

# Migrant Artists at InScena!2018: Italian Theater Made in USA

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At the InScena!2018 Festival, two all-female production will be on stage featuring an all-female cast. We interviewed Tania Kass, the director of *A Mother's Heart*, and Federica Cellini, author and director of *Dhana and the Rosebuds*, two Italian artists who live in the US and told us more about their show.

*A Mother's heart* (*Cuore di mamma*, an Ambrosia production) is a play written by Daniela Dellavalle, an author from the province of Trieste, and adapted into English by Tania Kass. The show was staged in Rome in two different editions and in New York in 2016 and 2017. Tania Kass directed this renewed staging and Alice Lussiana Parente played Mary's role, accompanied by Selamawit Worku (playing the psychiatrist) and Marianne Goodell (playing Claire Phyllis). The main character of the show, Mary, has just killed her father and tried to kill her mother. She is forced to speak about herself to a stranger, the psychiatrist who has the task to verify Mary's mental stability. *Dhana and the Rosebuds*, a Dhana production, is an original screenplay and a theatrical work that investigates the research of the female identity in a dramatic situation such as the loss of one's roots in a country that is destroyed by the war. Shana is in search of her identity: it's a female, intimate, and extreme journey. But Dhana's story is also a tale of reconciliation between the Middle East and the West.

Can you tell us about the genesis of this project?

**TK:** This play (original title: “Cuore di Mamma”), by the Trieste-born playwright Daniela Dellavalle, touched me deeply from the first moment I read it. The opportunity to bring it on stage presented itself in the fall of 2016. Alice Lussiana Parente, who plays Mary and co-produces the show, and I obtained a space grant at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting and put up “A Mother’s Heart”, that I personally adapted in English. For that first edition the cast was composed by Alice Lussiana Parente (Mary), Maite Uzal (Mrs. Phyllis) and myself (Psychiatrist), directed by Kathy Gail MacGowan, with whom I had collaborated in the past. A few months later the play was accepted at the Midtown International Theater Festival, Summer 2017. For that occasion I decided to take over as director and we cast Selamawit Worku as the psychiatrist and Marianne Goodell as Mrs. Phyllis. They both will resume their roles for InScena!

Dhana is an original screenplay written by Giulia Corda and myself. It is the story of a young Syrian woman who lives in New York City, a scientist who has forgotten all about her past. However, when she believes to have identified her estranged grandmother on television among refugees in the Balkan borders, she embarks on a mission to find her. It will become a spiritual journey to rediscover her roots and her own identity. Dhana is a sort of upside down Greek heroine: she doesn’t return home after the war, but runs away from peace to find home again in the war. Looking for her grandmother, Sham, she travels to the Balkans at the heart of the migration emergency, but even in such dramatic circumstances life goes on. I believe that it’s the story itself that suggests you the right way to tell it. The fixity of an art installation and the fast pace of news reports (both tools I am familiar with) were not satisfying. And that is when I started working on the adaptation of this performance, the one will be at *In scena* festival. I needed the power of visual storytelling, and the fascination of the live performance.



A scene from Dhana and the Rosebuds.

What are the strong points of the show? Why should people go watch it?

**TK:** I do not want to reveal too many details, but I can say that this is a highly provocative play, that creates room for the unique sensitivity of each audience member. The tight pace of the dialogues accompanies these very complex characters during their journey through

extreme circumstances hanging between life and death.

**FC:** The “migration crisis” swallows fears, dreams, and the stories of these people. This journey is too often translated only into numbers building up in news reports. *Dhana and the Rosebuds* comes from our desire to explore migration in a more intimate way. Dhana’s journey is extreme and unique, but also universal. When she departs, Dhana is not interested in the human multitude traveling in search of a better future because she is different from them. At the outset of her trip, Dhana just wants to find her grandmother, and tries to stem the flow of pain she sees around her. Instead, she will soon find herself questioning all of her achievements, her life, and the identity she built for herself. This journey will make her discover a new Dhana.

What does it mean to you to perform in New York?

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**TK:** I believe that New York represents something special for anyone involved in theater. It has not always been a dream for me. I developed the desire of working in this city a few years ago. I am lucky to have worked in Italy for a good period of time, but perceiving a scarcity of future opportunities, I began to contemplate the idea of moving abroad, which brought me to the Big Apple. I trained and continued my path as an actress, musician and director, which gives me more and more gratifications. In this specific case, I am happy and proud to bring to New York the work of a very talented Italian playwright.

**FC:** Giulia and I are both native Italians who live in the United States, so we know what it means to feel like a stranger in a foreign country. We both have a strong bond with New York City and that’s why we decided that Dhana’s journey should start there. I have lived in many different cities over the years. Bouncing between different places made me aware of the connections among seemingly distant human beings and illuminated the challenges faced by immigrants.. Migration is shaping our societies and dominates public debate all over our unequal yet interconnected world. While we live our lives, migrants are leaving their homes behind, losing loved ones, risking death. I want to raise questions, emotions and doubts on this defining phenomenon of our times –migration and immigration. This is a crucial moment, and I want to channel the public attention and raise awareness on this defining phenomenon of our times –migration and immigration. And to bring it to New York it is like closing a circle. New York was our narrative greenhouse, where we grow our plant in the most fertile diverse society until it was ready to finally grow under the sunlight.

Tania, *A Mother’s Heart* has already been staged in New York directed by Kathy Gail MacGowan. You are going to direct the show for the InScena! Festival. Did you add something new to the direction and to the English adaptation?

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**TK:** The English adaptation was obviously the first step. I know the author of the play well, and I think this has given me the opportunity to maintain her style and stay faithful to the original text.

Directing this show is a delicate task. The dynamics between the characters are very complex, like the characters themselves. Furthermore, the time and place where the action takes place are not specified; this is a detail that frees the play from any superstructure belonging to a specific place, therefore not purely realistic. We must consider that modern American theater strongly embraces realism as a theatrical genre, unlike the European

habit of also benefitting from surrealism and dwelling on the philosophical meaning of things in order to use theater as a provocation and create realities that do not strictly belong to everyday life. During our first production in 2016, this cultural gap became very clear. After that experience I wanted to take over the direction of “A Mother’s Heart”, already introduced in last year’s edition, to test myself with a play that I particularly care about, and to do my best to transmit its essence. It will remain a minimalist staging using the space, the lights and the music created specifically for this project by the Danish composer Amanda Mistry. The focus will be on the three protagonists of this story.



A scene from A Mother’s Heart – Photo by Babak Parsyian.

Federica, In your opinion, how is it possible today in a country like the United States to remain faithful to your roots while affirming your female identity?

The world is a better place for women than ever before: there are many women who have established themselves in the world of art. However, the artistic community still lacks diversity and true equality. I dream of the moment when we will be defined just artists and not anymore as women artists. There is so much we have to change and to question in order to give to our daughters and sons a world of equal opportunity. And I think that in order to do so it is very important to know where we come from. To view diversity as a treasure. And to explore and rethink our own roots and traditions in order to reconcile them with modern society and make them real, without losing them, because they give us strength. And I think this is exactly what happens to Dhana. In the end, the search Dhana undertakes is the same as those who want to reconnect with their roots, in order to grasp them and find their “center” as human beings.

What does it mean for you to direct a multicultural cast in a city like New York, the heart of the American melting pot?

**TK:** I have always perceived cultural variety as a treasure, even while I was living in Italy. Being an integral part of that in this city is an incredible gift. In New York there are constant opportunities to make friends and create artistic collaborations with people of any cultural background. Only in our small production we have brought together Italy, USA, Ethiopia and Denmark, and in other projects I have collaborated with people from countries like Austria, Brazil, Russia, Mali, the Caribbean, Canada, Iran, France and I hope many others

in the future! I love creating unity among people, and art is perhaps the best way to do it.

**FC:** I used my experience as a journalist to research stories, locations, and characters. I was also faced with the great challenge of blending reality and fiction. We shaped the complex female protagonist as a scientist who embarks on a journey that combines fiction and truth, reality and dream. To put it on stage, I wanted strong, fearless female voices which I found in my actresses. I also wanted people with diverse backgrounds. It was very challenging and I was extremely lucky to find these artists; they were all very generous to embrace the challenge of this project, which is very unconventional. There is a lot of ensemble movement and choreography, and we also worked with improvisation. Everyone willingly accepted these challenges and blended their different professional experiences into a cohesive performance.

**Tania, Why did you choose an all female show to talk about love, hate, and death penalty?**

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I briefly conferred with the playwright to answer this question. She told me that it was not a rational decision to write an all-female-cast show. It simply happened.

I believe that it creates a particular perspective on certain issues, such as death penalty and hate. The characters are very different from each other, and I find interesting the way in which each of the three protagonists live, perceive and face their situation.

I would like to add that our entire team is made up of women, including the actress Adriana Rossetto who will be our Assistant Director. And this too, in truth, happened by chance.

**Federica, Why did you choose an all-female ensemble to tell a story of reconciliation between the Middle East and the West?**

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A female perspective permeates the performance and the tale of Dhana. Her Syrian childhood is depicted as a dreamlike all-female world that in its narrative style is inspired by the work of some of my favorite artists, Pina Bausch and Martha Graham, as well as Vanessa Beecroft. Another artist who inspired this work is the director Joy Zinoman, the founder of the Studio Theater in Washington DC, who believed in my unusual narrative and has supported my work from the beginning. Dhana and the Rosebuds is the story of a young woman struggling between her two souls: the western one, of a child who came to America and grew up in New York, absorbing the city's energy and contradictions; and the Middle Eastern one, shaped by the land where she was born and was soon forced to leave in search of a better future. Finally, Dhana is also a strongly female journey from "the West" to the Syria of the childhood imagination. A story of reconciliation between the Middle East and the West.

***A Mother's Heart* will be on stage at The Brick Theater in Brooklyn on May 14th and 15th at 8p.m. *Dhana and the Rosebuds* will be on stage at The Brick Theater in Brooklyn on May 14th at 7p.m.**

For more information: [\*\*InScena!\*\*](#)

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Translated by Giulia Casati

