In search of Italian theatre

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The quest for Italian theatre will take the English-language reader into unfamiliar territory, and not only because theatres in New York or London rarely stage Italian plays. The unfamiliarity arises from an anomaly which goes to the very core of theatrical creativity. While the theatrical traditions of other European countries are author-centred, the theatre of Italy has been, through much of its development, actor-centred. Reforms, whether by Carlo Goldoni in the eighteenth century, or by Silvio D'Amico and others in the early twentieth century, have had as one of their central aims the restriction of the power of the actor in the theatrical hierarchy.

It is this dominance of the actor which explains the central paradox of the Italian role in European theatre. If it is beyond discussion that the varied, colourful input of Italian theatre-makers has been profound and indeed decisive in the shaping and development of European theatre, it is equally true that the number of Italian playwrights who could be named by theatregoers of average culture and knowledge would be surprisingly small. Carlo Goldoni and Luigi Pirandello would have unquestioned niches in any pantheon of European drama, but for all the impact of Italian Renaissance theatre, only Machiavelli's *Mandragola* is likely to spring to mind. In contemporary theatre, Dario Fo and Eduardo de Filippo would be guaranteed admission to the modern canon, but it is hard to know whether their places will be enduring.

It is not a matter of foreign ignorance. There is not a repertoire of Italian classics available to Italian directors to compare with the rich legacy of national drama at the disposal of their counterparts in Paris, Madrid, London or Berlin. Italy had no great playwrights' age comparable to the Elizabethan age of Shakespeare and Marlowe in Britain, the *siglo de oro* of Calderon de la Barca and Lope de Vega in Spain, the neo-classical age of Corneille and Racine in France or the Romantic age of Goethe and Schiller in Germany. There were, it is needless to add, such ages in music, architecture, painting, sculpture and poetry, but only at certain select moments

could Italian theatre boast of creative writing genius. The drama in which Italy excelled was not prose playwriting, but musical theatre. An opera-lover in any European city would be effortlessly able to reel off the list of composers that the theatregoer would struggle to provide. Aside from internationally renowned figures such as Verdi, Puccini and Donizetti, there were many other craftsmen of music whose works filled theatres, and which satisfied the national appetite for drama. It has been estimated that 80 percent of theatrical productions in the nineteenth century belonged to the category of musical theatre.

In no other theatrical tradition has the space between the stage and the page been so narrow. If Italian theatre has a representative man, in the sense Ralph Waldo Emerson used the term, he has been the actor-author. This central line runs from Ruzante in the early Renaissance years, through the *capocomico*, which translates as lead actor and who was the predominant figure in *commedia dell'arte,* on to De Filippo and Fo in our times. No theatre afforded such control to the actor as did the Italian. The case of *commedia dell'arte* does not require labouring in this context, but it was the seminal theatre which established a tradition. The level of improvisation in the sense of impromptu inventiveness permitted to the individual performer has been no doubt exaggerated. Recent scholarship has uncovered not only the scenarios of *commedia dell'arte,* but also actors' notebooks in which players committed to paper and to memory sections of dialogue which could be used in various situations – in love scenes, in thwarted escapes or in warding off unwanted advances. Originally such comedy was known simply as *commedia all'italiana*, but the later term *commedia dell'arte* went to the heart of the matter with its distinction between the dilettante, aristocratic players of early Renaissance drama, and the theatre of the professionals. In the view of the majority of theatre historians, *arte* indicates 'guild', making *commedia dell'arte* the plays produced by the guild of actors. It is interesting that there is no abstract Italian word to translate 'authorship': the only term that renders the idea is '*paternità*', and the paternity-authorship of the works produced by the members of the actors' guild was claimed by the actors, particularly by the *capocomico.*

These assertions should be taken not to suggest that Italian theatre is unpromising material for a theatrical history, but that a more varied approach is needed than would be appropriate for the history of the drama of other nations. To assess Italian theatre as of only marginal importance is to adopt the viewpoint of an Egyptian tomb-robber breaking into a

pyramid in search of gold, and failing to notice the sculpture, paintings, crafts and ceramics all around him. The heritage of Italian theatre is imposing, and its genius multiple. This volume attempts to examine Italian theatre in its rich complexity, and not to focus narrowly on writing alone. It is only in this way that the impact of Italy's theatre in Europe can be fully appreciated. It would be, for instance, hard to underestimate the impact of *commedia dell'arte* on the development of the European stage. France became its second home, with the Comédie Française in Paris feeding off the Comédie Italienne. It was to Italian precedents that Molière looked, as did Marivaux two centuries later when *commedia* was in decline in Italy. *Commedia* troupes dispersed all over Europe, taking up residence in Moscow, Warsaw, Madrid and probably London. The presence of Italian companies in London is subject to controversy, but it is known that Drusiano Martinelli and his troupe visited in 1578. Others followed, so did Italian theatre have an influence on playing and writing at the Globe? This is not the place to examine divided opinions, but the resemblances between Stefano and Trinculo in *The Tempest* and the *zanni* of *commedia* are striking, as is the sheer volume of Shakespeare's plays set in Italy and the number inspired by Italian models. The derivation of *Twelfth Night* from *Gl'ingannati* is example enough.

While *commedia* had the longest-lasting influence, the academies of Renaissance Italy rediscovered, reinterpreted and reinvented classical drama. It was to Italy that all Europe looked for counsel in the arts of stagecraft and playwriting. The distance between the medieval mystery or morality play and the drama of *Cinquecento* Italy, or Elizabethan England, is proof of the profound change in sensibility and culture created by the new learning. Italian academies made available translations of the classical dramatists, firstly Roman and latterly Greek. Terence was published in 1471, Seneca a decade later and Aristophanes in Venice in 1498. The great Athenian tragedians appeared in the first two decades of the following century. The first works to be staged were either productions of the classics or else imitations of them, normally produced in the courts. The works of commanding Renaissance figures like Ariosto, Tasso, Machiavelli all receive sympathetic, insightful treatment in this volume.

The development of Renaissance drama was assisted by the production of commentaries, studies, theories of the nature of tragedy and comedy. Rules began to be codified, and while many may judge this consequence regrettable, these rules determined stagecraft all over Europe. It was at this

period too that the thinking which sanctioned the division of drama and the hierarchy of genres which dominated theatrical practice in subsequent centuries was formulated. Tragedy and comedy were part of the inheritance of the classical age, but the pastoral and the wholly new genre of opera appeared. The role of treatise-writers in early centuries, and of critics and reviewers in more recent times, is not overlooked in this volume. It may be fashionable to treat all that smacks of criticism as parasitical, but treatises and reviews have played their part in the creation of theatrical cultures.

Others who made Italian theatre matter in Europe at different times were men like the early Harlequins Tristano Martinelli and Domenico Biancolelli, or later stars like the nineteenth-century 'great actor' Tommaso Salvini. Salvini made a deep impact on Stanislavsky through his meticulous, pre-performance efforts to think himself into a role. The Russian director and theorist recorded with amazed precision the time Salvini took at every stage in his preparation for *Othello,* noting that he was as attentive over states of mind as over details of costume and make-up. Salvini provided Stanislavsky with a model, and through Stanislavsky, the Italian style of performance influenced the modern actor's craft.

A synopsis of this kind risks making sharp distinctions where more gentle variations would be appropriate. Paradoxically, the two best-known names of Italian playwriting – Goldoni and Pirandello – stand outside this tradition, being writers and not performers. There were moments when writers were pre-eminent, including the Venetian eighteenth century, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Naples and the brief flourishing of 'grotesque theatre'. The Renaissance respected a more conventional division of labour. Conversely, the actor-author has his equivalent in other cultures. Playwrights from Shakespeare and Molière to Harold Pinter, to choose only celebrated examples, were actors, and the comparisons between such Victorian Anglo-American actor-managers as George Alexander in London or John Barrymore in New York and the Italian 'great actors' of the same period discussed in the relevant chapters below is closer than normally admitted. As part of the intention of seeing Italian theatre in an international context, contributors have attempted to give due weight to the impact of foreign writers on the Italian stage, whether Shakespeare in the Romantic age or Ibsen in the early modern period, when their impact on the Italian repertoire was decisive. Shakespeare risked becoming a quarry of grand moments for use by the actor but,

as several contributors to this volume underline, it was precisely in this interaction between writer and actor that dramatic creativity in Italy in the age of the 'great actor' was realised.

Tradition is as strong a force as innovation in this seemingly most iconoclastic of genres. Changes may be underway. A new generation of writers is emerging, several of whom now write for the screen as well as for theatre. It may be that the future balance of power will be radically altered.

To do justice to Italian theatre, this volume attempts to discuss theatre in its fullest sense and not merely as dramatic literature, and to include popular as well as high culture. While the efforts of earlier historians like Silvio D'Amico or Mario Apollonio command awed respect, probably no single historian could today attempt to provide a panoramic history of Italian theatre. An international group of scholars has been assembled, each capable of looking outwards at Italian theatre in Europe as well as inwards at the national cultural forces at work. This History offers a perspective founded on the most recent, post-2000 scholarship. The single-volume format imposes limitations, and the project of covering Italian theatre from its origins right up to the present day in one volume is ambitious. The restrictions have been challenging, but gladly accepted. It is for this reason that the apparatus of footnotes and bibliography has been kept to a minimum, but translations have been provided (by the contributors, unless otherwise stated), except where the meaning was obvious.

We mourn the untimely death of Professor Maggie Gunsberg, who was initially invited to contribute to this volume. There are many people who deserve our grateful thanks. Victoria Cooper at Cambridge University Press has provided both gentle encouragement and admirable patience over the years when the volume was in preparation. The main vote of thanks must go to Peter Brand, ex-Professor of Italian at the University of Edinburgh, sharp-minded scholar and generous friend. Peter ought to be listed as third editor, since he took on the work of editing the first part of this book, from the origins to the seventeenth century. In addition to authoring various sections, he also translated the bulk of the Italian contributions. He was continually available for discussion, and it is doubtful if the work would ever have been done without his rigorous but willing assistance.

PART I

The Middle Ages

1 Secular and religious drama in the Middle Ages

NERIDA NEWBIGIN

In the millennium that we call the Middle Ages, between the gradual decline of the Roman Empire and the reawakening of interest in the cultural experiences of antiquity that we call the Renaissance, spectacle flourished in almost every aspect of Italian life: individual rites of passage through life, rituals of propitiation for the next, celebrations in honour of the city's patrons, expression of civic pride and gestures for the pleasure of the city. It was an age without dedicated theatre space, without professional actors, without any desire to distinguish between *festa* and theatre. It did, however, have a vast range of performances: the 'theatre' of preachers and of *giullari*, storytellers, jugglers and tumblers, agonistic entertainments like jousts, horse races, contests of all kinds, ritual processions and propagandistic parades and religious festivals of all sorts. Sundays and holy days gave medieval communities about a hundred days a year to fill with entertainments of various kinds. Before we move on to theatre that is self-consciously theatrical and leaves systematic documentary records of itself through texts, inventories, account-books and official permission to use public spaces, let us look at some of the fleeting images of performance that can be distilled from disparate sources.

Every aspect of theatre in this preliminary chapter is contentious and contested: the supposition of some kind of uniformity throughout the Roman church and across Western Europe; the notion of a popular culture, the supposition that there is any continuity between the popular festivals of the 'Middle Ages' and those that are still alive throughout Italy, replete with lavish costumes, *sbandieratori* and the participation of church, communal officials and the local tourist authority. Nineteenth-century gothic revival, the invention of traditions of the new nation state and their further appropriation by the Fascist regime in the 1920s and 1930s await careful documentation and are not our concern here, but they have coloured scholarship in this field. As we pick our way through evidence in this

chapter the reader is invited to regard all assertions with scepticism and to treat every interpretation as suspect.

Plays continued to exist in the Middle Ages. Of Plautus' eighteen plays, only six were known before 1427, and were regarded as less suitable for schoolboys. The more decorous comedies of Terence were read in the schools as examples of everyday conversation, and it was not until the fifteenth-century humanists brought new philological tools that the texts were recognised as verse rather than prose. Like *Hrotswitha* in the tenth century, Petrarch (1304–74) composed in his youth a comedy, *Philologia Philostrati*, probably inspired by the plays of Terence that he had studied. The play is lost and there is no evidence of contemporary performance of it or of his *Triumphs of Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time and Eternity* (1351–2), even though they would become a standard part of urban ceremonial from the middle of the fifteenth century.

Secular theatre and spectacle on a large scale died with the Roman Empire: the staging of large spectacles was no longer economically and socially viable, earthquakes made the theatres unsafe, looters stripped anything of value from the sites and new religious mores collided with the way people entertained themselves in groups. There were still courts, and among the members of the courts were professional entertainers. There were also popular entertainers whose activities included dancing, fortune-telling, tightrope-walking, tumbling and walking on stilts. But if we accept a broad definition of theatre as a form of performance to an audience that entails impersonation with word, gesture and appearance, we must exclude these, and our brief examination of the kinds of performance activity that will, with time, become theatre will begin with the texts that are now called *dicerie*.

The *diceria* was a monologue delivered by a performer whose skill in an oral tradition allowed him either to memorise a vast repertoire or else to improvise in prose or verse. A small number of texts of Italian verse monologues appears from the thirteenth century – that is, with the beginning of recreational literature in the vernacular – in which the narrative contains a significant quantity of direct rather than reported speech. The so-called *Ritmo cassinese* and the legend of St Alexis both belong to a thirteenth-century ecclesiastical setting, and were probably delivered by a single performer, but with the *contrasto* of Cielo d'Alcamo, beginning 'Rosa fresca aulentissima' (Sicily, thirteenth century) there is no longer a linking narrative but rather two voices: that of the young woman, the 'sweetest

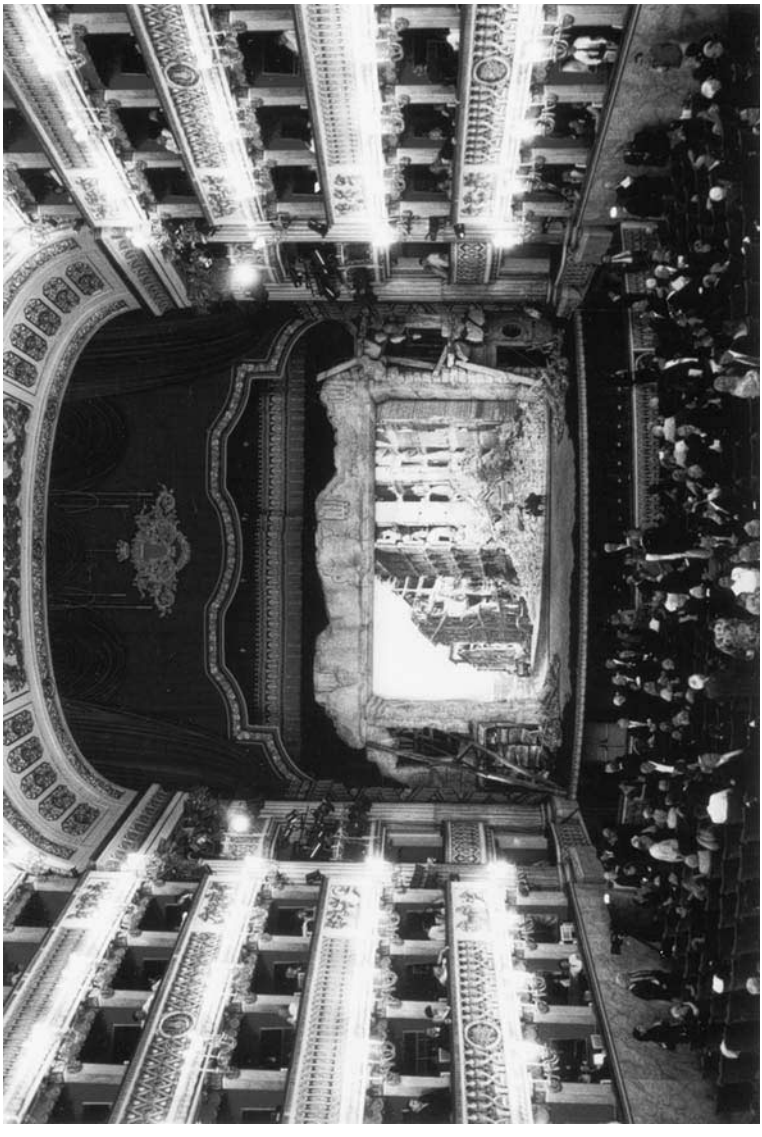

Figure 1: San Carlo Theatre, Naples. Production of *Napoli milionaria!* by Eduardo De Filippo, directed by Francesco Rosi, 2003 production.

fresh rose' of the first line, surprised in her bedchamber, and that of her suitor, who arrives with a knife (to kill himself if she refuses him) and a book (a bible, he says, on which he swears – probably falsely – to marry her). Worn down, or else convinced, she submits.

'Rosa fresca aulentissima' is just one example of a *contrasto*. Others are debates between Christ and Satan, Carnival and Lent, the Body and the Soul, the Living and the Dead. This last *contrasto* was enormously popular for the next two centuries at least, particularly in the context of Last Judgement pageants.

Masks and masking were also a feature of Carnival, the period between Epiphany on 6 January and the beginning of Lent, when all pleasure of eating and sexual contact ceased. Civic and ecclesiastical injunctions against all forms of misconduct at Carnival mention masks on both men and women as a source of *scandalo*: fighting, harassment of women and lewdness were the inevitable result, but we do not know the purpose. In the late fifteenth century, texts appear showing that young men in groups put on the costumes of a trade or profession and sang songs of extraordinary erotic lewdness: they were perfume-sellers from Valencia, with potions and unguents for every orifice; they were bawdy ladies selling sausages, of every dimension and to please every palate; they could belong to any profession that would lend itself to double entendre. While there is no evidence before Lorenzo de' Medici's time of such performances, it is clear that lewdness and masks were a long-standing feature of Carnival, and it may be that the evidence has simply not survived.

The license of Carnival infiltrated other aspects of later medieval life. In the liturgical drama, that is, the plays in Latin which in some monastic and episcopal churches were incorporated into the liturgy of Easter, Christmas and other feast days, Epiphany was celebrated with particular licence. Italy has no Feast of the Ass such as survives from Rouen, but a thirteenth-century ritual book from Padua prescribes a Play of Herod for the night of Epiphany in which Herod 'out-herods Herod', swinging about an air-filled bladder in his rage as he and his henchmen move about the church striking clergy and laity alike, in memory of the Slaughter of the Innocents. This form of drama in Latin is found throughout the Roman church from its earliest appearance in the tenth century and well into the sixteenth century, and when Hamlet comments on the performance of the leading actor in the *commedia dell'arte* at his mother's court (III.2.13) he is remembering a range of dramatic modes.