why are we using Italian? The characters that I played in the Melbourne Workers Theatre and the characters Lucia has played in Doppio have been Italo-Australian migrant workers who speak English with an accent and then go into harangues of Italian for reasons that are logically tied. They might get aggressive or they might get emotional or they might get the urge because they can't find the right word to say it in English. So that's a reality, and it works.

We've got the gift of speaking both languages, so it's good that we presented *Love and Magic* in English. A part of me says "Yes, ease them in just a little and then go pow with Italian", and another part says "No, let's just go pow from the beginning". I guess I wanted more dialogue in Italian in *Love and Magic* and not just repetitions or paraphrasing.

MS: Would it work, though, in this play which is *Italian* and not Italo-Australian and which is historically centred? It is situated in Italy and not Australia. The kind of bilingual theatre you are talking about belongs in this country.

LL: I think it's good to challenge audiences. I feel that we could have challenged them even more. What about having the whole play in Italian?

MS to Eva Di Cesare: I saw you in *The Olive Tree* and I know you were also in *Ricordi*, although I saw someone else in the role you took over. Both are Doppio productions. Could you tell me about the difference in experience between *Love and Magic* and your work with Doppio? What differences occur when you have a group that is united in some sense, as Doppio presumably is (goals, training, the fact that it is bilingual and that its members are Italo-Australians who have taken on board their cultural heritage) and a group that is brought together artificially, so to speak, for the purposes of a production, as was the case for *Love and Magic*? Was there a qualitative difference for you as an actress in terms of the work process itself and in terms of the production as an artistic whole?

E Di C: Firstly, on the actor side, I think that all the people at Doppio that I've worked with seem to have come from a similar background. So we're children whose parents are in their fifties, or sixties maybe. We know all the things our parents do which are very funny. In Doppio, we are allowed to work on those things. There I don't feel restricted. I feel that I have permission within Doppio to be as ridiculous as I like, to be as angry as I like, without being hated for being too strong. There was a nurturing of my background. I met people like Lucia and Laura. Our backgrounds are very similar, especially Lucia's and mine - middle class; parents who came here in the forties and fifties, mostly from peasant origin and who have done well for themselves. There is a lot of humour in that background; there is a lot of sadness, and openness. I suppose that *The Olive Tree* allowed me for the first time, as an actress coming out of college, to finally become completely open, able to experience every sort of emotion,

without feeling ridiculous for doing it. Whereas at college I placed upon myself a restriction that said: "If you do this, you'll be seen as ridiculous".

MS: Would you be seen as Italian? Did that worry you?

E Di C: I was always seen as Italian. In the first year or so I tried desperately to be a nice Australian, and halfway through second year my teachers at the VCA [Victorian College of the Arts] freely gave me a kick. That's when I started to develop. So Doppio for my first job out of college. There, all the pent-up emotions that I had had for three years came out in *The Olive Tree*. From that point on, I realized it was okay to be like this, but only within Doppio.

MS: Because of the binding threads between you as individual actors, with a very similar cultural context, all resonances shared?

E Di C: Yes, I believe that. It was amazing that this experience came to me at that particular time of my life. I would have been a very frustrated actress by now if I had not worked with Doppio.

MS: What was the difference with *Love and Magic*, given that you were all Italo-Australians bar one?

E Di C: The girls that come from Doppio - and I would include Laura - Lucia, Laura and myself work every day with our background. We talk it. We live it. We always have it in the forefront of our minds. We speak like our parents.

MS: You mix Italian and English. You create that special language called Italo-Australian, like "la fenca" [fence]?

E Di C: Yes, and we perpetuate that. I don't think "Australian". I always think a bit Australian with all the emotional Italian stuff that I feel. I see myself as Italian and I think that Lucia and Laura do as well. When we came to *Love and Magic* - and we've all been in the business three or four years, we're the younger group - we met Peta who's been in the business for twenty years and who had denied her Italianness all her life till this production. We met Dina who doesn't come from our particular background.

MS: Are the three of you Southerners?

E Di C: That's it. Dina is a Northerner, and so is Peta. Rose is a Southerner and she does come from the same background. The parents of Northerners are different, completely different. They are from a different culture. It's a fact that, within *Love and Magic*, we had two cultures.

MS: My question, therefore, is: Given that you were all Italo-Australian actresses, why and how was it different?

E Di C: As I said, there is the cultural difference between North and South.

MS: Are you trying to say that the Northerners are more contained, that this is one cultural difference between people from the North and the South of Italy?

E Di C: No. Look at Dina. She's completely the opposite.

MS: So what's the difference?

E Di C: I have a feeling that Northerners see themselves as superior.

MS: They do. They think that the South of Italy is Africa. I've even heard some Northerners say that Rome is in Africa! Come to think of it, I have heard Romans say *Rome was Africa!*

E Di C: I think also that the older actresses - Dina has been in the business for twelve years, and Peta about twenty - came in with the attitude: "We've been in the business that long and we don't do community theatre".

MS: So, you're talking about North/South differences, age differences, experience differences and perception differences when you're talking about someone saying "community theatre" as distinct from "mainstream theatre"? What's the difference between mainstream and community theatre?

E Di C: I don't know. I don't think Doppio is a community theatre. I understand community theatre as people really working together, shaping the whole art work together.

MS: If you, Eva, were sitting in the audience as an Italo-Australian, and you weren't acting but watching, how would you feel about the kinds of gestures used by you all? Are they a mixture of Northern and Southern gestures?

E Di C: Gestures have to mean something to you. They have to come from within, otherwise they become stereotypes. I find the gestures attributed to Italians very embarrassing when they don't come from within. When they do, they're hilarious. They are fantastic, but you have to mean it.

MS: Wertmuller's films rely, of course, on very developed gestures, particularly on those thought to be typically from the South. And this playscript works on the North/South dichotomy, among other things that remind me of her films. Do you think that part of the problem of performing *Love and Magic* was that you had a script with complex shifts in it from pathos to grotesquerie, from the comic to the tragic?

E Di C: I don't think that is a problem. I personally never found it to be a problem as a performer. I did that a lot in *The Olive Tree*, for example, at the funeral, telling my grand-daughter to shut up, which was quite funny; and then suddenly looking at my daughter in the coffin and becoming quite sincerely hysterical. I tried very hard not to parody. I tried very hard to keep to the truth of the character. But I look at my mother: she goes between tragedy, comedy, pathos, hilarity, all in one, in ten minutes.

MS to Peta Toppano: Peta, was this your first experience with a bilingual production? Was it a problem for you?

PT: Yes, terrifying! I'm Italian. My father is Italian - from Udine - but was not born in Italy. He was born in Broken Hill. My grandfather had put in an application before the war to come to Broken Bay because he loved to fish. Mistakenly, he was sent to Broken Hill where he died of asthma, from coal mines. My dad grew up trying desperately to assimilate. He spoke Italian at home - very confused, very torn between the two

cultures and consequently didn't wish to speak Italian. He married an Australian woman and only one language was spoken at home; but the Italian sounds were very familiar to me because I grew up around my nonna [grandmother]. I understood a lot but was very inhibited about speaking Italian. Teresa [Crea] wanted me to speak the language, so I worked with Mr. Pitosi from the ABC on my Italian.

MS: How did you feel about recovering these long-lost roots of yours? Did you find a new sense of yourself through this?

PT: Absolutely fabulous. I think it's one of the greatest experiences of my life. Also being with a group of girls, in that dressing-room, where I never had to censor what I said. I never had to put a pressure cooker lid on my head to stop any anger. If you wanted to get angry in that dressing-room, you got angry. There was no censoring, no bullshit. It was like being six sisters and you just said what you said, you did what you did. The shared experiences were amazing. We all had fathers who were very volatile and mothers who were very frightened. It was a kind of shared history, a shared culture, a shared life that bonded us together. Not like anything I've ever done before. Because I've always been the odd man out in a company.

MS: Are you suggesting that you've not ever really been amalgamated with a group before, no matter where you acted, in regional films or on stage or whatever?

PT: I always do feel like that, except in a mini-series that I did where there were other Italians in the cast. I was working mostly with Italian boys. There was a lot of swearing and carrying on. I found that with them I could be myself, and the Australians made a very strong dividing line between us and them. There was also a Polish girl on our team. She was the other foreigner. But in other television roles where I had to be an Australian, I always felt I wasn't true to myself. Something was wrong. It didn't ring true.

MS: It's a real problem, I think, this whole question of cross-cultural work and of being true to your cultural sense of yourself. Even if you don't have a language, you absorb all the cultural coding. You absorb the behaviour patterns. Some of it is genetic too, but you absorb it in the environment you live in so that it becomes part of you almost unconsciously.

PT: That's right. If I had a fight with my husband who's English, terribly terribly British, I would go "What are you talking about?" and he would say "Why are you shaking your hands at me like that? Stop being so Italian!" I was never quite sure of what I was. Now I know. I am Italian first and foremost, that's what I am.

MS: I find it fascinating that you have made this journey and come to a sense of yourself as being Italian, fundamentally, it seems, by working through this production.

PT: Absolutely. I tried to explain it clumsily to Teresa and I think she probably knew. I never had a chance to tell her properly what a difference it has made to my life. Not that there was ever a skeleton in the closet, not that I ever denied it, although I used to as a child at school. I'd say, "I'm not Italian". Many things happened to me when I was a child, but I remember being on a school bus and being hit from behind - I was about eight years old, in the sixties - by one of those little boys: "Your father retreated in the war you bloody wog". I didn't know what he was talking about. I asked Mum: "What did Daddy do during the war? Did he retreat?" I just thought I was the same as all the other kids, but I wasn't. I was small. I was dark. I had curly hair. I had hair on my arms.

MS: What do you think of this particular attempt on Teresa's part to create a bilingual theatre? You know she does it in Doppio and this is really the first non-Doppio production she's made for a place like the Belvoir Street Theatre. How is it for you who are working on the stage in two languages and having to come to grips with a new form of theatre?

PT: I panicked initially because I said to her - and I think I offended her by saying it: "Teresa, I can't do this. We're not playing to an Italian audience. Perhaps in Adelaide you were playing to a more Italian audience, in factories, in clubs, and so on, where there were large Italian communities. But here in Sydney, we're going to be playing mostly to English-speaking people". I said, "We're going to confuse them. I can't say a line in Italian and then just go and say a line in English", and she said, "It works, trust me". I said, "Maybe it worked in Adelaide, but it won't work here". She said, "It will work, just trust me; you don't trust me". I said, "I'm sorry, I just feel so ill at ease doing this". But she said, "Just do it". Every time I tried to analyze: "Just do it Peta". Looking back on it, I think it worked very well. Some people, in fact many people, said they felt a bit lost. Did you find that in your questionnaires?

MS: They say it in the questionnaires. Not many, but they do say it.

PT: They got confused, or they thought they missed something, or they didn't hear something correctly.

MS: Isn't it curious though, Peta, because what Teresa did was to have what was said in Italian paraphrased in English so that, in fact, if they had been listening to the English carefully, they wouldn't have felt that they had missed something.

PT: It seems that even in English it's a hard play to follow.

MS: Do you feel that the use of Italian in the production, which, I believe, was about 15%, might lend itself to charges of tokenism?

PT: No, I believe that Teresa did it with immense integrity.

MS: Were you at any stage worried that the acting style, this declamatory, rhetorical style right through the production might degenerate into stereotypes of women, particularly stereotypes of Italian women as, perhaps, Anglo/Celtic spectators might conceive of them?

PT: I've got aunties who behave like that. You put a bunch of Italian women together and they're crazy. Have you ever seen a gathering of Italian women at a wedding or a party? They all scream and yell. I remember at our family gatherings everybody yelling over the top of each other to be heard.

MS: I want to ask you about this: One of the questions in my questionnaire asked people how they saw the director's perspective in this production. I gave them a choice: "Anglo-Australian, Italian, Other". This was followed by "Please specify" and "Any further comments?". A number of them said "feminist". They didn't say "Italian" or anything else. They didn't give it an ethnic interpretation. They took it out of the ethnic context and talked about its feminist view. How would you answer that question? Did you see it from a cultural perspective?

PT: Yes, I saw it from a cultural perspective.

MS: Would you describe it as Italian, as Southern rather than Northern?

PT: Yes, I would. I wouldn't describe it as feminist. Feminist because it had women, but they certainly were not what you call "feminist". It's a very complex play socially and politically, speaking two languages, the fact that we are dealing with religion, witchcraft, fascism. It's like opening Pandora's box. Leonarda [the principal character, played by PT] was living in contradictions all the time: catholicism and witchcraft, talking to Caterina and talking to God. There are so many things we haven't dealt with yet and even Teresa said, "If only we were touring, we would think a few things over". But I wasn't dissatisfied. It was thrilling. It put me in touch with my culture again. Yet the question of geography, politics and many other issues needed dealing with, I thought. If only we had had six weeks of rehearsal time [instead of four]. I needed that exploratory time just to be able to make mistakes and get up and try something else. We did an enormous amount of improvisation. We did a lot of movements, of washing - miming washing - where I would have liked a lot more work on the text.

MS to Dina Panozzo: How did you feel about switching from Italian to English?

DP: I thought that it was extremely useful and creative because as soon as we got into our own tongue - and we all had different degrees of speaking our own tongue - it gave us this wonderful licence to be in a larger world. If you start making different sounds as an acting instrument, you are obviously opening other doors and necessarily going into other areas. Your body then has the freedom to tell the story of the sound, so the dimension is much larger. Then, those Italian sounds fit back into your English, so that your English is heightened too. I think that only about 15% of the audience had problems with the Italian. It was just a flavour. So I think it would be extremely exciting to use many more foreign languages. It could also give the whole Australian society a little feeling for speaking languages. We are very lazy here because the English language is the foremost in the world, and anywhere we go in the world we expect people to speak English. That's a great shame. For your brain to operate in different sounds necessarily makes your emotional equipment change, experiment, expand. It's a fantastic exercise. Making different sounds allows you a lot of freedom to transform your body in a bigger way.

MS: You said you would like to see more foreign languages being used in the theatre here in Australia. There are lots of community theatres doing

this now. There are Arab-Australian productions, Spanish-Australian productions, of course Italo-Australian productions with Doppio, and so on. Can this kind of theatre succeed on the so-called mainstage or is it confined or doomed in some way, right from the start, to the so-called "multicultural" community stage?

DP: I think at the moment it is. I said I was pleased to be in this play because it's historical, and it is because it went to Upstairs Belvoir Street under the umbrella of Carnivalé. Even though I said that it was mainstream, it's not quite. Nonetheless, it's an enormous move ahead. This is an "off Broadway" kind of situation here in Sydney. In Melbourne we have Jean-Pierre Mignon and he uses a lot of different nationalities in his productions. He's a terrific person.

MS: He doesn't use French in his productions, only English. He doesn't want to.

DP: I know, and I wish he would. I think that now it's becoming fashionable to want to hear other languages. It's called multiculturalism. I hope, please God, that it's not just a fashion: last year the Greeks, this year the Italians, and next year the Asians. I really have a very strong feeling that that's not what it is and I'll tell you why. People like myself in our mid-thirties are the first ones to be educated in terms of migrants. I am now an adult artist and I am qualified and I speak up and people are letting me speak up. So the industry is changing. It can't go on being boring. It has to open its doors. It has to have colour. Mind you, it's highly suspicious because it plays with trends and fashion all the time. But you're not fashion if you know how to think. I have very strong feelings that my generation - not only Italians - is moving into positions of power.

MS: You're becoming visible and audible.

DP: Absolutely, and I am not giving it up, not after what we've been through. While I will continue to collaborate with my own race, I will not do it on the fringes. We - mainly the Italians and the Greeks - have got our foot in mainstream and we will even enter much more fully. But we've got to be people with vision and ideas. This year, for instance, marks the beginning for me of actually telling the truth about what I like and don't like, even in my own race. I don't like clubs. As a serious artist with a serious professional training who happens to be an Italo-Australian, I am ready to debate anyone on any level. What we must do is start to

create, not just wait for jobs. I've collaborated on a short film with a fellow Italian. I've gone out to get the money. I've got to create a development grant, go for an Australian performing grant from the Australia Council. I don't know how to write. English is still my second language. I do not construct English very well, but this doesn't stop me because I am an ideas person. So I've got money to hire a co-writer who is an Anglo/Saxon and a dramaturge. I will create because it's very important that people like myself in my generation now start to move into positions of creative decision-making. Otherwise it is just fashion, and who wants to live here at that level?

MS: The creative decision-making may mean that you will all collectively decide to go bilingual or monolingual as it suits the piece.

DP: Absolutely. It should be as rich as this country actually is. Compared to the other two English-speaking territories: England, for instance, is not in any way integrated; it is not Europe at all. But when I go and visit my Italian relations in Chicago, they are so American. They want to be Americans. Every race that goes to America is American. Australia has a wonderful, unique identity, highly sophisticated, very complex. But we present a face to the world that is totally unsophisticated: Ginger Megs, Paul Hogan. I don't know how to solve this problem. We live in a society where you're very proud to be your own race - Italian - and you're very proud to be an Australian. So this is a truly integrated country in racial terms and we've got to bring it now into the face of the arts which represent society.

MS: Can we dream together for a moment, Dina, and say it is possible that in the future, in ten, twenty years, we might see highly capable, beautiful, artistically refined companies working on the Australian stage and actually working two languages consistently, at the STC, at the MTC?

DP: I think it has to come. The state of a country in a recession is very sad, but there is always great introspection when a struggle develops in a country. If we've been extremely lazy in a magnificent country and got ourselves into a state like this, there is a lot of introspection to be done. I know because I'm an artist and I'm going to starve through this. There's going to be an extraordinary amount of searching about values. People have to be rigorous about their thinking, why they exist, who their next-door neighbour is, what they really feel, where they want to go and how

they want to live. I think this is the time for all this moving forward. In times like this, smaller bodies of people rear their heads and come into the mainstream. If you look at the boards of the STC, all the names are Anglo/Saxon names. It has to change. People were highly excited by *Love and Magic* during this phase of Sydney theatre because it's fresh, because it's got hope for the future. We have to find inspiration to live. I really think that theatre is in a terrible state and has been for a while in that we wait for festivals to feed us, like the Adelaide Festival. We want to be fed with imported material and we've got theatre in this country.

Going back to your initial question, I think that it can't not happen, speaking in different languages. Though I am a bit scared about the notion of the world as a global village, because then specific languages disappear, which is happening in Italy. I speak an old Venetian dialect and nobody has heard of it, even there. Only the old folks speak it. I was thinking of the Italian clubs in Australia, for instance. When people like my mother are gone, those clubs won't exist because I won't be patronizing them any more. It's a very sad thing, so it's really up to my generation to decide to maintain something because we want a society that is heterogeneous, multicultural. So there are lots of forces against us just in terms of the global village idea. But for the first time, I see around me in this country people of different cultures actually dealing with their culture on a vocal, artistic level.

MS to Lucia Mastrantone and Laura Lattuada: Do you think that more theatre in Australia of this kind - Italo-Australian, Greek-Australian, Russian-Australian, and so on - would eventually change the form and shape of theatre in Australia?

LM: Absolutely. The Whatever-Australian has filtered through to mainstream, has filtered through to a lot of community theatres. They are all picking up multiculturalism, and yet what makes me furious is that they do not use the real thing. For example, a theatre company in Adelaide did a piece about Thailand and they used Anglo actors, which is shocking.

LL: I think it would be okay for Anglos to play migrants if the balance was there, if the ethnic actors could play the Anglo roles as well. But the balance isn't there because whenever we get sent for a casting, it's the Greek girl, the Italian girl, the German girl. We're never sent for the blond girl. Multiculturalism is very much in vogue now, and has been for the past five or maybe even ten years.

LM: I think it's wrong to use Anglos for playing others because there are a lot of ethnic, multicultural actors out of work.

LL: But that's being as racist as they are. You shouldn't say, "They're Anglo and can't play a Greek". If you're an actor, you've got the skill to play anyone and anything. If they give the job to an Anglo to play a migrant, why not create a balance? But they don't. Just recently they got an Anglo-Australian to play an Aboriginal on television. Why give him the job when there is Ernie Dingo out of work?

LM: That's why I think non-Anglos should get first preference. I don't think it's racist at all. When someone has got the singing skills and the acrobatic skills and is Greek, why give the job to someone who is not Greek and has acrobatic and singing skills? Anglos can do any of the Anglo parts. Why go to them when their spectrum of work is so much larger than ours? You can't fight the system by being outside the system. I think that what companies like Doppio and actors like us have to do is get a mainstream profile.

MS: So that you are *actors*.

LM: So that we are actors. By working in small companies you work outside the system and people put you down as community theatre: "That's a nice small-budget company". Our budgets are always really minuscule compared to the State Theatre Companies. Maybe we could do huge productions of Pirandello using Italian actors or ethnic actors and ask for big money.

MS: Do you think there is an assumption that community theatre actors are not professionals?

LL: Yes, of course, that assumption is made constantly. That's why they are always considered to be fringe actors. Our stuff is art, and it is different.

MS: What was the difference, for you, between working in *Love and Magic* and the Melbourne Workers Theatre?

LL: There are marked differences. One, this play is performed in a theatre. The MWT's policy is to perform in workplaces during lunch time for the workers. Two, this is a given script. Like Doppio, MWT develops your own thoughts as an actor. You're employed to be a researcher-cum-writer-cum-interviewer and collectively devise the script so that you devise the character you're playing. You have a say in the music too, which is more than what happened here. This is a historical piece. Then there is the use of language: the MWT not only employs actors of Italian origin, but also of Turkish, Greek or Macedonian origin. It has a Mediterranean flavour rather than just one culture.

MS: What about performing styles, ways of acting, ways of projecting?

LL: I think that if you have performed for MWT or Doppio or any company like them, little as they may be, you can perform anywhere. The kind of venues we have performed in, and I don't want to sound like a martyr - it's a real credit to any actor. You're not miked. People are getting their lunch. I really think it's great now that I look back. You're singing a song and a little old lady walks by with her tray and drops her fork in the middle of your ballad and you're still singing. Or it's an L-shaped canteen with shocking acoustics. You can forget about real sets, the props or the band. You just set up anywhere and I think being flexible and adaptable and having really good improvisation skills are paramount, are an asset, a credit to any performer who works with that.

MS: And the concentration and the control of what you're doing.

LL: You don't have that here. You have an educated audience who have paid, who sit there. They can hear a pin drop when they go to the theatre. They don't do that when you perform in Melbourne Workers Theatre. There are four Greek men down at the end of the table who don't want to know what you're on about. Then you sing a Greek song and their heads pop out and they begin to smile and you think, "I've won". You have to be brave because we've had people tell us where to go: "Get out of here, bloody wogs, what are you doing here?" It hasn't been publicized enough, all those kinds of things, the real put-down things. Or again, "Melbourne Workers Theatre, who are they?" "You're not professional" - that kind of attitude to community theatre.

MS: Would you say that the MWT was a phenomenal training ground for you?

LL: Absolutely. I was a bit offended actually, because one of the company's past writers said to me: "It was an apprenticeship for you, a stepping stone". Maybe it was an apprenticeship. Maybe it was a stepping stone. It doesn't mean I never want to work with the MWT again. I do. I agree with their politics. I agree with what they write about. I'd like to write a play for the MWT and be in it. I think the MWT should be commercial.

MS: What do you mean by commercial?

LL: I mean mainstream. Everyone should know about it, like Doppio, like Spike Lee films.

MS: I wouldn't use the word "commercial" here. Commercial means money. I would talk about being well-known, being visible.

LL: Being commercial wouldn't necessarily mean losing its authenticity, if it's not for the purpose of keeping bums on seats. No, I just mean it to be better known, more exposed and more recognized so that some of the people who go and see the STC and the MTC go and see MWT plays.

MS: How did you create your role in *Love and Magic*? What did you bring to it that was really yours?

LL: I think a lot of the idiosyncrasies of the character actually came later, in front of an audience. I think that it's true for most actors. You work off an audience. You do something, and they laugh. I think that I probably brought some physical qualities to the character that perhaps another actor might not have. And the comedy came out bouncing off the person I was working with, that is, Lucia. Mind you, we didn't know each other from a bar of soap. Nor had we worked with each other before. But there was a chemistry there that just went. There were two things that Teresa really pushed for for the characters: their sexuality and vulgarity. I think she wanted the sexuality to represent the fascist era. I think that if we had played the two gossips stereotypically, they wouldn't have had these qualities. They would have just been talking like that over the fence. We did a bit of research about fascism - the relevance of the war, young boys being sent off to war, about how you condemn a woman for killing three of her friends in order to save her son when you, the patriarchal system, have sent off millions of Italian boys to fight in the war, about how

everything was controlled. The gossips were almost like: “We’ve got our eye on you. We know what’s happening”. They represent the political power of the time. I bribed one of the gossips to come on my side and tell the diva [Virginia, played by Dina Panozzo] that she was an idiot. That kind of bribery also reflects fascism. I don’t think the fascist quality of the two gossips really comes out.

Dina Panozzo: As far as Virginia is concerned, I had to tread a very fine line. I had to keep that edge there, pathos and being ridiculous, because these women were ridiculous and life is ridiculous, and Wertmuller does say that. That’s how she makes you laugh. It’s black and savage. But when you lean too often towards the grotesque, the vulgar and the ridiculous, you lose the truth, I think. I had to keep the edge of the pathos finely tuned so that I could lean towards the ridiculous but always keep the truth that although Virginia was a failed diva, she may very well not have failed. This play is about the lost souls of Mussolini’s Italy.

MS: Would you have liked the social and political elements to have been worked through the production more so that the audience could understand better that this was Mussolini’s Italy, that there were very specific pressures on these women, that there were specific kinds of values attached to the climate in which they lived?

DP: The answer is “Yes”, but I feel that it’s easier to set a world like that in film. Obviously Wertmuller found that too. Crea is the vision-shaper in this. It’s absolutely valid that she took up the notion of woman as witch, woman as power, sexuality, children and merged it with religion and superstition, with the old savagery and the paganism behind it; the fact that women can work in those dark murky corners of their conscious and subconscious. I think it was fantastic because it was a more psychological piece than perhaps had been originally written. But given that we are talking about what world it was in, I definitely think that world did not come out.

MS: That’s exactly my feeling. Wertmuller places this world very clearly. It wasn’t fourteenth-century or nineteenth-century Italy. Now, I wanted to ask you how it felt to work with an all-female cast and whether this is the first time you’ve done it?

DP: No, at the beginning of the year I did a Steven Sewell piece. A two-hander, just two women. I have done a couple of things with just two women, but never with seven. I truly loved it because, besides being all women, they were all Italo-Australians except for Teresa Haremza who is a Pole. So we had a lot in common, given our background; and we were able to compare notes about our past. Because, as a migrant in this industry, you start out first of all in the fifties and sixties as a leper and then you become exotic, which is very fashionable lately. Then you become an artist. Meeting Italo-Australian actresses was like home, like being with a whole bunch of sisters, even though we are very different women. But we had the same stories, the same histories, the same terrible and amazing things happened to us. In the case of Peta, for instance, who is probably the least connected to her Italianness, the play was what I called "the getting of Italian". It was wonderful for Toppano. For me it was truly rewarding working with my fellow Italo-Australians at a level of great expertise and in that kind of prestigious position.

MS: Was it because it allowed you to look more closely at your own cultural parameters because you shared them, or was it also because it allowed you to explore your own artistic potential?

DP: This is the hardest question because it's one I haven't resolved. I think that what was most important was being in touch with my background, although I imagined it was going to be the other way around. I imagined that because I had an Italian script with Italian fellow artists I would be Italian finally in my art. That's *not* what happened. What happened to me was a naturalness about myself which I very rarely bring into my work because I'm still trying to understand language codes. I still have a language problem. I'm articulate, but I know I have a language problem because I've done this piece now and I know how I reacted in the past to other casts. For example, working in other casts, I've always been the Italian. By and large they've been Anglo/Saxon casts in television, theatre or film. I found myself relying on my Italianness a little in a predominantly Anglo/Saxon cast or trying very hard to be of the flavour of the whole cast.

MS: How do you define "the flavour"?

DP: Not being as natural as I was with these girls. Our dressing-room was as bad as a male football dressing-room. We talked about everything - bodily fluids, private parts, children, food, love, sex, in great detail. It was ordinary talk, covering all the basics. We were able to freely show off our Italianness and be as wonderful or as terrible or as ugly as we felt, and know the rest of the group would find it infinitely delicious to deal with each other at that level. So, working in other casts, I was always the weird one because I would come in and talk about the experience of love-making for the week-end or how I was sick. When I talked about that in other casts, I was suddenly over the top. They would say, "She's so Italian, so passionate". The people in Florence are very cold and detached compared to the way we peasant migrant Italians have acted in the world. I am from Veneto in Northern Italy. Lots of Italians who migrated during the twenties were Northern Italian. But in the fifties, the mountain people from Veneto and the Calabresi were the poorest ones. We were all thrown together here in Australia and we hated one another. In this cast, we had Siciliane, Napolitane, Turinese and Venete and we're really different. It was beautiful to have that subtle difference between Italians amongst us. So I could refine my identity even further - the *type* of Italian I am in relation to Australia.

MS: Did all this vitality, warmth, openness and frankness in the dressing-room carry over into the way you worked together, into how you performed together?

DP: I think that all of us actually believed it was very important that we didn't go for the clichéd Italian. I think it was consistently a problem because in trying so hard not to be over the top we were held back or held ourselves back to a degree. I know that for myself, at the beginning, I went a bit cute, a bit small with it, because I've always been very exuberant, very "Italian" in most of my work. I'm always a passionate actress. So the question is: "Is she passionate because she's Italian, or is she passionate because she's passionate?" I've never worked that one out. So I think that in the fear of being too big - we wanted to do subtle work, work that challenged the notion of a clichéd Italian who makes a lot of noise and throws her arms around - we had to deal with the dilemma of being too small. We were trying to get an elegant, subtle, intelligent Italian which is not the face of Italians in Australia. Actually, I think that what we were always grappling with was just an acting style. In fact, you just act with the power you have, with the words and with the vision that you were directed by.

MS: Two questions. One is going to be on what you think of the acting style or styles, and the other is about the shaping vision.

DP: I think that Crea's strength is the poetry, the beauty. Where I like savage, dangerous and uncomfortable work, Teresa's style was lyrical, poetic, very beautiful pictures, like a film. She wanted ensemble work very much because there were different levels of experience among us, and very different processes. There were community theatre girls. There were the Melbourne girls. There was the Polish girl. There was Peta with her weight as an actress with lots of film experience, me, Rose, and so on. She was trying to get us all to work at a gentle pace. I thought it was "undangerous". I thought we weren't taking risks, that we were not inventing. I have enormous power as an actress; why wasn't I bringing it to the fore? What Teresa was trying to do was to deal with the play delicately. It's not a delicate play. She also dealt with it in very modern terms in casting Peta, a beautiful woman, an attractive energy, instead of casting someone with a few teeth missing and grey hair, a seventies version of a witch. This brought the play into a much more elegant area, on a very modern level. I think that was most definitely the style of the play. Then it would burst out into the grotesque, in the way Teresa set up the fascists. I think she has massive vision, and it's her own.

MS: Can you say a few more words about what you mean by modern? Why is Peta modern?

DP: For one, Wertmuller writes very modern dialogues. The jokes are really contemporary. Then, Peta's massive television and film experience makes her work quite subtle and intimate. That is very much the eighties and the nineties. It's a very filmic style. Also, to have a beautiful woman portray someone who is wretched and half-crazy, who has given up the world of men and is outside of society, adds a lot of power to the piece. (When I say beauty, I mean a soft, seductive, warm kind of energy that is very beautiful. It's certainly not ugly. I don't think Peta could be ugly.) You couldn't not find the woman attractive. Once you're attracted to a person who murders and chops up three people, there is a huge dilemma. Then you start asking questions and you're forced to go and search for why she did these things. Whereas if the woman was crazy with shaved hair, black teeth, really ugly and spitting out curses - which is really how it was written in fact - then you would think, "She's a crazy. It has nothing to do with my life because I am not a crazy and I know no one like that". Whereas having Peta, having her beauty, you are seduced into

really being attracted to this woman. There you are watching the profile of a murderess. So it's like a piece of modern film. In retrospect, I understand what Teresa went through much better now because that's how she got the whole picture, by keeping us full of our dignity, not making us crazy over-the-top Italian women, with strange histories, where an Australian audience could go "Lovely Italians, they're so wild and mad". No, Teresa presented these creatures with lots of pathos, simple truths.

MS: Back to the question of acting styles. Would you describe the style of performances from all of you as extremely physical, declamatory, rhetorical, gestural? How would you describe it?

DP: Etched in space. Very stylized. Certainly not declamatory. I would say it was heavily gestural. I would say the gestural in this play had to do with the choreographed, physical meaning of the story. My character, for instance, holds her chest very high, breathes lightly and speaks in a high, broken, husky voice because I found it through the truth of the character. In smaller roles, you must make statements in your physical body because you don't have the words. So on stage, when you are not speaking, you must fill the picture out with the physical gesture. You must have the truth in your body so that the audience can read something in your body, the sadness, the dreaming, the longing. For instance, in my role, if I wasn't singing, I was holding some physical shape. So I found the production like a musical, physically choreographed and vocally choreographed. I don't know what that style is. I would say it's a highly stylized piece of work.

MS: Does this have anything to do with what might be conceived of as an Italian culture in acting?

DP: Most definitely. I would say that everything I've seen in the past, the great actors I admire, especially the ones in Italy, are highly stylized. Nobody falls into flabby naturalism. Italians have a great need to communicate. They need to be involved. It's a very active and energetic race.

MS: But this is where the stereotypes come from.

DP: With Italian actors, reality is heightened and they have no problems in showing it. Not declaiming it and not over the top, which is what happens in this country and insinuates that you are not telling the truth.

MS: Let's go back to my previous question. How did all this openness and exuberance in the dressing-room and also the showing carry over into how you acted together? Do you feel that one of the things that helped you all in this production was that you all understood this showing, this very gestural and articulate form of acting where even the body in repose is saying something?

DP: I believed it was very simple for us all to bring this highly articulate style onto the stage. I found this so easy that I was wondering what could make the production difficult. In this play we walked on as ourselves because it is our second nature - or our first - to be articulate and tell it as it is from the heart, and shape it because of the great sense of pathos in all of us. I wasn't asked to do anything else: just stay still and be quiet and not work too hard. This was very difficult for me because I had always worked very hard not to be Italian. Suddenly I'm asked not to work hard because I've got everything. It was very confusing for me as an artist. Now that I have talked it through with you I agree that all of that went onto the stage. It was very simple to walk on, strike a pose and people would understand it so clearly!

MS: Do I understand correctly that you are making here an implicit comparison between what happened with you all in *Love and Magic* as distinct from what might be called the dominant or the usual way of performing on the Australian stage?

DP: Most definitely. In this piece, we always tried to work against the idea of "pick a style". We said, "Let's do the roles. Let's not think about the fact that it's Italian. Let's not go for the Italian in them". We understood instinctively the gestures of these women. These women are our mothers. We had no problem with yelling. Nobody had a problem with high emotions. Australian audiences who came to see us were so excited all the time, much more than we were. We felt so comfortable with gestures that our mothers did, finding none of it unusual.

Peta Toppano: I don't have a terribly retentive line-learning mind, so I worked very hard. I am used to working with intentions behind every line. I wanted to play an action on every line like you would in a normal play. But the way it was written, it was sort of what you'd call "stream of consciousness". I would be thinking of one thing and Leonarda would snap straight into something else and then something else again. I hadn't

read too much about Leonarda. I bought a book on serial killings. I bought a book on witchcraft. The one thing that I hung on to was *Seven Beauties*. I kept playing the film over and over again. I'd come back from rehearsals and I'd say: "I've got to try and understand her. I've got to understand the grotesque in her, the humour, the rapid changes from humour to darkness". I watched the film over and over again with great intensity and enormous commitment and I started to realize it was terribly funny. I started to latch on to things about Leonarda that made me laugh, sections of the play that were tragically, grotesquely humorous.

I wanted to bring out Leonarda's kindness, nurturing, love not madness. I wanted madness to be the under-belly of it, but I wanted the audience to leave feeling that maybe she did do the right thing, like the speech at the end: "Alright, judge me. I'll pay, but there are millions of boys dying like dogs out there. Mothers' sons in Greece, in Africa, in Russia, being killed. If making me the scapegoat gives you a clear conscience, go ahead". What did these women have? One had cancer. The other one had no future. They were living in a village. I wanted the audience to believe she was sending them to a better place, and I wanted her to be like an angel.

MS: Is this the first time that you have worked in an all-woman cast?

PT: No, I have many times. I did a musical with twenty-one women. I've just done something for SBS called *Piccolo Mondo* with three women. I've worked about four times with an all-woman cast.

MS: Did this one differ from the other all-woman casts you have worked with?

PT: This one did because we were all Italian. It was a unique experience.

MS: And generally, when you work with an all-woman cast, is it very different from working with a mixed cast?

PT: I wouldn't want to make a habit of it! It's nice to have men around. But there isn't any kind of sexual tension. You are who and what you are, and you bring your talent and your integrity and your mind and your body to the job. You don't try and impress anybody. You don't try to be anything you're not. Women behave very differently around men, even in this enlightened age of ours. If there is a man there, women modify their behaviour. So we didn't have to go through any of that stuff and that's

very refreshing. Women in groups together are very strong. That was a formidable group. I just felt very proud to be part of that team.

MS: Can we come back to the question of bilingual theatre. I wanted to ask you whether you feel that this kind of theatre can become mainstream theatre, or is it doomed to being small community theatre, confined to clubs and other associations but not necessarily able to work on the mainstage?

PT: I would love to see it done on the mainstage. I would love to see Chekhov partly in Russian and partly in English. If theatre is good, it's good. I saw plays in France, all in French, that just blew me away. I speak some French, but a lot of it I didn't understand. Yet I was still left with my jaw on the ground. Good acting is good acting.

MS to Rose Clemente: What I am really interested in understanding - and I've posed this question in various ways to all the Italo-Australian performers in *Love and Magic* - is how it felt for you, as an Italo-Australian woman who is a professional actress, to work in a production that had only one performer who wasn't Italo-Australian. What was that like for you from a professional point of view? Can you remember what the discomforts were, the joys or the queries or the doubts?

RC: There were many doubts. Initially there was the euphoria that we all felt: here was a group of seven Italian women doing it together, a play by an Italian woman, directed by an Italian woman, six Italian actresses. One thing I definitely learned from it is that I don't think that coming from the same ethnic background is very important in the end. I think that people who have the same artistic spirit, regardless of the culture they come from, are the people who should be working together. It has more to do with something that comes from the soul, a value system, a political ideology that fits with another group of people. They become your source of inspiration. They become the lake into which you dip constantly to refresh yourself, to inspire yourself. I think I've learned that much from *Love and Magic*. I've learned that just because you come from the same ethnic background, it doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to work well together. There was an unspoken assumption that because we came from the same ethnic background and because we were women it was going to

be extraordinary. This experience clarified something for me. It actually got rid of a myth, the myth that because we are Italian, because we are women, it's going to be fabulous working together. It made me ask myself what makes good theatre. It's got nothing to do with gender and it's got nothing to do with ethnic background. It's got to do with soul, for me, because if I don't resonate with somebody on a spiritual level, it's no good. We can't create together. It's the stuff that makes theatre that we find very hard to talk about because there is not really a language for it. It's the soul of theatre that counts in the end. It's the spirit in which something is done. It's not for political reasons. It's because this piece must be done. It must be spoken. That's what makes great theatre for me. It's not: "It's now time to use more women in the arts", or "It's now time to use more wogs in the arts". That's a very sound political reason for getting more Italians and more women working in the theatre. Of course, the equality of opportunity needs to be there. But I have to go back and find out what it is that inspires me, what ignites my soul to want to communicate something to other people and I have to be true to that, not true to the correct politics of the time. It's a very fortunate time for me at the moment. I am a woman and I am Italian and that's good. The Australia Council likes that at the moment and so do a lot of people.

MS: Is it really being put into practice, this kind of *positive* affirmative action?

RC: I think that it is still pretty much tokenistic, but there are more women working as directors. There are more people from non-English-speaking backgrounds working in mainstream. This is happening slowly, but it's happening. I think it's very fashionable to be a wog at the moment.

MS: Are you saying that it has become part of official policy? So, officially, the Australia Council is thinking about wogs much more. Is that what you mean by "fashionable"?

RC: Yes, it's in. It's now legal. Places like the Sydney Theatre Company are actually being pressured by the Australia Council to hire women, to hire wogs "because if you don't, we might take your money away from you". So it's quite good for me politically to be who I am in 1993, being an Italian woman working in the theatre.

MS: We agree that this kind of affirmative action is necessary. Now, what's the snag?

RC: The snag is that it still feels like I am being told that now I must create *this* kind of theatre because I represent *this* kind of artist. There is a part of me that goes: “Hang on, don’t tell me now that I have to create theatre about the immigrant experience because it makes you feel happy, makes you feel comfortable and makes you think that you’re putting your money where your mouth is in terms of women and in terms of multicultural artists in this country”. I feel like saying: “I come from a different place. I come as a whole person here. I’ve got a mind. I’ve got emotions and I’ve got a spirit and that spirit may want to speak in a commedia dell’arte or a Chekhovian-style piece or in anything. But don’t tell me that now I have to get out there and be this passionate Italian woman artist”. I have people in high places saying “Express your Italian passion more” and I feel like we are still being dictated to, but just in a different way. This is what I mean by “fashionable”.

MS: When you talk about how you feel pressure being placed upon you to be an Italo-Australian performer - is it because of the way official people, bureaucrats, and so on, ask you to do things, or the kinds of letters they write to you or the kinds of offers they make to you? Where do you get the feeling from?

RC: I get it from the things they say. Once you’ve done something like *A Little Like Drowning*, you feel pressure to do more of that kind of theatre. I don’t always want to be directing plays written by Italian people about the Italian experience.

MS: Tell me about *A Little Like Drowning*.

RC: It’s basically about cross-cultural love. It’s about an Italian man who has lived in England most of his life and whose family is quite wealthy. He goes to Italy, marries a village girl, brings her back to England with him; but because he’s been assimilated into the English culture - she’s a very naive Italian village girl - their lives just don’t fit together. He wants to be a part of Britain. He wants to be a real Englishman, so he falls in love with an English woman. He leaves his wife and his two kids and he remains forever in a cultural limbo not belonging to his Italian family, not really belonging to his English family. He’s just caught in this cross-cultural love. Anthony Minghella who wrote the film *Truly, Madly, Deeply* wrote the play. He is a fantastic playwright. He’s Italo-English. His family come from the Isle of Wight. It’s like a tribute to our parents for the

group of us who got it together under the name of Teatar di Migma. There was Christina Totos, Rosie Lalevich, Dina Panozzo, and Nicolas Papadimitriou. It spoke very strongly about all sorts of issues that our parents must have faced when they came to Australia. In a sense, we wanted to do something that was a tribute to that generation of Italian migrants who had undergone great hardship, not just the physical hardship but a lot of emotional, psychological, sociological hardship, all sorts of terrible stress. The play really highlighted these things for us. So we thought our first piece out of Teatar di Migma should do something that was a tribute to the older generation. Now we are talking about experience from a second-generation perspective.

MS: Rose, there's a whole hidden story in what you're saying. Who proposed to do *A Little Like Drowning*? Did you? Did you have to go and seek a grant from the Australia Council?

RC: Yes, yes, we did and they willingly gave us that grant because the material was appropriate.

MS: And you felt that it was appropriate for you to do it, or you wouldn't have done it?

RC: Absolutely, I was passionate about it. We all were.

MS: But what you're saying is that you don't want this to be the only kind of theatre you do.

RC: That's right, the same as I don't want *Love and Magic* to be the only kind of theatre that I do, either. When it was over, a lot of people said that it was fantastic. They really meant "It was fantastic to see you Italian women out there doing this" without talking about the work. That's what hurts me because nobody was really that interested in talking about what the play was about, what it was trying to say, what it was trying to communicate. There was very little debate in that area. Okay, I accept that it's a part of Australian culture. We don't do very much after we go and see a play. It's not how our culture works. But the emphasis was on the Italian women doing this piece at Belvoir Street and wasn't that wonderful. I wanted the focus to be on my work.

MS: But you see, this is possibly the problem. Perhaps that sort of social statement is necessary as a preliminary statement. But the rest should then follow.

RC: And it will follow.

MS: The rest that you're talking about is the aesthetic, where the social and the aesthetic go hand in hand and it isn't just the social separated from the aesthetic. Is that what you're talking about?

RC: Thank you for putting it so precisely. That's exactly what I am trying to say.

MS: I want to come back to a statement you made earlier about being with these Italo-Australian performers, with an Italo-Australian director, in an Italian play, using Italian - about 15-20% - but all this not being what you thought it would be. How did you think it would be, you, Rosalba Clemente?

RC: I have to talk about it as a performer and as an actress inside it. I thought it would be extraordinarily liberating. I thought I would find a dimension in my work that I hadn't tapped before. That's what I was hoping for.

MS: Which dimension? Liberating in what sense?

RC: This is interesting because I thought I would somehow connect with my Italianness more fully in the work because I would be speaking the language, because I would be working with women who understood me. So I wouldn't have to be afraid of the power and of the difference of my work, which has always been a problem for me. People have never known what to do with me: "Rosalba is wonderful, but what do we do with her? Where do we cast her? What do we put her in?"

MS: And now that she's done *Phèdre/Phedra*, where do we put her?

RC: And I thought it wouldn't be an issue with these women, and indeed it wasn't. We were all there. We were all Italian. We all dived in but I felt really repressed. I'll try and answer why. I found speaking Italian for 20% of the time very difficult. It felt very artificial. I felt I was doing it so that

the Italians would understand some and the Australians would understand some too, and that's really fabulous. But apart from that one reason, I was never clear as to the other reasons why we were actually doing it. Again it comes back to me as: "Are we simply making a political statement here?" and that's not enough for me.

MS: Didn't you discuss this with Teresa or the other women? Wasn't it something you discussed together?

RC: No, that was part of the problem. We did not talk enough. We had four weeks of rehearsal. Teresa was away for one of those four weeks because she had to be at the Australia Council. We had singing to worry about. We had dancing to worry about. We had a very complex piece that was quite fragmented, not linear in any sense, totally fascinating. We really talked enough about what the piece was about, so I don't think that was the fundamental problem. We never got around to talking about why we were doing it in two languages. It really did feel like we were doing it for the few Italians who came - because there weren't that many of them. That was incredibly disappointing for me.

MS: What or who in you was repressed?

RC: It could have been the part I was playing, Faustina, who was very repressed, the total opposite of Phedra. I was a mouse and I loved doing it. So maybe it had partly to do with the part. She was obviously the most repressed of all the characters in many ways. This has to be taken into consideration because, as an artist, you take on the psyche of the character you play. I'll say that to qualify the rest of what I'm saying. I also felt that many of us were still in conflict about being Italians, Italo-Australians, as individuals.

MS: As individuals or as individual performers? Do we separate the individual and the performer or do we put them together?

RC: We can't separate them. We put them together. Many of us were still trying to work out what it even means to be Italian. There were some who felt more Australian than Italian, others who felt more Italian than Australian, that "incredibly passionate" sort of stuff. There were some women who were dealing with the beauty myth, women who were dealing with not being beautiful enough, women who were bringing to it all their female personal agendas as well as the ethnic background like: "I come

from this particular background. I am a working-class Italian. You're an Italian who comes from a very rich background". There were all of those chasms to bridge too.

MS: You had a whole class problem between you.

RC: Exactly. I can't tell you how complex it was, and it was terribly frustrating because of everybody's expectations that there would be immediate understanding, immediate knowledge of who the others were. As a result, the work would be explosive because we wouldn't have to cross the bridge of getting to know the other people.

MS: And you wouldn't have to cross the bridge of being one Italo-Australian woman in a cast where everyone else is something else and they understand certain things that you don't or they feel certain things that you don't because, after all, you are partly Italian. Somewhere, there is something Italian in you that has survived.

RC: Very well put, yes absolutely.

MS: So you thought those kinds of barriers would fall completely and there would be a wonderful understanding and a symbiotic, harmonious relationship - which didn't happen? Did it have to do with professional competition and cultural difference too, because of the North/South division? After all, Northern Italy is very different from Southern Italy.

RC: Yes, all of that. On a level out there, people pick up those vibes, what's being created on that stage, in that empty space, for one or two hours. It actually has much more impact than we even understand as performers and as directors. It goes inside people in a way that I don't think we understand. What people carry out with them is not just a critique of the piece. They carry it inside them. So we are responsible to the people we work with. We must nurture them and safeguard their psyche while we're working with them because we are doing such phenomenally vulnerable work.

MS: Is it because you were not fundamentally united by a common cause? If you had been Italo-Australian performers absolutely convinced and committed to specific ideals and principles that were social and aesthetic at the same time, perhaps these stresses could have been avoided. So was it the lack of common objectives, the fact that there hadn't been enough

talking, the fact that the reasons why you were performing together and performing in Italian and English had not been discussed enough and therefore you could not weld your ideas together as one?

RC: That's a very interesting point. It's pretty close to what happened because it seemed to me that everybody was coming from a very individual perspective and they were all there for their own needs. There was the umbrella of "This is an important historical event in Australian theatre", but we weren't sitting as a group underneath that umbrella. We were actually just skirting around the edges, coming in every now and again and coming out, but we weren't underneath it together all the time and holding the umbrella up so that the days when it rained we were under there saying "You hold it for a minute; I'll hold it for a minute", protecting each other. Teresa had come from a place where she had created Doppio Teatro. She had pulled people in who really wanted to be there. She was clear about what she was doing there and suddenly in this kind of mainstream context where she expected the same kind of commitment as her actors from Doppio she didn't get it. People were interested in what this would do for their career, and rightly so. We mainstream performers - and I move in and out of that boundary - can be absolutely dreadful because we're out there, day in and day out, not knowing when the next job will come, and we come in with all that agenda behind us going: "I'll need this. This has to do something for my career". I wish I'd had more time with the women. I wish we'd had two weeks of work-shopping and then a month of going away and a month of coming back to it or something like that. It just felt so terribly rushed and confused; Teresa wasn't there for a week. We had so many people in the room when we were working, which was very distracting. You talked about competition. In a way the competition was heightened because we weren't different.

MS: I've never thought of that, Rose. It never dawned on me. So you *weren't* different from each other and that's what created the stress and fear?

RC: Yes. I worked with much less fear when I did Phedra. I didn't feel I had as much to prove when I was doing Phedra. I knew that I was the right person for that role. I knew that I was chosen for the difference, whereas with *Love and Magic* I was chosen for the sameness and that was so new it was terrifying. Suddenly I was there with all these women who

were the same as me and somehow we had to make ourselves different. To shine, to be seen, to be visible became so much more difficult. We were all wogs, but we were all women too, and let that not be a secondary thing. Women have a lot to learn about being with women. Until we can be with one another in all sorts of situations, until we can learn to be non-competitive with one another, how can we hope for men to change? That was one of the saddest things for me. It wasn't even so much the Italian factor. We were women and I expected it to be a sisterhood and it wasn't. I've been let down by sisterhood before. I still believe in it. I'm still a feminist and I will never let go of those ideals because they're ideals. One day it will happen. But you can't attach yourself to any kind of "ism" in this world. That's where my expectations have slackened off. Feminism isn't going to fix it, nor is communism, nor is any kind of "ism". "Isms" are out as far as I'm concerned at the moment because the more I'm alive and operative in the world the more I realize that it's to do with me, to do with healing myself, and no "ism" is going to make anything right. In an ideal sense, feminism should have been operating in that rehearsal room, but it didn't. We were so damaged by our families, by our migrancy, by the profession, by being women in the profession which is such an oppressive thing to be, by having to look right. Even Peta, who is such a beautiful woman, had so many issues around beauty. It was amazing getting to know her. We were both reading *The Beauty Myth* at the same time when we were doing that show. People come to creative experiences so damaged in so many ways.

MS: How was she damaged by the beauty myth? Did she think she had to be beautiful no matter what?

RC: Yes, and it was very difficult for her to deal with it within her work. She worked so hard - and I really admired her for it - to make herself ugly in that role. She cut her hair. She ripped her dress. She did all those things because she was terrified that people were going to criticize her for being too beautiful. It's the sort of thing she's had to live with all her life, just as I've had to live with being too fat and too hairy all my life. Equally as painful, equally as distressing, but that's a little bridge we built between us, a little bridge of understanding and I wish we could all have built more of those. How do artists get into that rehearsal room and work with an intrinsic respect for one another and put the personal stuff aside and just focus on the work? How do you do that? It's so rare for it to happen, but when it does you really feel the possibility of humanity at work.

MS: Let's go back to the question of the "me" you were talking about: no "ism" but "me". What does this do for the whole idea that theatre is an art but is part of a big framework we call a culture? How do the "me" and the culture connect? Can it all be reduced to a purely personal level? Would you really, even after an experience of this kind, say that my Italian culture has got nothing to do with this "me"?

RC: No, of course not, because it's part of me. But I have to heal that part of me as well; that part of me has been damaged. I have to understand it much more deeply, much more profoundly, because I realized during *Love and Magic* that I wasn't as in touch with my Italian background as I thought I was. In fact, I was still in lots of denial and lots of pain about it, and I think a lot of the women were.

MS: Don't damage, pain and denial pose a lot of problems for the whole issue of so-called multicultural theatre?

RC: I actually think that all this stuff - and we were dealing with it backstage - was the real truth that needed to be spoken on stage. Maybe it was. I don't know because I wasn't outside watching. What do you think?

MS: No. At least I couldn't see it, which shows what consummate artists you all are. What does it make of multicultural theatre? It's an official decree these days. It's an attempt to redress the balance, an ethnic affirmative action and we agree in principle that it's necessary and important. This whole discussion between us points again to the problematical nature of multicultural theatre. I think it's problematical because one of its main assumptions - and it's right - is that ethnicity or so-called ethnic identity or something to do with a particular culture should be preserved, developed and extended so that it stops being in a ghetto and stops becoming wooden. You're a Southern Italian. You know perfectly well what I'm talking about - wooden attitudes, wooden values; it's dead and gone five hundred years ago, fifty years ago, but it still survives in people's memories, and memory and reality contradict each other. A Southern Italian goes back to Italy to her or his village and discovers that it has moved on. It has moved on to the contemporary world, and that same Southern Italian is still living fifty years back: she or he is an anachronism. So there is myth and reality, memory and reality all tied up together. There has to be some sense of evolution, of going forward, and it's socially and artistically important to ask this question

about this new type of theatre. It's probably very important to create the theatre of Italo-Australians, French-Australians, Russian-Australians, Greek-Australians or whatever, a theatre that emerges from a particular group of people and allows the artist - you, for example - who has emerged from this group to flourish and grow. I think there's got to be some sort of support structure that allows a minority culture to grow.

But what's the problem? One of the problems seems to me to be, first of all, that you can't create art by decree. It has to come out of those people and those artists wishing to affirm something about their histories. This doesn't mean that you don't share all sorts of difficulties, on stage or off, with non-Italo-Australians or non-whatever-performers. But there are some difficulties - we might agree - that are unique to you, if only because you are known as wogs, if only because you have lived the experience of being alienated in some way and you've had to fight your way back from the margins. There is probably another difficulty. This uniqueness and individuality must be held together, but you become token figures in that you are forced, as artists, to conform to an image of Italo-Australians, or whatever, that holds sway outside the theatre, in society. You may feel this uniqueness from the inside, but it may not give you enough elasticity, enough elbow-room to develop artistically. And unless you can develop artistically, you cannot grasp social reality firmly.

RC: We are tackling something very difficult here. I don't think there are any easy answers. We are searching for answers.

MS: We agree that there is a problem with multicultural theatre and multiculturalism in general. Where are the problems? Where do they lie? We agree that it is important to give space and voice to performers who are not of Anglo background, who do have a different sense of the world because their cultures of origin and even of actuality are different. They have to live with *that* as performers too. You, Rosa, as a dark-haired Italian, will inevitably be typecast by some agent, at some stage. It's going to happen all the time. Someone is going to look at you and say: "I can't have her as Juliet. She's too dark", or "I can't have an Italo-Australian as Hamlet. He looks too small". It poses a problem artistically, but how do you get out of it without reducing artistic aspirations to a very narrow notion of "multiculturalism" which has the worst features of "ethnism", of some kind of notion of ethnic "essence" or ethnic "purity"? Then there is the problem of how so-called multicultural theatre keeps being pushed either into community theatre or what we might pejoratively call folklore,

but it hasn't been absorbed into the mainstream yet.

RC: Yet *Love and Magic* was an attempt to do that, and so was *A Little Like Drowning*. It was one of the reasons we went Upstairs Belvoir. Our aim was not to create another piece of "Downstairs" but to say: "This can also happen on a bigger scale". And yet, somehow, it sat very uncomfortably in there. It didn't feel right because, as with *Love and Magic*, who came to see *A Little Like Drowning*? Mainly theatre people. In fact, more theatre people came to see *A Little Like Drowning* than Italians, even more than for *Love and Magic*. We've proved one point and we've lost something else here. I think Doppio's most successful piece was *Ricordi*, a wonderful piece of work. It spoke very strongly not just to the Italian audiences in Adelaide but, when it came to the Wharf, it spoke very very strongly here too.

MS: It was an extraordinary piece. The whole issue of multiculturalism and of mainstream as distinct from community theatre is an extremely problematical and difficult area. I would hate to think that "multicultural" theatre belongs exclusively in community theatre. I say this because I have argued for years that so-called "ethnic" theatre should not stay in the margin implied by the term "community" theatre but should move into the mainstream, move into what is, after all, the arena of art; not be seen as folklore, but be seen as art. If we define the mainstream as the place of dominant art forms, then that's where I've always thought it should be. But maybe it can't survive there too well yet.

RC: I think at the moment we don't know. Perhaps it does need to stay at its source for a prolonged period of time, only making little forays out into the mainstream, to test the water out there and then go back to its origins. We're at the embryonic stage. The whole notion of multiculturalism is still so young.

MS: We were talking earlier about the problem of a common cause, of defined common purposes or objectives. I've been wondering for a long time whether a bilingual, bicultural theatre of the kind that's emerging from Doppio isn't creating a new type of theatre, and what the future of this type of theatre will be. Where will it live? Will it live in a new space all of its own that is neither community nor mainstream? What do you think of the idea that a group of performers from minority cultures can get together, work out a common perspective and common purposes and then

create this new type of theatre? It could be new not only in terms of its content - content alone does not make newness - but new in terms of performance style, the structure of performance, the kind of understanding and communication between performers that using several languages ideally implies, and amalgamating several cultures in some way, at least having them come together in some sort of coherent fashion; and have them make some sort of social impact. Is it possible to create this new type of theatre?

RC: All the things you are talking about are the things that Teatar di Migma has spoken about as being part of its artistic agenda for the future. After doing *A Little Like Drowning*, we wanted to extend in all sorts of ways, cross all sorts of boundaries, create a new form, create new styles, create a new language, cross-fertilize different art forms, bring together movement and music and language. But we don't have a shared vision strong enough to hold us and to drive us. There is no one in the group who's willing to take it on and make it their life's work, which is the kind of commitment it would require.

