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Luciana d’Arcangeli was Cassamarca Senior Lecturer at Flinders University, Adelaide, from 2008 to 2021 and now holds external academic status with the university. Her areas of expertise are Italian theater, cinema, twentieth century studies, translation, and interpreting. Luciana coordinates the ACIS funded project “Indelible (Eng) / Indelebile (It): The Representation of (In)visible Violence Against Women and Their Resistance.”

Claire Kennedy was for many years Cassamarca Senior Lecturer in Italian Studies at Griffith University, Brisbane, conducting research in applied linguistics and more recently translation studies and the Italian presence in Australia. Over the last thirty years she has participated in numerous community theater productions concerned with social and political issues.

**Abstract:** This article describes our collaboration in creating a book containing plays on violence against women and interviews with the theater practitioners who wrote and staged them. The plays included in the book premiered between 2014 and 2018 in London, Sydney, and Rome. The three editors of the book are Italianists who work in Adelaide, Auckland, and Brisbane. Colleagues who have translated some of the plays are based in Melbourne and Sydney. The project began at the end of 2019. After a few months, when the Covid-19 pandemic closed our countries, we were not sure how the project would continue. But as it turned out, with all live theatrical activities stopped, the authors, directors, and producers of the plays we had chosen had more time to devote to our questions. Although disappointed at not being able to interview them face to face, we discovered the capabilities of Zoom, in addition to Skype and WhatsApp. The connectedness was much more than technical: we found that working together on a joint project during the pandemic, each of us locked in her home, promoted a particular kind of well-being and community of purpose.

**Keywords:** theater, violence against women, rape, FGM/C, Covid-19

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## Collaborating during Covid

DANIELA CAVALLARO, LUCIANA D'ARCANGELI, AND CLAIRE KENNEDY

It has now become almost customary to plan for a peer-reviewed publication of selected presentations after a conference. But “Indelible [Eng]/Indelebile [It]” was no ordinary conference.<sup>1</sup> The three-day meeting in Adelaide in late October 2019 included not only traditional conference presentations but also several performances: from excerpts from the new South Australian opera *Daphne* to a staging of Dacia Maraini’s *Passi affrettati / Hurried Steps*; from live improvisation comedy (*La Prima Donna*, by Fools in Progress) to recorded courthouse drama (*Processo per stupro / A Trial for Rape*, directed by Renato Chiocca).<sup>2</sup> The theme of the conference—part of the work of the Visual and Performance Studies (VPS) Research Group supported by the Australasian Centre for Italian Studies (ACIS), with a steering committee led by Luciana, and including Claire, Daniela, Giorgia Alù from the University of Sydney, and Sally Hill of Victoria University of Wellington—was the representation in the arts of violence against women and girls and their resistance. Given the emphasis of the research group on the performing and visual arts, it seemed appropriate not only to discuss works concerning violence against women, but also to offer the attendees—and the broader community, especially students—the opportunity to see some works on the stage, live or recorded. Our own experience, confirmed by the conference participants’ feedback, was that stories of violence described by films, paintings, opera, or plays touched the audience more deeply than the devastating statistics that were also presented and analysed during the conference.

So, when we discussed how to move forward after the conference, in addition to planning special issues of peer-reviewed journals with academic articles on representations of violence against women in literature, cinema, art, and theater, we began to talk about a *pubblicazione creativa* (creative publication).<sup>3</sup> The idea was for a publication that would introduce to a wider public the texts of some of the creative works that had been discussed or presented during the conference, and that were still unpublished. One such text was “Kubra,” the most recent of the *Hurried Steps* stories, created by Maraini for the 2016 Australian premiere of the play. Kubra is a woman who gives testimony in an

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<sup>1</sup> Luciana and Claire co-organised this international, inter-disciplinary conference, hosted at Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Several artists generously provided their work for viewing and discussion during the conference days. Visual artist Lucienne Fontannaz presented her collages on the theme of “Affront, Crisis and Survival” and allowed us to show them in each session and in conference publicity. The artists who performed music and theater were: the duo of actor Mimmo Mangione and musician Adi Sappir; Co-Opera and its artistic director-composer-pianist Josh van Konkelenberg, who accompanied soprano Bethany Hill singing excerpts from the new Australian opera *Daphne* by Josh van Konkelenberg with libretto by Fleur Kilpatrick; Corinna Di Niro, who directed Hannah Humzy, Robert Donnarumma, and Suzanne Bleeze in a performance of *Bone Cage* by Geoff Gillham; Bianca Bonino and Ben-Jamin Newham of the company Fools in Progress, who performed their work *La Prima Donna* in Commedia dell’Arte style; and the Brisbane theater group RedVentures, directed by Ainsley Burdell, who staged Dacia Maraini’s *Hurried Steps* accompanied by the Adelaide choir *Born on Monday*. Amelia Walker and Michele Fairbairn facilitated the workshop that followed the *Bone Cage* performance. The panellists for the discussion following *Hurried Steps* were: Kelly Barrett of Women’s Safety Services, South Australia, Linda Fisk and Fiona Brown from Seeds of Affinity, and Khadija Gbla, activist against FGM/C.

<sup>3</sup> The academic publications emerging from the conference are: a forthcoming special issue of the journal *FULGOR—Flinders University Languages Group Online Review*, guest edited by Luciana d’Arcangeli and Claire Kennedy, titled “Indelible / Indelebile. Representation in the Arts of (In)Visible Violence Against Women and their Resistance,” which includes the work of scholars and artists from Australasia, Africa, and Europe; a mini-special issue of the journal *Italian Studies* on the representation of violence against women in Italian literature from the nineteenth century to the present day, guest edited by Giorgia Alù and Sally Hill; and a forthcoming special issue of the journal *Violence Against Women*, guest edited by Sally Hill and Luciana d’Arcangeli, on the theme of violence against women in relation to the visual and performing arts, with articles by women scholars from across Australasia.

Australian court of the traumatic experience of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) which she had been subjected to as a child in a migrant community in Sydney. Thus, FGM/C is added to the harrowing series of acts of violence against women and girls—rape, stoning, femicide, sex trafficking, and prostitution of children—that Maraini has sought to raise awareness and indignation about.

After watching “Kubra” performed in Sydney in 2016—and seeing it again at the conference in Adelaide—we wondered whether the topic of FGM/C had been brought to the stage by other writers. We found out about *Little Stitches*, four short plays staged in London in 2014 and 2015 with excellent reviews. The show’s producer put us in contact with the four writers, who very generously sent us their unpublished scripts. We were taken by the style, language, and protagonists of the four pieces, and their potential to raise awareness about FGM/C.

Another recent unpublished play that staged a case of violence against women was *Processo per stupro*, a 2018 theater adaptation of the 1979 documentary made for the Italian state TV channel RAI-2.<sup>4</sup> Forty years after the famous trial in which a young woman named Fiorella accused four men of rape, writer and director Renato Chiocca decided to bring the words of the documentary to the stage, showing how the attitudes of the defendants, their barristers, and some of the general public during the trial remained, sadly, still current. Very generously, Renato allowed us to screen a recording of a performance in Latina (where the original trial had taken place), during the conference, back-to-back with the 1979 documentary.<sup>5</sup> Since the RAI declines to re-screen the documentary, and the book containing its transcript is out of print, publishing the play seemed a useful way to highlight the significance of the documentary as well.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, we had three unpublished plays, connected by theme (FGM/C) or setting (a court of law) that we wanted to make available to our academic colleagues and to a more general readership, in a publication that would be something different from a collection of academic essays. Luciana, as leader of the VPS research group and contemporary theater specialist, received the tentative project enthusiastically and offered to be part of it. Daniela, also a theater specialist, who had watched “Kubra” in Sydney in 2016 and had contacted the *Little Stitches* authors and Renato Chiocca, and Claire, who had acted in “Kubra” with RedVentures in the role of the judge and worked on the English subtitles for the *Processo per stupro* documentary, got on board with this *pubblicazione creativa*, which was yet to take a definite shape.

By the time of the conference, Luciana had already had the opportunity to record a long conversation with Dacia Maraini, which began with a discussion of the process of creating “Kubra” and went on to include some of her other works. We decided to try to do the same with the other writers and accompany each play with an interview with its author.

Daniela was in Italy in early 2020 and, after failing to record a Skype call with Renato Chiocca—a slip she will never live down—got a second chance to meet with Renato in person in Rome. This time she managed to record a long conversation during which Renato not only discussed the process of moving from screen to stage, but also shared the process of directing the play: choosing the actors, the costumes, the sets, and lighting; addressing a limited audience in a small theatrical space, or a large audience in a traditional theater; bringing the documentary and the topic of violence against women and girls to schools and receiving students in the theater. He also reflected on the responses from some audience members who remembered the trial and documentary, and others who were not even

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<sup>4</sup> The award-winning documentary *Processo per stupro*, made by a collective of feminists based in Rome, was screened twice on the Italian state TV channel RAI-2 in 1979, to over 14 million viewers in total, and generated vast public discussion. The documentary is currently available on YouTube. Daopoulo et al., “Processo per stupro.”

<sup>5</sup> A recording of a performance of the play *Processo per stupro* in Latina is currently available on Facebook. Chiocca, *Processo per stupro*.

<sup>6</sup> The transcript of the documentary is in Belmonti et al., *Un processo per stupro*. The book includes an introduction by Franca Ongaro Basaglia.

born at the time. The insights that Renato provided on his experience of adapting and directing *Processo per stupro* were so valuable that they encouraged us to seek similar insights from the directors of the other plays. Our next decision, then, was to collect not only the voices of the authors, but also those of the directors / producers of the plays we hoped to include in our *pubblicazione creativa*. Our project thus became a collaboration not just between academics and writers, but also with theater practitioners—our network started to expand.

The interview with Renato was significant for at least two other reasons. The first was that, when discussing the performance photos that he was going to share with us, Renato mentioned one in which actor Clara Galante, in the role of the barrister Tina Lagostena Bassi, made a gesture that was a clear indictment of the way in which trials for sexual violence were conducted. Thus, from that day on, the so-called *pubblicazione creativa* took on its definitive title *Atti di accusa*—a title which cleverly (or so we hoped) combined both theater and protest against injustice.<sup>7</sup> The second was the interview that took place on February 18, 2020. As Daniela and Renato said their goodbyes—Daniela was to return to New Zealand two days later—they mentioned the strange atmosphere of fear pervading Italy because of a mysterious and deadly illness that was spreading in the North of the country. Certainly they—and the rest of the world—had no idea how deadly that illness would prove to be, and how much everyone’s lives were about to change because of it.

For the three of us, in the Southern hemisphere, the academic year began in early March. Normal operations quickly came to a halt—at short notice (only 48 hours at two universities) we were required to collect our books and teaching materials from our offices and instructed to continue our teaching online, using systems called Zoom, Collaborate, or Teams which only very few academics were familiar with. Our research projects were also interrupted, not just because the archives and libraries were closed, but also because figuring out how to switch to online teaching and assessment took most of our time. And although we were fortunate enough to live in Australia and New Zealand, countries where the risk of Covid-19 infection was very low at the time, the lockdown measures were quite strict, forcing us to stay inside our respective homes—Claire in Brisbane, Daniela in Auckland, Luciana in Adelaide—for most of the day, most days.

It was at this time—when the usual contact with local colleagues at our universities was no longer possible—that our collaboration on *Atti di accusa* really began to materialize. The lockdown left us wishing for a more immediate contact than the usual exchange of emails. Why not take advantage of the technology we were expected to use for online teaching? So, we began to meet regularly by Zoom and WhatsApp to comment on each other’s work, as each of us had chosen specific tasks but we all oversaw the entire project. There we were—each in her home, in different time zones, with different family members and pets sometimes invading our video spaces—but feeling less isolated thanks to the shared project.

Of the three plays that we decided to include in the book, *Little Stitches* was the one that sparked most of our collaborative work, for several reasons. The first factor was communication, since the text was in English and all its creators were in lockdown in Europe, while we were in lockdown in Oceania. We started asking the *Little Stitches* team to answer some questions related to the origin of the work, the issues that arose in bringing FGM/C to the stage—especially for people who do not belong to a culture that includes FGM/C—the staging choices, the audience feedback, and more. The director, Alex Crampton, and producer, Melissa Dean, opted to answer our questions by sending voice-recorded messages on WhatsApp. Daniela, who had established the initial contact with them, received their answers, but it was Claire who took on the job of transcribing them. Later, we decided to try combining the two interviews into a single joint one, as in most instances the producer’s answers

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<sup>7</sup> Cavallaro, d’Arcangeli, and Kennedy, *Atti di accusa*.

completed gaps in the director's, or vice versa. So, we worked together on deciding how to best combine the two sets of answers, avoiding repetitions and highlighting the different strengths of the producer, who had the initial idea for the play and found the four writers, and the director, who, working with the creative team, then brought their ideas to the stage. Finally, we went back to Alex and Melissa to obtain their approval for the way we wanted to present their words. Given that by the time we managed to produce a cohesive draft of their joint interview theatrical activities had been stopped—in fact, most activities had been stopped—we found they had more time than would usually have been possible to devote to our questions and requests for clarification. But each time Daniela received a reply from Alex, Melissa, or one of the writers, the resulting corrections or clarifications were shared with and approved by Claire as well, in an almost daily process of exchange and collaboration.

The second factor that expanded our collaborative network was the theatrical translation process. While we three editors of the book translated the interviews with the *Little Stitches* team ourselves, we thought it would be valuable to assign each of the four plays that make up *Little Stitches* to a different translator, involving other colleagues associated with the VPS group. Thus, in addition to Daniela (who translated Raúl Quirós Molina's *Where Do I Start?*), we enlisted Giorgia Alù (for Karis E. Halsall's *Mutant*), Laura Lori from the University of Melbourne (for Bahar Brunton's *Dancing Feet*) and Annamaria Pagliaro from Monash University (for Isley Lynn's *Sleight of Hand*).<sup>8</sup> The style and language of the four pieces are quite different—from the verbatim reporting of four interviewed people in *Where Do I Start?* to the rapid exchanges between two women who take care of girls who have just been cut in *Dancing Feet*, to the highly colloquial language of the five characters in *Sleight of Hand*, and the poetic musing of the girl who is cut in *Mutant*—and so it seemed appropriate, and likely enriching, to have a different translator for each. This approach was also in line with the mission of the ACIS research groups: they are intended to be as inclusive and interdisciplinary as possible, and to ensure their initiatives provide opportunities for scholars from various fields to work together on projects under a general theme.

Initially, each translator worked alone, but her first draft would then be reviewed with Daniela and Claire, or Claire and Luciana. Our debates and collaboration over the translation of the texts were concerned largely with two issues: how to talk about FGM/C, and consistency of language use across the four pieces.

The pamphlet “Come parlare di Mutilazioni Genitali Femminili” (How to Talk about Female Genital Mutilation), published by *Associazione Italiana Donne per lo Sviluppo* (Italian Association of Women for Development) together with the Network EndFGM, provided clear guidelines for writing about FGM/C.<sup>9</sup> But, in the play scripts, we were translating spoken words, private conversations. Would a teenager or young woman actually use the words *mutilare* (mutilate) or *mutilata* (mutilated) to talk about her experience? Laura, who had studied Somali literature written in Italian, in which references to FGM/C appeared, suggested that in Italian the words *cucire* (sew) and *cucita* (sewn) would be more appropriate than *tagliare* or *tagliata* which correspond to the English “cut,” frequently used instead of “mutilate” or “mutilated.” However, such Italian expressions seem applicable only to a Type III FGM/C, one in which the vulva is stitched together with only a small orifice left for

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Lori and Luciana had co-organised the group of sessions and roundtable titled “Women and Conflict” at the Biennial ACIS Conference of 2017 in Prato, and both had worked with Claire on an earlier conference. Luciana, Laura, and Claire were then largely responsible for spawning the VPS group on the theme of representations of violence against women. Annamaria Pagliaro is the Editor of *Spunti e ricerche*, whose special issue edited by Gregoria Manzin (La Trobe University) and Barbara Pezzotti (Monash University), titled “Women and Violence in Contemporary Italian Literature,” was supported by the VPS research group.

<sup>9</sup> EndFGM, “Come parlare di Mutilazioni Genitali Femminili.”

menstruation and urination.<sup>10</sup> The plays we translated did not usually specify the type of mutilation the female protagonists would be or were subjected to. We eventually decided to use *tagliare* and *tagliata*, in order to avoid the negative connotations of the words *mutilare* and *mutilata*.

No matter which words were chosen, talking about FGM/C—even just thinking about it—was a difficult experience for all of us, and it was helpful that we could share the processing of the mental images that the four *Little Stitches* texts created in us. The images were no less horrific when shared—the words of the protagonists no less painful to recreate in a different language. But it was good to collaborate with colleagues who could understand the horror of the issue, because they were working on the same topic.

Our collaboration took on a different tone—much less painful, but no less concerned with precision—when we came to the point of aligning the four translations in terms of our linguistic choices. As it turns out, no four Italians from different regions can agree on the use of the article in front of a possessive adjective when referring to a family member—and we all presented learned sources to back up our language choices. Finally, as consensus proved impossible, an executive decision was made in favour of translating “my mum” as *la mia mamma* (as opposed to *mia mamma*). And we discovered that we had translated the gesture of shrugging in the stage directions in four different ways: *alzare*, *scrollare*, *scuotere le spalle*, and *fare spallucce*.

Of course, we also had to consult the writers to ask for clarifications. Nobody in the *Little Stitches* team spoke Italian—the closest was Raúl Quirós Molina, whose first language is Spanish. Thus, the authors had to trust us to make accurate choices. Moreover, their text in English had not been published, so we were working on performance scripts, with the consequent problems of inconsistent formatting between the four plays. In sum, our collaboration extended to the authors themselves, whom we frequently contacted and who occasionally revised their texts as we noticed some inconsistencies.

While we had decided to have four native speakers of Italian as translators, it was essential for us to have the support of Claire, our English native speaker, as she was sometimes able to detect nuances in the English dialogue that the Italian translators could not. The adjective “special” was a case in point: we would not have noticed the slightly negative connotation that the word seems to have acquired. Thus, we often had to ask the writers to confirm Claire’s intuitions and then work a bit harder in order to include such nuances in the Italian translations.

We would probably agree that the hardest character to translate was the Ice-cream Van Driver, from Lynn’s *Sleight of Hand*. First of all, the concept of an ice-cream van in itself is alien to most Italians, while it constitutes a joyful sign of summer for the British population. Then, there was the problem of explaining the sort of ice-cream sold in such vans: we ended up describing it as *il gelato come da McDonald’s* (ice-cream McDonald’s style). Finally, the ice-cream vendor coloured his speech with a lot of swearing. Once again, we enjoyed erudite exchanges of emails—this time on the best ways to translate into Italian a range of insults from “wankers” to “dickheads.”

While working on this book through the Coronavirus pandemic emergency, we were constantly reminded of the renewed urgency of combating violence against women and girls, including the types of violence portrayed and examined in these plays. News items reported on an increased incidence of family violence in our own countries and elsewhere during long periods of lockdown, and Plan International raised the alarm that in Somalia the lockdown had led to an increase in FGM/C, as cutters needing business during the economic downturn went door-to-door to offer their services

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<sup>10</sup> The types of FGM/C are described in World Health Organisation, “Female genital mutilation.”

while students were home from school.<sup>11</sup> Plan International, which works worldwide for children's rights, also reported more generally on the danger of the Covid crisis producing "a shadow pandemic of gender-based violence"—including increased rates of child marriage and pregnancy—under the pressures of lockdown and economic crises.<sup>12</sup> A global review report to the United Nations General Assembly in July 2020 warned "the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has further exposed violence against women as a global emergency requiring urgent action."<sup>13</sup>

The plays that we have collected in the book not only give names and faces to the stories of women who have suffered gender-based violence (Fiorella, Kubra, and the young women of *Little Stitches* Dunya, Safa and Felicity), but give space to their emotions and to our empathy as spectators or readers, affecting us in ways that statistics and reports cannot.

We were able to work on the book despite the Covid crisis because the process did not require archival research. We were fortunate in that all our authors, producers, and directors sent us their texts as email attachments and were reachable by electronic means, once international travelling became impossible. And it was even more fortunate that we had decided to co-edit the work, and that we found other colleagues willing to share the work with us. Collaborating on a common project during the pandemic, each of us locked in their home, promoted a particular kind of well-being and community of purpose. With all live theatrical activities stopped, the authors, directors, and producers of the plays we had chosen became more available to us. Although disappointed at not being able to interview them face to face, we found that the capabilities of newly discovered apps and software came to our aid. Communicating almost daily allowed us to share and process the distress created by the texts that we were working on, by those examples of violence against women that were, sadly, becoming even more frequent during the pandemic. In 2021, as our book has just been published, and we begin planning an English edition,<sup>14</sup> we are grateful that working together allowed us to survive the first Covid-19 year and proud of what we have accomplished through our collaboration. Our hope is that our book will be read as an *atto di accusa* against continued violence against women, be it in the shape of rape or FGM/C or its myriad other forms, and that it will help in our common fight to eradicate any form of violence.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Foon, "Domestic Violence," for New Zealand; Kennedy, "The Worst Year" for Australia; and Taub, "A New Covid-19 Crisis," for a worldwide perspective. On cutters going door to door in Somalia, see Kumar and Wambui, "Girls in Somalia Subjected to Door-To-Door FGM."

<sup>12</sup> "How Covid-19 Is Threatening Girls' Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights."

<sup>13</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls."

<sup>14</sup> The book, titled *Staging Violence Against Women and Girls: Plays and Interviews*, tailored for English-speaking audiences, is for publication by Bloomsbury, London, in 2023.

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