

Dancing with Fashion.

Seeking for a New Model of Partnership and Innovation in Corporate Citizenship

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This essay focuses on the ongoing dialogue between for profit and non profit organizations, and on different forms of interaction between differently-oriented organizations.

The Aterballetto-Marella case shows the attempt of setting up an innovative partnership pattern between a non profit organization – a foundation supporting some of the most significant dance company nationally – and a for profit international fashion brand. The essay will thoroughly consider the opportunities and the limits related to the effort to turn a traditional form of sponsorship into a far-reaching cooperation, aiming at the cultural empowerment of the territory and the community as well as at the creation of a “third dimension” of shared values and culture that could improve on – through a logic of “win-win” – both a for profit and a non profit organization.

By using the methodology of critical evaluation and crossed comparison of the perceptions and representations of the players involved as well as of the relation between the blue-print of the project and the actual outcomes of the partnership, the paper will explore the articulation between innovation and the catching up of somehow seedy traditional models, which generate a tension between the search for a new dimension of corporate citizenship and the old pattern of using philanthropy and CSR as vehicles to improve business outcomes and enhance the visibility of the for profit company. Does the matrix, whose most innovative trait should be the exchange of skills and visions between the members of the foundation and the staff of the company, really fits its purpose? Or is it yet another uninspired fluctuation of a market-oriented sponsorship pattern?

Amongst other features, the paper will take into consideration the following issues:

- The shared vision and the common strategies, if any, of the boards (of both the foundation and the corporation) as a framework for leadership and innovative partnership.
- The asymmetries in management and governance as a constraint in triggering an evolutionary process which enhances a bottleneck effect.

The paper aims at stressing out those strategic, commercial and political hurdles (Galaskiewicz and Coleman, 2006), which co-determine a process of involution, lowering the interactive and innovative effects of the non profit-business partnership, through an analysis of specific organizational gaps (e.g. lack of long-term evolutionary strategies, incapacity of both the crystallized institutional actors in building into traditional structures the vision beneath, etc.).

The first step is a brief **narrative** about the creation of the partnership

Before establishing a partnership, the Ater Balletto Foundation and Marella, a sub-brand of Max Mara¹, the well known Italian fashion house, had nothing to share but the nearness of their headquarters (both placed in Reggio Emilia, a mid size town in the Northern part of Italy) and two successful stories. Respectively in supporting some of the most significant dance projects nationally and in the field of fashion.

The partnership was established in 2005, thanks to the initiative of two leading personalities, sharing a strong determination in performing successfully and creatively: the CEO and Founder of Marella - a mining engineer, very talented in managing companies - and the President of the Ater Balletto Foundation - a human

¹ The role of Marella's CEO as well of the owner of the Max Mara Holding, the Maramotti family, was crucial in shaping this business model, based on the articulation of several independent societies, each one with its own brand and its own CEO as a key, self- entrepreneurial role.

scientist with significant expertise in managing and designing strategies in the field of arts.

Beside being an entrepreneur himself, Marella's CEO clearly showed his talent in shaping communication strategies, through an initiative that went in the direction of implementing a possible sponsorship with the Foundation, by transforming it into a co-production. As we shall see, this strategy represented at the same time an opportunity and a challenge for the two players but also a limit and, finally, a constraint in the evolutionary process of the partnership. The story of the partnership starts with an award in 2005 by the organization Impresa Culltura which each year organizes an event and deliver a series of awards for the best programs in establishing partnership between business companies and cultural organizations. Among others we decided to analyse the Aterballetto - Marella partnership because it was presented with relevant elements of innovation and impact.

Concerning the methodology our research team conducted semi-structured interviews with the managers and the personnel of the two organizations and assisted to the to the performances of the company ballet, observing the behaviour of the players, with a special focus on the role of Marella's executives responsible in the partnership programme. Before starting the interviews we collected information about the origins of the project.

At the origin of the partnership both strategy and serendipity played a role. The Marella's CEO had since a long time the idea of developing a project, linking dance and fashion, by using the social capital of the territory of Reggio Emilia. The serendipity was connected to the necessity of preparing a collection that should enhance dynamism and softness particularly adapted to young people. The Marella's CEO and founder had a long experience as coordinator of the cultural activities of the Association of the local entrepreneurs and a good knowledge of the cultural activities in the region. In this framework he has been the editor of the association's newsletter "Vision". A very prophetic name indeed! Instead of just having a group of dancers presenting a fashion collection the idea was to have dresses, skirts and pants

moving: fashion in action, from the catwalk to the stage. This vision, shared by the President of the Ater Balletto Foundation, implied, on the ballet company side, a reconceptualization of the role of the costumes, which became the core of the choreography. With the same logic, which can be represented as a chiasmus, Marella developed a totally new rationale: not a fashion exhibition but a dancing performance. Ater Balletto's artistic Director was very enthusiastic about this idea and instead of creating a collage of different performances, he dedicated his energy and creativity in a totally new performance, in a totally new choreography based on a "interpretation" of the fashion collection, adapting choreography to the fashion collection or even better creating a new choreography that made the dresses dancing.

At the origins the partnership was not based on offering a ballet performance in order to respond to an offer of sponsorship but on the creativity of a joint-production, which eventually could create a replicable model, a cultural matrix that can fertilize both the business company and the Ballet Foundation organizational culture.

Creativity was also enhanced by the label of the fashion collection to be launched: "B Side" – LatoB - which indicates the less relevant or less fashionable side of the old Long-Play records. The analogy is evident: the dancers' costumes are no longer means, objects exclusively related to the performance, but actually become the core of the choreography. The main effect was the embodiment of the choreography and its identification with the dancing dresses.

The main question we addressed both to the fashion company's CEO and the President of the Ater Balletto Foundation was related to the effect of their partnership at the level of their organizational culture. The answer was quite enthusiastic and positive: the emphasis wasn't on the success of the event but on the potential of its replication. The president of the Ater Balletto Foundation (at present: former president) and the CEO of Marella, agreed in stressing out the fact that the "B Side" first performance was replicated in other places, with a larger audience

attending the performance²: in Barcelona first and, later on, at the festival of literature of Mantua, with a lot of impact and success from the audience.

In recent times many companies - such as for example BMW - have reproduced this contamination among their corporate business, dancing and fashion but, apparently, nobody has realized the hybridization that was at work in the Marella –Ater Balletto partnership.

The perception of the success and of the impact and the transformation of the risk into a growing opportunity of creativity led the two partners to generate a more structured system of collaboration. This occurred at the level of the preparation of a new performance: an original reinterpretation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It represented the framework in which the matrix of the partnership could be replicated with the co-operation of another fashion company with a very specific characterization: Dainese, the world leading company for bikers technical gear. This company bases its success on the high level of creativity and innovation of its founder and owner Mr. Lino Dainese. The collaboration of Lino Dainese, the choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti and the visual artist Fabrizio Plessi was intensive and very enthusiastic and represented the opportunity for a further more important step: the involvement of Marella as a co-producer of the performance which also generate the cooptation of the Marella CEO into the board of the Ater Balletto Foundation (at present this is no more the case)

In the framework of the first performance of the *Romeo and Juliet*, which took place in Germany, the co-production role has been extended also to the German theatre in which the performance took place. The result is a symbolic performance in which the strong impact of the dresses for bikers (boots, helmets etc) represented the forces that constraint the affirmation of love and passion. The Dainese products are not just a complement but a part of the narrative plot, a symbolic test the really design the performance. The interaction between the company ballet and the musicians - particularly the director of the German Theater - was overwhelmed by the role played

² The first B Side performance was basically meant to be a Business to Business event. Only the Marella customers and shareholders were invited to attend.

by the set designer, whose works were presented at the Hack-Museum of Ludwigshafen in a big exhibition - Digital Island - which collect Plessi's works from the Eighties to the Nineties.

Actually, the International and national success of the performance and the amplification of the partnerships related to the event, represent the highest peak of the partnership, in terms of potential consolidation and representation of the matrix as well as the starting point of the involution of its growth, in terms of innovation and impact of the partnership in the organizational culture of the two organizations.

As we said our research team had the opportunities to assist to several replications of the performance. Beside the originality of the performance, we also noticed that at the exit the personnel of the Marella company donated to each lady who assisted to the performance a bag with the Marella label and a catalogue of the recent production of the fashion brand: it was clearly a marketing operation which has nothing to do with the content of the performance. We perceived that a regressive process was in act and we decided to a develop further inquiry which focused on a top down process, involving not only the top managers but also the executive who were involved in the partnership process.

Beside the enthusiastic facade of a series of very successful performances, which apparently consolidated the cultural and strategic matrix of the partnership we perceived that something was wrong on the side of communication processes

The research team went through a deeper inquiry, involving other components of the two organizations in order to explore how the perception of the innovation model was at work and really had an impact at the level of the different components of the two organizations: the company ballet and the personnel of Marella.

We made interviews with the responsible of parallel and similar functions within the two organizations in joint sessions and particularly with the head of communication

departments and with the “creative” managers, the choreographer for Ater Balletto, the fabric and styling manager for Marella. In the interviews, two relevant aspects became evident: the first one was the high level of interaction between the stylist manager and the choreographer. Both of them had a strong dedication to the Side B performance and a lot of enthusiasm about the artistic effect of the performance. Quite different was the perception from the point of view of the communication department. In this context asymmetries emerged. While in the web site of Ater Balletto there a strong result was given to the Side B performance and to the strategic effects of the co-production, in the Marella web site - a B to B site - the communication about the projects and its outcome was practically non-existent. And this was in contrast with the enthusiasms of the personnel who attended the first “exhibition” of Side B. From these additional interviews we started to discuss and analyse a bifurcation pattern, between innovation and replication of old models. In this perspective the first steps of the partnership appeared as functioning more in terms of CSR engagement, rather than in terms of a creative civic entrepreneurship matrix, generating new models of organizational culture through the hybridization of dance and fashion.

Our perception was that, beside the first impetus, the Marella management was increasingly focusing on the marketing effect of the product. Afterwards, Side B became for the fashion company a special collection to be put in the market rather than a creative work, a piece of art. At that point we decided to make interviews also at the level of the retail system, and again it was evident that the marketing was more relevant than the cultural strategy. At the level of the retail system, in fact, Side B was perceived as a collection, which contained a successful sponsorship, rather than as a cultural innovation with its own cultural message: fashion can be a vehicle of artistic creation. Our questioning about the regressive behaviour of the fashion company in the second and successful performance of *Romeo and Juliet* started to find some answers. Actually, the answer was a paradox. While the matrix that originally supported the partnership - the customs playing the role of characters and

shaping the plot of the performance – became an independent pattern and consequently a potential matrix - with Dainese firm cooperating in the choreography and giving through the bikers gear the main imprinting to the performance – everybody can resist to everything except to the force of love - Marella took, in the same performance, the role of marketing the products as a sponsor rather than as the “creator”. The paradox within the paradox is that Marella continue to play the role of co-producer in the AterBalletto production, but in our perspective this role is a more traditional one as compared with the original design of the partnership and its conceptualization by the two top managers. This regressive orientation is emphasised by the fact the President of Marella resigned and the new President was not a player in the original strategy. It is a matter of fact that the role of Marella in the last creations of the Ater balletto choreograher Mauro Bigonzetti *Minus* and *Terra* is mainly that of provider of customs for the dancers rather than of a player in the construction of the plot. There is still, obviously, at work a form of cooperating in the production of the performance but a more traditional one in comparison with the role of Marella in the choreography of Side B. Moreover the core role of the dancing costumes of Dainese as relevant aim of the plot in *Romeo and Juliet* and consequently a continuation of the cultural matrix of SideB - seems now to be reduced rather to a reductive logic and an allusive aim – the errant people and particularly Jewish people – in the plot of *Terra* - rather than the core aim of the performance. This aspect has been stressed also by a commentator of the performance who stated that :

“Marella’s costums take inspiration from the Fifties and help- to some extent. With the use of luggage permanently on the stage- to enhance the reference to the erratic life of Jewish communities and their quest for the Promised Land in the framework of a festival dedicate to Israel”

If we make reference to the main literature and case studies about civic entrepreneurship (Gregory Dees, Peter Drucker and others) we can enhance in this presentation several aspects that do not meet the strategic issues of civic

entrepreneurship and rather produce a bottle-neck effect. A first consideration is related to the model of collaboration which does not produce a third dimension or at least quite paradoxically enhances a possible new dimension of cultural partnership which has been developed by other actors and did not emerge really as a “matrix” to be structured (Austin 2000). From the point of view of civic entrepreneurship several considerations should be stressed.

Like the business entrepreneur, the civic entrepreneur sees opportunity, and mobilizes others in the community to work toward their collective well-being. Civic Entrepreneurs share crucial traits. Civic entrepreneurs take their regional economy—its opportunities and needs—as a starting point, and help communities make positive choices about their future, building the relationships and specialized resources for success. This was what the Presidents of the two organizations - in our case study - considered as a positive framework for their partnership.

Second, civic entrepreneurs share the personality of the classic business entrepreneur. In contrast to the idealist, civic entrepreneurs are challenged by the "how-to" questions and delight in getting results. Mobilizing resources, persisting against all odds, driving toward tangible results—civic entrepreneurs bring their entrepreneurial mindset and skills to the civic arena. This was precisely what the two entrepreneurs, in our case study, had intention to do in the first phase which was the frame for the production of SideB

Third, civic entrepreneurs exert a collaborative style of leadership. They know how to work with people to get results. They provide collaborative leadership to bring diverse parties to the table, identify common ground, and take joint action. They build bridges. This was the main aim of SideB project to create a matrix bridging dance and fashion simultaneously

Fourth, civic entrepreneurs are motivated to get involved in their community out of enlightened, long-term self-interest. Civic entrepreneurs believe that their personal long-term interests, and those of their organization, are to some extent tied to the

cultural and social life of the community. They view it as in their best interest to work toward a long-term positive interconnectedness among business vitality, schools and universities, physical infrastructure, natural environment, and tax base. This motivation is in direct contrast to traditional roles that have been played by business and other community leaders--the lobbyist who advocates narrow positions, the philanthropist who contributes money for personal recognition, the opportunist

entrepreneurship is not about altruism per se; it is about long-term interests that include community well being and quality of life issues, including cultural aim

This is in our perspective the beginning of the bottle-neck effect in our case study: a creative cultural matrix was narrowed and lowered to the classical role of a firm which supplies the costumes for a ballet company and consequently - despite the formal role of co-producer- the Marella firm tends to act as a supplier of the choreography, as a complement in the choreography, rather than as a creator or a designer as it was originally in Lato B.

Fifth, civic entrepreneurs work in teams to help their communities move forward. They are not lone eagles or solitary charismatic leaders. Community change processes are complex undertakings that require multiple talents and a lot of teaching. Civic entrepreneurs play different roles on a team, each contributing their unique skills, experience, personalities, and connections.

Only by combining roles and developing more and more new leaders are civic entrepreneurs effective. It is at this level that bottle - neck effect becomes evident. We have seen, in fact, that the personnel of Marella fashion firm was unaware of the cultural aim of the partnership and beside the first event was not involved in the consolidation of the cultural matrix. This is even more evident at the level of the retail and the customers that perceived Side B only as a new collection. The most recent performances of the company - as we said - did not reproduced the matrix. Paradoxically the diapason of the matrix as potential strategic bridge between fashion and dance has been represented by the choreography in which Lino Dainese firm for

bikers dresses acted simultaneously as dancing fashion and designer of the plot in the *Romeo and Juliet* performance. The paradox is evident: another firm co-produced the ballet, with Marella playing the role of the sponsor but maintaining the formal role of co-producer and member of the Ater Balletto Foundation Board.

What we would like to stress in the final part of our presentation is that instead of strengthening the bridge between fashion and dance, the *Romeo and Juliet* performance - representing paradoxically the highest level of articulation between the two sides of a coin which was supposed to be unique - was also the starting point of a narrowing role of Marella in the bridging process.

At present Marella launches a collection which is called **Dancing**, produces a bag called **dancing bag**. But “dance” is more an icon rather than a culture that cross-fertilize the company in a process which should be bottom-up if the effect of generating innovative organizational culture has worked successfully. The collaboration between the partners is claimed as a permanent feature but it is not the product of a cross-fertilization process that generates **simultaneously** structural cultural effects within the two organizations and strengthen a logic of win-win- as a third dimension of bridging cultural patterns.

Conceived thanks to the collaboration with the Aterballetto Dance Company – that Marella will flank for the tour of **Romeo and Juliet** as the sole private co-producer – this mini-collection mirrors the latest trends in colours, shapes and materials. Perfectly suitable for leisure time, it proposes the must-have garments for the new season, such as the overalls and the parka. It is perfect but only from the point of view of marketing fashion not of generating arts.

Our observation is that in the case of Marella and AterBalletto the cooperation occurs in fields that remain separated in their own performances. It is after all a commercial strategy rather than a civic entrepreneurial partnership. In the case study we have presented, the collaborative effect is not as challenging as it was expected in

the first original project: actually the partnership is levelled to a mutual gain rather than to a win-win evolutionary matrix.

To conclude by using the metaphor of the Romeo and Juliet performance- “it is possible to resist to every constraint except love”- we can observe that in the case of the Marella Ater-Balletto partnership what -at the very end - seems to prevail is the principle that it is possible to resist to every pressure except to the market.

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