

# The Mejerchold Twins land at InScena! with Francesca Airaudo and Giorgia Penzo

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The Mejerchold Twins, Olga and Manolita, are a perfect clowning duo: two divas. The show ranges from variety shows to vaudeville with live music by Tiziano Paganelli. We interviewed the director Davide Schinaia and the actress Giorgia Penzo.

The Mejerchold Twins (a 2013-2014 **Città Teatro** production with the contribution of the Province of Rimini and the Emilia Romagna Region) comes from the interest of this theater company in comedy from the **Commedia dell'arte** to the early 1900s Italian Theater and from a research on the *avanspettacolo*. After their debut in December 2013, the show has been staged in excerpts at the Venice Carnival, in Piazza San Marco, and during numerous winter seasons and summer festivals. Afterwards, in November 2014, the show was invited to the "Theaomai" event, organized by the Literature and Philology Department of the Università degli Studi di Verona, during a festival dedicated to the *Commedia dell'arte*, from its origins to the contemporary developments. The songs of the show are played live by Tiziano Paganelli, and re-arranged for vocal duo and accordion.

The show revolves around the two characters of Olga and Manolita, who start singing together by chance, having to substitute for a missing gig at a famous variety show. They have been together ever since and their partnership goes on in an ongoing fight for the stage.

How was this project born?

GP: Our company, Città Teatro, focuses on the study of all aspects of comedy and folk theater, so, in 2012, we accepted Davide's invitation to start researching the variety show and the *avanspettacolo* – literally “before the show” – a genre that was very popular in Italy until the 1960s.

DS: We were motivated by the curiosity of discovering the origin of great Italian comedian-actors, such as **Totò** and Petrolini. This first phase ended with the staging of a show, “Shabadabadà-quasi verità” – Shabadabadà-almost truth – in which we tried to bring back to life some themes and characters of that theater genre. We collected a lot of literary and audio-visual materials. One of the aspects that struck me the most was the conflict between the “little stars” of that small world, where sometimes they would fight for the bigger name on the posters. So, during a rehearsal, I had the intuition of a singing duo, two fake twins, who always fight but when it's time to sing they can surprise everyone. Once the “Shabadabadà” experience ended, we understood that, behind the characters of Olga and Manolita, there was a whole world that needed to be discovered and that deserved a show on its own. And just like that, the Mejerchold Twins were born. The name is an homage to the Russian director Vsevolod Mejerchol'd, student of Stanislavskij and founder of the Moscow Art Theater, and inventor of the “theatrical biomechanics,” an educational system for the actor who elected the typical techniques of Italian Comedians as their main sources.

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

DS: The show presents the endless conflict between the two divas who are the exact opposite of the other, despite calling themselves twins. This conflict is declined according to the visual comedy language. The speech is limited to the bare minimum and it's based on a mix of languages that is almost impossible to understand, while the actual texts appear in the form of the many songs in Italian and Spanish. Like this, we achieved an alchemy of elements that communicates in a para-verbal and non-verbal manner. Our study of the characters used the techniques of the biomechanics and the Commedia dell'arte to approach the art of the clowns; it became an incredible school for the actors. I have rarely seen two actresses have such an energy and be able to keep the singing, the comedy, and the femininity going in such an original and surprising way.

GP: Olga and Manolita are two perfect “models of imperfection” in which every woman can recognize her own fragility. But at the same time, they are two stage animals, who are ready to face any snag with exceptional energy and comic verve. I believe that irony and self-irony make the “Mejerchold Twins” a “theater the Italian way” kind of show that can make the staff, who can recognize the techniques and virtuosity of the Art theater, laugh, but the pure public as well, children included (we hope many kids will come!), who can enjoy themselves watching the two fickle divas picking on each other and in turn, be moved by the “failures” of the twins.

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

DS: It's a great satisfaction, but a challenge at the same time. I am curious to see how an international audience will respond as compared to the Italian audience. I think it's an important step for the search of a universal theatrical language.

GP: The challenge is to be able to make the American audience laugh, using all our talent as actresses. I am satisfied to have the opportunity, but I'll confess that I am a little scared as well: for the Twins, the "failure" (in the clowning, it's that moment in which the mechanism gets stuck and embarrassment occurs for the awkward moment) is the leit-motiv of their career; yet, these two showgirls fall and get back up with the fortitude dictated by their desire to make it...and they made it: they came to New York! Don't you want to cheer for them already?



A scene from the show The Mejerchold Twins – Photo by Andrea Brugnetti.

Giorgia, did you take inspiration from anyone in particular to develop your character?

GIP: Other than drawing on mine and Francesca's "genetic heritage," we fed ourselves tons of images and movies during the months of rehearsal: Olga's character is inspired by **Anna Magnani's** great "Sciantosa," but also by the divas of the Telefoni Bianchi and the German cabaret. In Manolita, you can recognize the sweet Gelsomina from Fellini's "The Road," a grand-master to whom we owe a lot! But there's also some of Franca Valeri's merciless Hungarian choreographer in "Variety Light." Franca is an extraordinary theatrical actress and author and we bow to her! Then, the instinctual conflict filled relationship between Olga and Manolita was "scientifically" structured by the dynamics of the White clown-Auguste couple, properly transformed into women.

Olga and Manolita, one the opposite of the other or two complementary characters?

GP: Naturally they are complementary, both on stage (one is slow, the other fast, one is tall, the other short, one is clumsy, the other meticulous) and in life: the work relationship between Giorgia and Francesca ensures that one supports (and take care of!) the other. Since we are so different, the arguments are a daily matter, but we have the same principles and that makes us complementary. Complementing each other when singing was also a turning point in our relationship: singing has a huge harmonizing power, singing makes you feel good, and singing and making music together helps to overcome conflicts. Discovering a natural mix really helped us: we started to duet by ear, and then we refined

the performance by adding the accordion, which becomes an actual orchestra in Tiziano Paganelli's hands. Let's not forget Vladivostok's fundamental role, the multi-instrumentalist that accompanies the Divas by harmoniously balancing the family dynamics!

The show revolves around the Commedia dell'Arte and the Italian Theater of the early 1900s. How do you think the American audience will react?

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DS: This is a question that we can probably answer only after the last show. What we are counting on is that the theatrical and comical situations are universal, and this universality is based on something that each man and woman on earth can experiment with the limits of their body.

GP: I believe that the public will feel like "home." We looked for a long time at popular theater and we know how important it is to make the audience participate, having the audience understand that they are the target of all our efforts, give them a sense of happiness. Of course, emotion and even the "fear of failure," to highlight the clowning language, are always there: in particular, I am always terrorized each time we perform! However, I feel better thinking that our journey is also a witness to the production of our area, of our culture: there is such a strong tie between Italy and USA, like a umbilical cord, made of roots, a common history, myth, mutual admiration, love, so we expect a true familiar hug.

The Mejerchold Twins will be on stage at the Berniw Wohl Center on May 17th at 8p.m. and at The Brick Theater in Brooklyn on May 18th at 8p.m.

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

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Translated by Giulia Casati.