

1 Towards a theatre of humanity

The first ten years at the Piccolo Teatro were ten years of theatrical madness. In ten years we chose, rehearsed and mounted nearly eighty plays. We put them on in our small theatre in Milan, in the open air, in squares, churches, celebrated theatres throughout Italy and all over Europe . . . it was hard work but exhilarating. Our theatre was from the start a poor theatre and it has remained a poor theatre. Initially we had a first-rate group of actors and technicians who decided to stay together. But eventually one of them – or a group – would leave and others would take their place. The history of the Piccolo is that of four or five companies which have constantly alternated, changed, amalgamated; plus those few individuals who have stayed with the theatre for twenty or thirty years. The Piccolo started with a group of friends and has developed into a communal theatre in which the personal relationships are all-important, most of all the strong and enduring friendship between myself and Paolo.

Strehler, 'Schegge di memoria', *Teatro in Europa* 1 (1987), p. 70

Giorgio Strehler's now celebrated production of *The Tempest* opened at the Teatro Lirico in Milan in 1978. At its climax the magician in control of events is profoundly influenced by his servant's unlooked-for sympathy for his victims:

ARIEL: Your charm so strongly works them
 That if you now beheld them your affections
 Would become tender.

PROSPERO: Dost think so, spirit?

ARIEL: Mine would, sir, were I human.

As Ariel (Giulia Lazzarini) hovered tentatively behind her master (Tino Carraro) her phrase: 'se fossi umana' had the effect of crystallising the essence of Strehler's theatre. This painful moment of realisation coinciding with an Aristotelian reversal of intentions on the part of the 'wronged duke' formed a powerful dramatic catharsis. As Lazzarini, part Pierrot, part acrobat, part ballerina, glided away – still attached to the clearly visible wire which manipulated all the gyrations of the 'tricksy spirit' – we were forced to consider the implications of Prospero's inhumanity. It was at the same time a Brechtian 'alienation effect' and a theatrical image of great force as the magician and his devoted servant – images of the stage director and his interpreter – shared a moment of revelation on Luciano Damiani's bare sand-covered stage.

'Umano' is the key word in Strehler's approach to theatre. In 1974 he published a collection of essays under the title *Per un teatro umano* which

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David L. Hirst
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stands alongside Brook's *The Empty Space* or Grotowsky's *Towards a Poor Theatre* as a seminal late-twentieth-century text. Only the lack of an English translation has contributed to the relative obscurity of this Italian director, whose work is little known in Britain. It should be pointed out that the title itself is particularly difficult to translate since the Italian word 'umano' has all the implications of human, humane and humanitarian with their concomitant social and political overtones. It is his concern to explore such values through his productions that has led Strehler again and again to Shakespeare, Goldoni and Brecht. These three dramatists have a fundamental significance to his work. Strehler undertook his first production of *The Tempest* in 1948, the year which had marked his initial confrontation with Shakespeare in *Richard II*. In



- 1 Giulia Lazzarini as Ariel and Tino Carraro as Prospero in Strehler's production of *The Tempest*, 1978

the previous year, the inaugural season at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan had included his first Goldoni staging: *Arlecchino, the Servant of Two Masters*, a play which he has continued to rework for forty years. He did not undertake a full-scale Brecht production until 1956, when he mounted *The Threepenny Opera*. This staging, which Brecht himself considered superior to his original of 1928, was to lead – shortly after Brecht's death – to Strehler's being offered the directorship of the Berliner Ensemble. Though Brecht is still little performed in Italy, his work has featured constantly in the repertoire of the Piccolo, the version of *Galileo* in 1962 being regarded internationally as something close to perfection. It is significant that Strehler should see a strong link between the human concerns explored by these three playwrights whose subject-matter and styles are so different.

The cosmic dimension of Shakespeare is a far cry from the bourgeois world at the centre of Goldoni's drama, or the analysis of political and social conditions seen through a historical perspective which characterises the mature work of Brecht. Strehler's achievement has been to find powerfully effective theatrical styles appropriate to the performance of these dramatists. He is one of the very few directors outside Germany who has tackled Brecht successfully: his skill resides in his combining a clear awareness of the epic style with a stunning sense of theatre and a profound knowledge of music. His work on Goldoni, one of Italy's few great playwrights, has resulted in a major revaluation of the canon. Not only has Strehler revealed the strengths of previously neglected or underestimated pieces (such as the *Villeggiatura* trilogy or *Le baruffe chiozzotte*) but – along with Dario Fo – he has been responsible for a revival of the commedia style. His interest in Shakespeare – which began, significantly enough, with productions of the major history plays – saw its crowning achievement in his *King Lear* (1972) and his *Tempest*. These two productions employed his vast range of theatrical skills – from commedia through to aspects of epic staging – whilst having an essentially Italian emphasis in their affinity with lyric opera, another field of Strehler's interest and achievement.

Not only has Strehler consistently returned to these three dramatists; he has often returned to the same play. *Arlecchino* has never been out of the Piccolo repertoire for long, having been through six entirely different productions. He has returned to *The Threepenny Opera* twice (in 1973 and 1986) and has reworked Shakespeare's first historical trilogy – as *Il gioco dei potenti* (*Power Games*) – on three separate occasions. Two plays crucial to his theatre – *The Cherry Orchard* and Bertolazzi's *El nost Milan* – both received their first productions in 1955 and were later revived in greatly enriched stagings. In his important study of Strehler's work up to 1965, *Teoria e realtà del Piccolo Teatro di Milano*, Giorgio Guazzotti concludes by suggesting that

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Strehler has always been guided by some kind of intuitive 'compass', one which has gradually become more and more precise and which accounts both for the choice of his plays and the style of his work. This is a useful image, complemented by Strehler's own more recent suggestion that very often the plays have forced themselves on him rather as the six characters did on Pirandello. To date Strehler has undertaken some 200 productions. His range is vast and may at first seem bewilderingly eclectic. But it is important to understand from the start the principles which have guided his work and which have gradually emerged with greater clarity over half a century of theatrical activity.

Strehler's name will always be linked to that of the Piccolo, the theatre he helped to found in Milan which celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 1987. Equally important in the story of the Piccolo is Paolo Grassi, Strehler's friend and associate, who helped him found and run the theatre until Strehler broke with the organisation in 1968. The way in which this theatre came into being makes a fascinating story indicative of the cultural and political atmosphere in post-war Italy in general and in Milan in particular. Though Strehler's career has developed considerably since then, the beliefs and principles which led him to undertake that enterprise at the Piccolo still inform the whole of his work.

Strehler was born at Barcola (Trieste) on 14 August 1921, but moved to Milan with his mother in 1928. In 1938 he became a student at the Accademia dei Filodrammatici, where he studied for two years to be an actor. After graduating in June 1940 he worked with a number of theatrical companies – both traditional and experimental – and in January 1943 made his directorial debut with three one-act plays by Pirandello. In September of that year he was called up for military service and spent the last two years of the war in Switzerland, partly in a prisoner-of-war camp at Murren, and then, after receiving permission from the Swiss authorities, in Geneva. He was able to attend classes at the Conservatory there and he went on to found an international company, La Compagnie des Masques, under the pseudonym of Georges Firmy. When the war ended he returned to Milan.

A thriving cultural scene characterised Milan in the period immediately after its liberation by the Allies. The city had been the centre of partisan resistance in the North and the freedom which followed the downfall of the fascist regime influenced the literary life there, creating an intellectual solidarity. As publications such as *Politecnico*, edited by the writer Elio Vittorini, and *Avanti!* gave scope for the exchange of fresh political and social viewpoints, the new theatre was struggling to emerge. Paolo Grassi, then a critic for *Avanti!*, provoked a particularly lively scene in the foyer of the Teatro Nuovo when he accused the play then showing, by Aldo de

Benedetti, of a fascist ideology and referred pointedly to actresses who had been the mistresses of important members of the regime. Outraged defence of Italian womanhood was countered by the young Vittorio Gassman, who leapt on to a chair and – citing Kaiser and Strindberg – announced that the theatre ‘must grow up or die’. The celebrated veteran actor Renzo Ricci (Gassman’s father-in-law) retorted stiffly: ‘You cite Kaiser and Strindberg, but I have performed *Shakespeare*’ – which proved too much for Grassi, who burst out: ‘You might have performed Shakespeare, but you’re an old ham!’¹

Strehler soon teamed up with Grassi and tried to persuade him to found a theatre company. Grassi, however, believing that something along the lines of a civic public theatre was in the long run more important than any individual enterprise, succeeded in making him bide his time. Strehler in turn became a drama critic – for *Milano Sera* – but was soon drawn back to directing when the veteran experimental director Anton Giulio Bragaglia suggested mounting *Mourning Becomes Electra*. O’Neill’s vast drama was performed with great success – after only two weeks of rehearsal – and was followed by stagings of *Desire Under The Elms* and *Thérèse Raquin*. The Zola, with its realistic emphasis, seems in retrospect the most characteristic piece for Strehler to have tackled in this period when he was throwing himself with gusto into whatever theatrical venture offered itself.

His next choice – to mount Gorky’s *The Petite Bourgeoisie* – was a more meaningful decision, seconded by Grassi, who set about his first administrative venture with Strehler by finding the necessary funds. It was another Gorky play – *The Lower Depths* – which was to open the memorable first season at the Piccolo the following year; the nucleus of actors was the same in both. Grassi was convinced that the time had come to team up with Strehler in a more ambitious venture and set about looking for a venue. The story of their first visit to the place that was to become their theatre is remarkable. They happened to stop in front of the Cinema Broletto in Via Rovello. During the last months of the war it had been the base for a fascist regiment – the Muti – employed to round up and torture partisans (there was congealed blood on the walls of the ex-dressing rooms, which had served as cells). Immediately after the war it had been taken over as a club for allied soldiers. A notice reading ‘Off Limits’ was still in evidence when the two men went into the courtyard and saw a door fastened with a small lock. Grassi kicked down the door and they went in. Strehler describes the sight:

An abandoned auditorium with uprooted seats, an empty stage with a red curtain drawn half-way up. Suddenly whilst we were gazing in a thin ray of sunlight crossed the stage and stopped in one corner. It was just as though a spotlight had been switched on almost by magic and a shaft of light was consciously trying to point out the stage: this stage. An invitation? A provocation?²

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Grassi turned to Strehler and asked: 'Well, Giorgio, do you think you can turn this place into a home for a permanent theatre company?' Strehler stayed in the empty cinema for four hours and thought it through very carefully. He decided to take the risk.

The work during the next few months was intensive: the theatre had to be overhauled and equipped, a programme had to be formulated, a company assembled and the funds for the enterprise found. This was no one-off undertaking by an enthusiastic group of theatricals; Grassi took the matter to the highest level, involving critics, writers and officials. The mayor, Greppi, was enthusiastic and on 29 January 1947 convened a meeting with other cultural and political advisors. There were the usual objections, including that of a noted left-wing figure who claimed that priority should be given to the public services, schools and hospitals; but Montagnani, the cultural representative, argued that 'moral and cultural values are of equal importance to a society as building walls or expanding public services'. This point of view was dear to Grassi, who had claimed in an article in *Avanti!* (25 April 1946) that theatre was itself a 'public service'. Mindful of the achievement of art theatres, notably in Paris and Moscow, Grassi had proposed a different solution for the Milanese situation. He felt it was necessary to start from scratch, to stimulate and provoke the public, to make it conscious of its role and nature: in a word, to *form* it. In his view it was the duty of the public – as well as the state – to use such a public service.

In short Grassi argued that theatre was as necessary, as fundamental, as public transport, the health service or education. His brand of inspired liberal communism struck a chord with Strehler and influenced the formation of the Piccolo – from its choice of repertoire and staff through to the administration. Strehler insists that 'the Piccolo Teatro has always remained faithful to two principles: a free interchange of ideas within the group and a stress on human values in the selection of the repertoire'.³ The manifesto which was issued to coincide with the first season made Grassi and Strehler's position clear:

After the rhetoric of theatre for the masses and the restrictions of fascist propaganda we believe it is time to begin to work in depth so that later we can gain a wider audience. We hope that the theatre-goers who come to us will become the nucleus who will help to fill bigger theatres; unless we deceive ourselves, every civilisation works by bringing different groups of people together and integrating them into a richer and more varied unit.⁴

They were insistent that the Piccolo should not be an 'experimental' theatre or private institution putting on plays only for the initiated. It would be 'an art theatre for everybody'. They wanted a new audience: workers, young people drawn from schools, the university, offices and factories; and they offered shows 'of a high artistic calibre at prices as low as possible'.

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Strehler’s task was threefold: to create a new repertoire, a new audience and a new acting style. In this he was assisted by Grassi, who helped to form his social and political commitment, curbed some of the director’s wilder excesses, found the money to finance the company’s ventures, and proved a



2 Strehler with his co-founder of the Piccolo Teatro, Paolo Grassi

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skilful politician in persuading the authorities of the validity of the more ambitious schemes. If the Piccolo has – over forty years – become something of a fashionable institution, this is precisely because Strehler and Grassi have achieved their aim in attracting an ever wider public. The house in Via Rovello was soon to prove far too small to accommodate the ever-expanding audience even after the structural alterations completed in 1952 had expanded the seating for 500 to nearly 700. Various solutions have been sought: from increasing the number of performances to playing in a bigger theatre, the Lirico. But the first expedient inevitably reduces the number of productions per season, whilst the Lirico is acoustically far from ideal as a theatre for straight plays. The only real answer would be a new base. In 1986 the company expanded its work to the Teatro Studio (which also has restricted seating space) and Strehler now increasingly looks to the Odéon in Paris as a base for launching large-scale productions. The Milan authorities – who took twelve years to recognise the theatre's right to the status of 'ente autonomo' (an official state-supported organisation, like La Scala) – have been even slower to construct for the company the theatre it so plainly deserves.

The choice of repertoire for the opening season was crucial. There had been talk of beginning with Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, an Italian classic, but a lawyer, Luigi Meda, acting for the Christian Democrat party, opposed this on the grounds that the play dramatised the violation of one of the sacraments, confession. The inaugural play finally chosen was Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, followed by *The Nights of Rage* by Salacrou, *The Prodigious Magician* by Calderón and Goldoni's *Arlecchino, the Servant of Two Masters*. The repertoire was a deliberate challenge and invitation to the new audience; but it can also be seen at a much later point in time as fulfilling the artistic credo which was guiding the founders and which has continued to influence Strehler for over forty years. If Shakespeare had to wait a little and Brecht a long while, there was Goldoni, represented by the play which was soon to become the company's international hallmark. The Calderón initiated that preoccupation with the magic of theatre which was to grow and mature through Strehler's career. His concern with the life of the lower depths was to recur not only in the revival of the Gorky in 1970 but in his productions of *El nost Milan* and *The Threepenny Opera*. The search for a realistic style appropriate to Italian techniques of acting was already beginning in that first show. The Salacrou (another piece he was to revive, in 1964) is a play about the French Resistance, of particular significance to a Milanese audience in the immediate post-war period. Special performances were given for ex-partisans; it must have been a disturbing experience for them to visit – or revisit – the place which had once been the base of their arch-enemies, the Muti.

The choice of repertoire was only one aspect of the challenge – it implied a certain type of audience, but that audience had to be educated, encouraged to expand their theatrical tastes. More to the point, Strehler had to find a group of actors – new actors – and train them in an acting style (or styles) which he would have to invent. As he has pointed out:

We were a generation without teachers, without leaders. We were kids who had nurtured a love for theatre, but at a great distance because we had grown old somewhere else, in a war that was for so many of us a source of great unhappiness or for others the excuse for mad, empty rhetoric. We were young in years, though, and in human and theatrical experience. And we were the ones who were going to have to guide 'the others'. These 'others' lived apart in a world of their own in which their way of working, their whole approach to theatre had grown decadent. They were profoundly cut off from reality in every sense; they knew neither the words to speak nor the way to speak them. They were trying to keep alive a theatre which both from a historical and a human point of view was at least fifty years out of date.⁵

What Strehler says his generation lacked were 'maestri': men of practical experience and knowledge who could teach and inspire them. In fact in a later essay entitled 'I miei maestri' (in *Per un teatro umano*) he points to three men who had a formative influence on him: Brecht, Copeau and Jouvét.

Tragically Brecht died shortly after visiting Milan to attend rehearsals and the performance of *The Threepenny Opera*, so that the friendship and admiration which had grown between the two men was not destined to develop. Strehler has expressed regret that he waited so long before he tackled a Brecht play, but his decision was a careful and wise one. Brecht has had the most direct and permanent influence of any writer or director on Strehler; their brief collaboration confirmed Strehler's interest and skills, which have expanded ever since. Strehler paid eloquent tribute to Jouvét when he mounted *Elvire or A Passion for Theatre*, in 1986, his dramatic adaptation of the French director's lectures on theatre given at the Conservatoire in Paris just before he left France for South America in 1940. Strehler has said:

As a young enthusiastic boy of twenty I learnt from him that theatre is a day-to-day joy, not a divine art. I owe to Jouvét in particular the sense of a critical imagination working within a show. The discovery that a production isn't just a philological, technical or cultural undertaking, but also a living interpretation of the text, an intuitive acceptance of its poetic values.⁶

He invited Jouvét to Italy when he fell out of favour in France after the failure of his *Tartuffe* production; Jouvét responded by helping the Piccolo when they went to France later – in 1949 – inviting the whole of fashionable Paris to their shows and introducing a radio programme in which Strehler talked about commedia. Strehler's debt to Copeau (whom he never met) is explained as follows:

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I owe to Copeau an austere, moral, almost Jansenist vision of theatre. Theatre representing moral responsibility in a collective context. A painfully religious feeling for theatre. I believe that deep down Copeau abandoned the theatre because he'd come to realise that in order to perform theatre as he wanted it performed he would have had to demand of his cast and crew the sort of things only God can require.⁷

His admiration for Copeau stems from the fact that the ex-director of the Vieux Colombier retired to Burgundy: 'to carry on his battle against star actors and to find a performance style that would be at the service of the text.'⁸

Despite his rejection of the ethics and aesthetics of the outmoded style of performance which reached its nadir during the fascist regime, Strehler has always had a great admiration for the talented veteran actors of a previous generation. Many of them have responded by working at the Piccolo: Camillo Pilotto (Strehler's first Prospero and Falstaff), Renzo Ricci (Richard III), Sarah Ferrati (Bernarda Alba) and Wanda Capodaglio (Volumnia), for example. Strehler was shrewd enough to learn from these 'maestri' too, whilst they, in working with him, developed their skills. As he has pointed out:

How many great actors and actresses who had become famous in the 1930s came to act with us, to put themselves in step with the new movements (even if that isn't quite what they would have admitted)? It would be unfair and historically inaccurate to claim that we in Via Rovello have ever run a theatre *opposed* to actors. We did – it's true – get rid of the excesses of the star actor.⁹

One of the main reasons for his sense of pride, Strehler claims, is that the Piccolo has always been there as 'a house you set off from and to which you came back . . . a springboard . . . or a port where you could refuel after a long voyage'. An anecdote which illustrates Strehler's down-to-earth practicality as a director – which he had already learned in part from Jouvet and which he was to develop through his encounter with Brecht – explains one of the fundamental reasons for his early (and continued) success with actors. Lilla Brignone, who had been with the company from the first season and who had played many roles including the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Viola, Nora in *A Doll's House* and Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*, was cast as Electra in Sophocles' tragedy (Strehler's only production of a classical Greek play to date). She felt out of her depth, frightened of making a fool of herself, and in a moment of exasperation banged on Strehler's directing table and shouted: 'Why the hell are we performing this rubbish anyway?' Instead of playing the indignant young intellectual, Strehler used all his skill and knowledge of the profession to cajole her into continuing with the difficult role. 'I had acted myself', he says, 'played walk-on parts, taken the prima donna's dog for a pee, toured in the provinces. I knew all about the poverty and the nobility of the